

RESILIENCE AMONG FUTURE MILITARY LEADERS – COMPARATIVE STUDY AMONG THE STUDENTS OF THE “NICOLAE BĂLCESCU” LAND FORCES ACADEMY –

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In the context of the increasingly complex challenges of the military operational environment, developing resilience among future military leaders has become a strategic priority. Resilience enables leaders to cope with acute stress, uncertainty, and decision-making pressure. This paper highlights the essential role of resilience in maintaining performance, preventing burnout, and promoting ethical conduct in high-stakes situations. Considering this, we identified the level of resilience among military students at the “Nicolae Bălcescu” Land Forces Academy in Sibiu, from both the first and third years of study. The comparative analysis of the two groups allowed us to observe whether resilience increases during the course of military training. The study used the College Students’ Resilience Scale, composed of four dimensions: self-efficacy and adaptability, perception and use of social support, positive cognition, and the ability to adapt to negative emotions. The results indicate a higher general average recorded in the third year ($M = 3.18$), compared to the first year ($M = 2.86$). Overall, the results confirm not only an increase in self-efficacy, social support, and positive cognition, but also a significant strengthening of emotional resilience over time.

Keywords: resilience; self-efficacy and adaptability; perception and use of social support; positive cognition; ability to adapt;

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary military environment, characterized by uncertainty, exposure to multiple risks, and constant psychological pressure, developing resilience has become essential for maintaining performance and mental health. For military leaders, this capacity is even more important, as they act not only as decision-makers in critical situations but also as sources of moral support and stability for subordinates. Resilience in military leadership has been associated with increased resistance to operational stress, stronger team cohesion, and reduced risk of psychological exhaustion. Moreover, resilience is not a passive trait but one that can be actively cultivated through psychological training programs, organizational support, and positive leadership – especially through formal education. In this sense, resilience is not just a personal quality but a strategic goal for modern armed forces that aim to develop leaders capable of managing pressure and acting ethically in complex situations.

WHAT IS RESILIENCE?

In the psychological community, resilience is a quality that allows an individual to recover from adversity stronger than before. The factors that make an individual psychologically resilient are often emotional and attitudinal; in this sense, *“the primary metric of resilience is the individual’s emotional well-being.”* (Zolli, Healy, 2012, p. 7).

Resilience is the psychological capacity of a person to effectively cope with adversity, intense stress, trauma, or significant changes, while maintaining or returning to an optimal level of functioning. In specialized literature, it is often described as a dynamic process of positive adaptation in the face of risk factors or external pressure (Demerouti et al., 2001). In the military context, resilience involves not only psychological survival under operational stress but also the ability to make effective decisions, maintain moral integrity, and lead responsibly even in extreme situations (Meredith et al., 2011).

Fletcher and Sarkar (2013), in their work *“Psychological Resilience: A Review and Critique of Definitions, Concepts, and Theory”*, review and critique the variety of definitions, concepts, and theories of resilience, emphasizing the need for rigorous

conceptual clarification. They identify two central concepts underlying most definitions of resilience: *adversity and positive adaptation*. Resilience involves both exposure to challenges and the ability to respond constructively and appropriately to the given context.

Building on this, the idea emerges that resilience is not a fixed characteristic but a dynamic process shaped by the interaction between the individual and the environment. Adversity acts as a trigger for activating and developing adaptation mechanisms, and the ability to effectively cope with such situations reflects the level of resilience. This process is influenced by internal factors such as self-esteem, emotional self-regulation, or problem-solving skills, as well as external factors like social support, family climate, or community resources. Therefore, resilience should be understood as a complex interaction between vulnerability and protection, and its assessment involves considering the context in which the adaptive response occurs, not just the exposure to risk.

Adversity is defined as being related to negative life events or circumstances associated with adaptation difficulties (Fletcher, Sarkar, 2013). Other researchers define adversity as any distress linked to difficulty or, taking a broader view, prefer to include both major negative life events and daily challenges (Davis et al., 2009). Existing definitions associate negative circumstances with negative outcomes or risk-related terminology, focusing on statistically significant predictors of maladaptive behavior. Moreover, seemingly positive life events that are not linked to meaningful outcomes may also be relevant to defining resilience.

