The Cost of Army Psychology

By Jeff P. Kasik

Summary.

The author of this piece examines a question of profound ethical implications: should the US army be employing psychological methods and tactics in their training? The article critically explores empirical evidence elaborated in the literature. What is the cost of Army Psychology? It runs in the millions perhaps. But the true cost is the one related to discipline and perception: Psychology in the army does not always have to have negative aspects. It is just unfortunate that there have been more negative ones than positive ones throughout our history.

Introduction

We often hear about all those great stories that come from the army. We always hear when a soldier saves another soldier’s life, or protects an innocent family from being attacked. When we have relatives overseas or our friends have relatives overseas; we always hear about the hard work and tremendous amount of training that the soldiers experience.

Even in middle school and high school we are introduced to all those mottos that come from the army: “An Army of One” and “Be all you can be.” The one thing we rarely hear about is the psychological training that soldiers receive. I believe the literature supports the concept that a majority of humans are not born with the instinct to kill. Even when a gun is placed in their hand with an open shot at the enemy, the average human cannot pull the trigger.

This paper examines the question on whether or not the army should be employing psychological methods and tactics in their training. Scholarly sources provide a theoretical perspective from the social sciences in general and Psychology as a field in particular. The U.S. is not the only country that uses this type of psychological training; nevertheless, and for the purpose of this analysis, I will focus only upon the United States of America Army.

Psychology and War

Psychology continues to be one of the most popular majors. Studying of the brain, the mind, and the behavior of individuals in their everyday lives is something I find fascinating. I believe that the issue of whether or not psychological methods should be employed is important to the social sciences community because relatively few studies and tests have been conducted on this topic. Much is still unknown to the public and is waiting to be discovered.

The U.S. Army has been around for more than 200 years and has been practicing psychological training techniques
for about the same length of time. If the army were to stop employing psychological training and tactics, many people across the country, from professionals of psychology to military personnel would be affected by such change. It would take an incredible amount of effort and evidence in order for the army to discontinue their psychological training programs. Although the ways of the army are sometimes surprising, if they were to stop employing psychological training, the army soldiers, the defense contractors, the army officials and even the families of the soldiers would all be impacted in one way or another. The main stakeholder however are the army soldiers; as they are often the “test subjects” for the army and are, therefore, affected the most.

At every Army base, you have soldiers from all over the United States. Every soldier is in many ways different from one another, and every soldier brings a little bit of their home with them. But slowly over time the Army changes the mindset of thousands of soldiers; allowing the army to have complete control over the soldiers. With all of these little changes the soldier’s experience, stress is built up as it is harder for them to perform their tasks. Isolation, ambiguity, powerlessness, boredom, and danger are also stressors that help add to the deployed environment (Adler 2006). Changes in mood are of concern to the military because they may complicate coping with stressors associated with military life. Some examples are extreme physical conditions, sleep deprivation, and combat (Martin 2006). One may assume that if these psychological conditions were different, soldiers would experience less stress throughout their daily activities and would be able to accomplish more of their tasks.

The United States Military has a myriad of contractors ready to help with any special project. Some of the top defense contractors are Boeing, Halliburton, and Lockheed Martin. These companies, as hundreds of others, depend on the military, the army, and war in order to keep their companies running and make a profitable business. In 2004, Boeing took home an estimated 32 billions dollars; Halliburton 20 billions and Lockheed Martin more than any other with 35.5 billion dollars. Only Boeing employs more than 152,000 people, Halliburton 95,000 and Lockheed Martin 135,000. If the army were to discontinue their use of psychological training, all the money invested in these weapons would have less people capable to taking it to its ultimate mission, the take of life. There will be fewer soldiers willing to drive the big tanks and fly the fast airplanes. Imagine what would happen if the army suddenly stopped needing the help and support from these companies or simply reducing the amounts on the contracts. Thousands of jobs would be lost and these major companies would be affected financially.

