Mgr. Zuzana Bílková

Key mental features of the members of the armed forces for coping with conditions of high risk of losing one´s life: Importance of social support among soldiers of the ISAF mission

Abstract

This thesis focuses on the topic of social support among soldiers in the ISAF mission. It was supposed that army environment is very specific in the area of social relationships in particular and so in the area of social support. Military mission is very demanding – soldiers face a real danger of their lives, they are limited in contact with their families, in the way of spending their free time. Therefore, some soldiers suffer from mental problems when they came back. This thesis examines a potential contribution of social support during the mission and deals with the question whether social support can help soldiers to cope with it.

The theoretical part summarizes three main topics – the specificity of the army environment, stress and its impact to health and performance, and social support. Different approaches towards social support, methodological difficulties, positive and negative outcomes of social support are presented. Approach of the author Eric Sonderen was used in the empirical part (Sonderen, 1991, 2012a).

The empirical part presents a combine-designed survey. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were made for mapping the area of social support, its positive and negative aspects during the mission. Social support was divided into two parts – social support received and given in the mission and social support received and given out of the mission. We used this differentiation also in the quantitative part. Two questionnaires were administered in the quantitative part – SSL (Sociale Steun Lijst) and MMPI. MMPI was administered twice – before going to the mission and after coming back. Thus, we can compare changes in the mental conditions of the soldiers.

We can conclude that social support in the mission and out of the mission proceed differently. Different kinds of social support are given and social support has also different negative aspects. The commander seems to have unsubstitutable role in giving social support.

Social support predicted some negative changes in mental condition after coming back from the mission. However, in comparison with some other studies, negative interactions played more important role than interactions positive. It might be more important not to experience negative interactions than to experience positive ones for soldiers.

Key words: social support, ISAF mission, specific demands, stress, coping, ISAF mission