Further, in their role as guest editors of a special issue of the *“Journal of Personality on Resilience in Common Life”*, Davis Luecken and Lemery-Chalfant (2009) noted that most adversities for the majority of people are not major disasters but rather modest disruptions embedded in daily life. Together with other contributors, they strongly advocate for examining the processes underlying positive adaptation when facing ongoing, demanding daily stressors. Resilience mechanisms may vary depending on the context’s severity – from daily hassles and workplace stress (mild adversity) to intense but occasional stressors like the death of a loved one (severe adversity).

The conceptualization of a positive outcome or adaptation that equates to maintaining mental health and not succumbing to psychological illness after a crisis involves returning to or surpassing one’s previous level of functioning. To demonstrate this, Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker (2000) argued that the indicators used to represent the concept must correspond to the adversity examined, in both content and methodological rigor.

Another important, yet often overlooked aspect in studying positive adaptation is the sociocultural context in which the individual functions. This view is supported by Mahoney and Bergman (2002), who state that specific sociocultural conditions must be taken into account when examining the phenomenon.

Based on the critical review by Fletcher and Sarkar (2013), an integrative definition can be proposed: psychological resilience is the dynamic capacity for positive adaptation in the face of adversity, resulting from the interaction of individual and contextual factors, and involves the proactive development of psychological resources that protect against stress and enable personal growth even under pressure.

THE IMPORTANCE OF RESILIENCE IN THE MILITARY ENVIRONMENT

The development of psychological resilience is a fundamental component in training future military leaders. Leadership roles in the military inherently involve high-stakes decisions, operational uncertainty, and acute psychological stress. In this context, resilience serves as a core competency that enables leaders to maintain emotional balance, cognitive clarity, and ethical integrity under pressure (Bartone, 2006). Resilient leaders are better prepared to lead by example, demonstrating self-control and adaptability in adverse situations. Their ability to remain functional and supportive contributes directly to unit cohesion and the psychological safety of subordinates. As Meredith et al. (2011) emphasize, leadership-level resilience has a positive ripple effect on collective morale and operational performance, making it not only an individual asset but a strategic necessity.

Furthermore, resilience reduces the likelihood of burnout and cognitive overload – factors that can impair judgment and increase mission failure risk. Preventive programs such as stress inoculation training, as described by Hourani et al. (2011), have proven effective in strengthening coping mechanisms before deployment, contributing to the mental preparedness and psychological durability of leaders.

Beyond performance and endurance, resilience plays a crucial role in maintaining ethical decision-making in morally ambiguous environments. According to Papazoglou et al. (2020), unresolved moral tensions may contribute to post-traumatic stress disorders and moral injury, especially in roles involving life-impacting decisions. Resilient leaders are more likely to act in accordance with military values and uphold professional standards even in the most difficult circumstances.

In conclusion, resilience is not a fixed personality trait but a dynamic capacity that must be cultivated through training, mentorship, and institutional support.

Equipping future military leaders with this ability is essential not only for their psychological health but also for the overall effectiveness and integrity of the military institution.

COMPARATIVE STUDY ON THE RESILIENCE OF MILITARY STUDENTS

This study aimed to comparatively analyze the level of resilience among first- and third-year students at the “*Nicolae Bălcescu*” Land Forces Academy in Sibiu. The comparison allows us to examine whether academic and military training influences the development of resilience in these students. To achieve this, we employed the *College Students’ Resilience Scale* (Wu, Yin, 2022), which includes four dimensions: self-efficacy and adaptability, perception and use of social support, positive cognition, and the ability to adapt to negative emotions. Each dimension consists of a variable number of items, ranging from 4 to 9. Using Google Forms, the questionnaire was distributed online, and the data were later analyzed using the SPSS software.

Research Objectives and Hypotheses

The general objective of this study is to conduct a comparative analysis of resilience levels, evaluated across four essential dimensions: self-efficacy and adaptability, perception and use of social support, positive cognition, and the ability to manage negative emotions. The comparison is made between first- and third-year students at the “*Nicolae Bălcescu*” Land Forces Academy in Sibiu. In line with this research direction, the working hypothesis is that third-year military students demonstrate higher resilience levels across all four dimensions compared to their first-year peers.