The army officials are also stakeholders. The army officials are set up with a job and a goal and must do whatever it takes to make sure that both are accomplished successfully. If you were an official whose orders are to set up an attack, one would only hope that their soldiers have properly been trained, and psychologically equipped to carry on with the command for a successful attack. The officials are not the ones that stand on the front line and shoot; they are only the ones giving the orders to those soldiers on the front line. Using psychological training seems to be the only way that the army has successfully been able to change the mind-sets of
these soldiers. During the First World War, it was commonly believed that only ten percent of soldiers could aim at target with intent to kill. By the Second World War, shocking statistical information was released making it very apparent that many ‘stable’ men (that is, men not at risk of breaking down under stress of combat) simply did not kill (Bourke 1999, 61). If the army was forced to stop using psychological training, army officials would have to reconsider their strategies to reach combat effectiveness as they have for the past two hundred years.

The last stakeholders involved with this issue are the members of the families of the soldiers that receive psychological training. Some soldiers leave their families as fathers, while others leave their families as a sons or daughters. No matter what the relationship is, a soldier leaves as an individual and usually returns home with a different mindset, different personality and even sometimes they experience mood swings. These soldiers risk their lives everyday and experience in a very dramatic and direct way. We, civilians, as the army personnel will say referring to us, do not know what it is like to have another one in harms way, on the other hand facing unemployment. The officials would also be worrying about their careers with soldiers under their command not able to perform at combat level.

If the average man cannot kill another man, then, what makes the U.S. Army so effective in combat? Some of the psychological training that the Army uses on its soldiers consists of “breaking down” the individual and then “rebuilding” him/her to appreciate the needs and orders of those of higher rank. They begin the psychological work during basic training. Basic training experience is designed to transition soldiers from civilian life to military life (Martin 2006). The army require all of their soldiers to both dress and look alike; they live under a strict dress code and shave the hair off all of their heads (Grossman 1996). This is not just discipline. It is part of the “breaking down” process that the army uses. It is not helpful for them to look at each soldier as an individual; they only wish to look at them as a whole and as a group. Individuality is not the main focus of attention by the army.
Once basic training is completed they are able to begin the “rebuilding” stage of the soldiers. The soldiers must do little mindless and tedious tasks throughout the day or else will be punished for non-compliant behavior. These tasks may seem as very unskilled and useless information, but it teaches the soldiers the meaning of discipline. For example, in a “Primary Leadership Development Course” manual I found on Fort Ord, dated November 06, 1992, “Toiletry drawer pulled out to four inches, under garment drawer pulled out to eight inches and the sock drawer pulled out to twelve inches. Towels must be folded into thirds and wash clothes folded into halves” (PLDC 1992). Even talking to some military veterans, taking a corner of the last toilet paper sheet and folding it over to make a triangle is something they still are in habit of doing.

Even with all of the basic training and “rebuilding” that each soldier receives; it can still become very hard for an individual to perform well in combat. In one particular study, the 51st fighter wing (also known as the MIG-Killers) was sent to accomplish a mission in Korea. Out of all of the F-86 fighter pilots, half of the pilots never once fired their gun, and out of the half that did, only ten percent hit something (Bourke 1999). These are troubling statistics for those army officials getting ready to take their squad into combat. If I were an official, I would only hope that my soldiers had been through the proper training needed to accomplish their mission. If I knew only half of my pilots were going to pull the trigger, I might rethink some strategies instead of the usual tactics used by the army.

The 50th division has a total of 860 soldiers; only ¼ had ever done any field firing, seven have never fired a rifle in their life, nine have never fired a Bren gun, 131 have never thrown a live grenade, and 138 have never fired a Thompson submachine gun (Bourke 1999). These statistics are taken after each of the 860 soldiers had been in the battlefield. These statistics show that even with all of the psychological training, humans cannot simply kill without a reason to.

I have a personal position and hold values that influence the way I view this issue: I do not think that this country or any other country must kill in order to make a statement. I do not feel that killing solves any problem; killing only eliminates the problem until it repeats once again. I do realize that there are other countries that want to have nuclear warfare and want to go to war and that it is not just the United States that has those desires. Although I do not believe we should be currently going to war, the bottom line is that the United States is at war and there is nothing I can do to change it today; I took that into consideration while writing this paper. I also feel that if the soldiers had less stress to deal with on a daily basis, they would be able to focus more on their duties as an American soldier rather than trying to cope with the stress they have. Unfortunately the workforce is a tough place to be and no matter what career you work in stress will always come with employment.

Two social theorists can help me understand the way that the army and its soldiers are affected through psychological training. Incremental Implicit Theory developed by a social theorist named Carol S. Dweck suggests that all human attributes are malleable (Heslin 2005). This is a theory that is in tune with the army approach to training; they take thousands of different unique individuals...
and turn them all into one similar soldier. The army knows that human attributes are malleable and takes advantage of this during basic training. All of those little tedious tasks that the army has their soldier’s do all help take part in changing the human attributes and creating that “perfect soldier.”

Instinct Theory, developed by William McDougall, suggests that most patterns of behavior can be explained as a result of instincts and their derivates (sentiments, habits, attitudes). This theory also suggests that habits are formed in service of instincts (Pleszewski 2005). I feel this theory helps explain why many soldiers are unable to walk into combat and fire a gun. The youngest any individual can be to enlist in the army is eighteen years old. Given the way our society is, we grow up in schools learning that violence is bad and there are other ways to solve problems. Eighteen years of schooling and real life experiences is a long time to build up habits and attitudes to make one individual opposed to war and violence. Although the last theory suggests that human attributes are malleable, I do believe that because of eighteen plus years of receiving knowledge that killing is wrong, it would make you think twice about firing a gun off at someone. I do believe that human attributes are malleable, however it takes a lot of time and patience to change the mind set of one individual.

From a combination of reviewing materials, reading social theories and thinking on my own personal beliefs, I have come to the conclusion that the army should not employ psychological methods and tactics in their training. From the stress that the soldiers deal with, to the stress the families deal with, and even to the thousands of lost and innocent victims, the outcome is not worth taking the time and trying to prepare every soldier for combat psychologically. A hundred soldiers with a gun and bullet each would only kill a hundred people. Just imagine: the army could eliminate those hundred soldiers, add one bomb and destroy much more imaginable than only a hundred people. At the same time that the U.S. has their army kill citizens in other countries they are killing citizens and soldiers of their country as well.

The two statistics mentioned earlier in this paper (both from Bourke) also helped me reach a conclusion. It is amazing that even after all of the basic training and special training soldiers receive, many of them still freeze up when it comes down to life or death situations. It seems more of a waste of time and money to have these soldiers go through training, purchasing all of the dangerous equipment and weapons, and to not even have the weapons fired off once. Although the purchasing of thousands of weapons and dangerous machines help keep thousands of people employed, it is not worth making any soldier or the families experience the negative affects of war.

I understand that the defense contractors and officials have jobs and deadlines that are to be met; however I do not feel that those jobs or any others should be met at the expense of another human being. One thing I take into consideration is the fact that the army does not draft its soldiers, but the soldiers enlist in the army. I would only hope that the soldier does the proper amount of research to help inform him/her of what they are getting themselves into. The families of the soldiers have also helped influence my decision as I am a family member of a military veteran myself. I have been fortunate enough to have my father come
back safe and sound and I can only imagine what life would be like if my father came back feeling uncomfortable around us and not wanting to share his stories. The army officials have been the least influential to me throughout this topic. The officials were once soldiers themselves, and I do not see how they could put the soldiers after them through the same kind of training they once received. There are many different lose/lose situations involved in this topic and I do not think that there will ever be an answer to solve all of the problems that come with military psychology. Psychology in the army does not always have to have negative aspects; it is just unfortunate that there have been more negative ones then positive ones throughout our history.

Bibliography