Population and Sampling

The research population consisted of 658 students from the “*Nicolae Bălcescu*” Land Forces Academy in Sibiu, enrolled in the first and third years of study. To determine the sample size, the Taro Yamane (1967) sampling formula was applied, with a 5% accepted margin of error. This approach allows the selection of a statistically representative sample of the target population, ensuring an adequate level of accuracy in estimating results.

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Table 1: Number of students by academic year

Academic Year	Total Students	Sample Size
Year 1	365	277
Year 3	293	231
Total	658	508

Subsequently, the proportion of students was determined by year, faculty (across the academy’s three faculties), and military specialization, using stratified sampling. For this paper, we present data related to the Bachelor’s program in *Military Leadership* from the Faculty of Military Sciences, focusing on the two years of study (*Table 2 and 3*). As a result, our sample includes 81 first-year students and 69 third-year students in the Military Leadership program.

Table 2: Distribution of first-year Military Leadership students by specialization

Specialization	Percentage	Number of Students
Infantry	75,75%	60
Reconnaissance	24,25%	21
Total	100%	81

Subsequently, the proportion of students was determined by year, faculty (across the academy’s three faculties), and military specialization, using stratified sampling. For this paper, we present data related to the Bachelor’s program in *Military Leadership* from the Faculty of Military Sciences, focusing on the two years of study (see *Table 3 and Table 4*). As a result, our sample includes 81 first-year students and 69 third-year students in the Military Leadership program.

Table 3: Distribution of third-year Military Leadership students by specialization

Specialization	Percentage	Number of Students
Infantry	60,90%	42
Reconnaissance	31,88%	19
Mountain Troops	7,22%	8
Total	100%	69

Data Analysis

The analysis of responses reveals a generally favorable level of psychological resilience among students, with high average values on the dimensions of self-efficacy and adaptability ($M = 3.68$), perception of social support ($M = 3.49$),

and positive cognition (M = 3.48). These results indicate that most students demonstrate important adaptive resources in terms of confidence in their own abilities, effective use of their social support networks, and positive cognitive strategies when facing challenges. However, the dimension with the lowest average (M = 2.27) was the ability to adapt to negative emotions, suggesting emotional vulnerabilities in managing negative affective states such as depression or difficulty in regulating anger. This profile highlights the need to pay particular attention to the development of emotional regulation and affective coping skills in order to fully strengthen the psychological resilience of students in the demanding military environment.

First- and third-year students obtained the following averages for the four dimensions of resilience (self-efficacy and adaptability, perception and use of social support, positive cognition, and the ability to adapt to negative emotions) (figure 1):

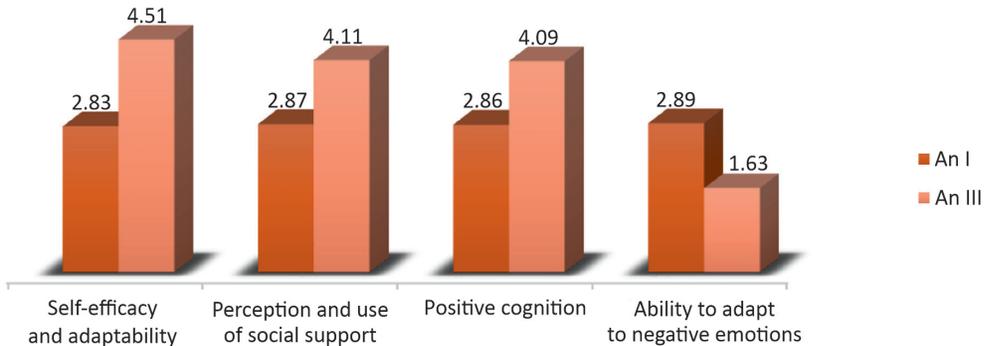


Figure 1: Average scores for each resilience dimension (self-efficacy and adaptability, perception and use of social support, positive cognition, ability to adapt to negative emotions) among first- and third-year students (author's conception)

Comparative results show a significant differentiation between first- and third-year students across all four dimensions of resilience. Third-year students exhibit higher levels of self-efficacy and adaptability (M = 4.51 vs. M = 2.83), perception and use of social support (M = 4.11 vs. M = 2.87), and positive cognition (M = 4.09 vs. M = 2.86). These data suggest a progressive development of adaptive resources over the years of military training, confirming the formative effect of the institutional environment and practical experiences on the consolidation of psychological resilience.

Interestingly, for the ability to adapt to negative emotions, a reversed interpretation trend is observed: the lower average recorded in the third year (M = 1.63) compared to the first year (M = 2.89) actually indicates an improvement in emotional regulation as students advance in their military training. This positive

evolution suggests a gradual development of emotional coping competencies, likely influenced by adaptation to military rigor, personal maturity, and accumulated experience.

Overall, the results confirm not only an increase in self-efficacy, social support, and positive cognition, but also a significant strengthening of emotional resilience over time. Comparing overall resilience scores between first- and third-year students indicates a favorable evolution throughout military training. The higher general average recorded in the third year ($M = 3.18$), compared to the first year ($M = 2.86$), reflects the gradual consolidation of psychological adaptation capacities, emotional self-regulation, use of social support, and positive cognitive reframing when facing difficulties.

This progress suggests the effectiveness of military training in developing student resilience, through gradual exposure to challenges specific to the military environment, practical experience accumulation, and the formation of complex competencies necessary for adapting to demanding situations.

In a specific context such as the military, developing the ability to efficiently manage stress, pressure, and uncertainty is an essential component of preparing future officers. Understanding the psychological and social mechanisms that support resilience allows for the adoption of educational and organizational measures that contribute to strengthening students' mental and behavioral resistance to the challenges of a military career.

Understanding the motivations behind the actions undertaken by students, whether in the first or third year, can represent an important factor for the military organization. This understanding allows identification of strengths and weaknesses in the leadership training process and supports the development of new programs aimed at increasing resilience levels.

Building resilience among military students through formal education is crucial for preparing a generation of leaders capable of handling operational and psychological challenges specific to the military environment. In a professional context where exposure to stress, uncertainty, and high-pressure decision-making is constant, the early development of adaptation capacities, emotional self-regulation, and flexible thinking becomes a key component of military training.

Formal education not only serves to transmit technical and tactical knowledge but also to build the psychological resources necessary for mental resilience, ethical leadership, and sustainable performance under adversity. By consciously integrating resilience training into the military curriculum, military education institutions can significantly enhance operational preparedness and safeguard the mental health of future officers.

CONCLUSION

The military environment constitutes a distinctive framework for the development of resilience. Exposure to controlled stressful situations, collective responsibilities, and performance pressure fosters the formation of functional coping mechanisms and a high level of frustration tolerance. At the same time, the hierarchical structure and the social support characteristic of military communities contribute to the creation of a sense of belonging and solidarity – factors recognized for their protective role in maintaining mental health. Thus, the military environment can be viewed both as a source of stress and as a context for adaptive psychological development, depending on individual resources and the availability of institutional support.

Although resilience training is recognized as essential for military students, a fundamental question remains as to what extent current educational programs fulfill this objective. The formal military curriculum provides a rigorous framework for physical, theoretical, and tactical training, but the psychological component – especially the development of resilience – is often addressed peripherally or implicitly. Resilience formation is not limited to exposure to difficulties or high standards; rather, it requires deliberate educational interventions focused on developing coping skills, emotional self-regulation, ethical decision-making under pressure, and maintaining motivation under adverse conditions (Bartone, 2006).

Understanding how resilience is formed and manifested at this stage (young cadets) has direct implications for professional success, motivation for a military career, and the emotional stability of future leaders. Continuing the research would allow not only the identification of the cultural and institutional particularities of resilience development but also the design of training and psychological counseling programs tailored to the specific needs of this group. Thus, such research would contribute to strengthening the national scientific database and to formulating effective intervention strategies aimed at supporting adaptation and performance within the military environment.

In this regard, educational programs should be evaluated and adapted to include explicit pedagogical strategies for cultivating resilience: resilience training, realistic simulations with psychological feedback, mentoring, emotional intelligence development, and the integration of applied psycho pedagogical modules. Without a conscious and systemic approach, resilience formation risks remaining a by-product rather than a deliberately formed competence through education.

Therefore, a curricular and methodological reconsideration may be necessary so that resilience becomes an explicit and sustained educational objective in military education – not merely a secondary outcome of academic rigor and institutional discipline.

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