

# ETHICS AND ARMED FORCES

CONTROVERSIES IN  
MILITARY ETHICS AND  
SECURITY POLICY

ISSUE 01/2023

## Resilience – Aspects of Crisis Competence

**SPECIAL**

Coping with Fears and Threats

# RESILIENCE – ASPECTS OF CRISIS COMPETENCE

**Editorial** Page 3

**Resilience – Normatively Conceived,  
Transformatively Developed**  
Kerstin Schlögl-Flierl Page 4

**Resilience, Virtue Ethics,  
and Mental Health Care**  
Craig Steven Titus Page 12

**Disinformation and Disinformation  
Resilience**  
André Schülke and Alexander Filipović Page 22

**Resilience: A Care Ethical  
Perspective**  
Eva van Baarle and Peter Olsthoorn Page 30

**To be completed**

## SPECIAL: COPING WITH FEARS AND THREATS

**“We all have our breaking point”**  
An Interview with Dr. Ulrich Wesemann  
from the Psychotrauma Center  
at the *Bundeswehr* hospital in Berlin Page 36

**Resilient Military Families:  
Challenges and Opportunities  
Presented by the *Zeitenwende* –  
Germany’s historic geopolitical shift”**  
Peggy Puhl-Regler, Alexandra Hoff-Ressel  
and Peter Wendl Page 42

**“I want to be a role-Model”:  
A portrait of Björn Baggesen,  
participant at the Invictus Games  
in The Hague**  
Rüdiger Frank Page 50

Imprint/Full Issues Page 67

# EDITORIAL

The cover photo of this issue on the homepage [ethicsandarmedforces.com](https://ethicsandarmedforces.com) shows a Ukrainian soldier in the trench near Bakhmut. The photographers Kostyantyn and Vlada Liberov took this and other harrowing pictures of the Ukrainian war. It is emblematic of the Ukrainians' spirit of resistance.

In this country, too, the Russian attack has changed the threat situation; soldiers in particular have to deal with the possibility of a military or hybrid attack. We take this up and discuss aspects of personal and societal resilience.

After a brief introduction to the concept of the "containment term" by Herfried Münkler, oriented towards security policy, Kerstin Schlögl-Flierl elaborates the various dimensions and the transformative claim in her fundamental contribution. Referring to peace spirituality, she shows a way how resilience thinking could show the way out of routine, resignation and passivity. In the following, Cornelia Richter examines the relationship between religion, spirituality and resilience. She understands the latter as a crisis phenomenon that defies a static, preventive "fit for fight" approach, and sheds light on the importance of the core themes of Christian faith for experiencing and suffering through ambivalence and destructiveness. Craig Steven Titus approaches the phenomenon of resilience by highlighting several complementary dimensions of virtue and how they can provide the strength to stand up for others and work through extreme adversity.

The article by André Schülke and Alexander Filipović looks at sustained immunization against the corrosive effects of pervasive disinformation. In doing so, they emphasize a viable educational foundation. Finally, Eva van Baarle and Peter Olsthoorn take a critical look at military resilience-building programs and stress the need for moral awareness and power of judgment according to the mission spectrum of today's armed forces.

The special then takes a look at particular challenges for soldiers. I spoke with psychologist Dr. Ulrich Wesemann from the Psychotrauma Center at the *Bundeswehr* Hospital in Berlin about the stresses of deployment and the limits of "mental fitness". In addition, Peggy Puhl-Regler, Alexandra Hoff-Ressel and Peter

Wendl from the Center for Marriage and Family in Society (ZFG) provide a detailed account of how military families can face up to the conditions of their profession (which have been exacerbated by the *Zeitenwende*, Germany's historic geopolitical shift).

The struggles involved in coping with a severe impairment can be seen at the Invictus Games. The games for mentally or physically impaired soldiers will be held in Germany for the first time in September 2023. To mark the occasion, we introduce you to Frigate Captain Björn Baggesen, who competed at the Invictus Games in The Hague last year. The illustrated portrait "I want to be a role-model" at the end of this issue tells you how it all came about, what he and his wife Grit experienced there and took with them, and what role sport can play in recovery.

The fact that it makes sense to strengthen oneself for one's own life, job and the challenges that come with it is particularly obvious in the military. But resilience should not be misunderstood as an unconditional claim to emerge unscathed from any adversity. In their article, the ZFG team write: "Developing fundamental awareness of the vulnerability of the body and soul is intrinsic to the very nature of being a human and soldier, and therefore also has its place in the character guidance training curriculum." This issue of Ethics and Armed Forces aims to provide impulses for a differentiated debate. As always, we would like to express our sincere thanks to all those who have contributed to this issue.

Rüdiger Frank  
Copy Editor



# RESILIENCE – NORMA- TIVELY CONCEIVED, TRANSFORMATIVELY DEVELOPED

*Author: Kerstin Schlögl-Flierl*

Resilience is on everyone's lips right now – from climate resilience to resilient structures in government.<sup>1</sup> It's all about becoming more resilient for the next crisis.<sup>2</sup> Resilience seems to be the answer to the constant crisis mode of our current times.

Like many other popular ideas, it is ultimately a container term that can be filled by very many different agendas from various sides. It is only in the context of specific resilience measures, however, that the various differing concepts finally come to light. Do you build a dam against rising sea levels or do you motivate the people affected by sea level rise to relocate? In the first case, a short-term technical solution is considered. The second is a long-term, more comprehensive adaptation. What about the people affected and their attitudes? And what is the general policy on the issue?

It is a challenge for ethics in particular to clarify questions about the underlying normativity. At the same time, it is important to avoid introducing yet more unclear terms and concepts. Referring to more or less obvious ones like freedom, human dignity and so forth does not reveal the standards inherent in the resilience discourse. It means that again the agenda (only) contains different hidden thrusts.<sup>3</sup>

This article therefore aims to provide a basic introduction to the concept of resilience, and elucidate some common and workable different approaches. Subsequently its relationship to vulnerability will be discussed – since vulnerability is often mentioned as a counterpoint to resilience – and the link between resilience and spirituality will be considered before concluding with an examination of peace spirituality in the context of armed conflicts.

## **Differences that lead us to a (resilient) definition**

There is a fundamental distinction between a *conservative* concept of resilience (comparable to returning to an original state), and a *creative* one (which thinks about an accompanying transformation). Another memorable and influential distinction was made by the

## *Abstract*

*A normative consideration of resilience has been an extensive feature of contemporary crisis discourses. As part of this debate, it has become clear that a fundamental distinction has to be drawn between the capacity to resist, the adaptation dimension, and the question of transformation. This reveals two important normative stipulations: first, to pay attention to structural and societal resilience as well as individual resilience. Second, not to assume that the conditions which have to prove resilient are unchangeable and good per se, but rather also to consider in principle the question of their transformation.*

*To advance reflection in these two directions, the relationship with vulnerability is examined – with reference to a non-stigmatizing concept of vulnerability. This anthropological dimension of vulnerability and resilience brings the actor question clearly onto the agenda once again. Martin Schneider and Markus Vogt blazed a trail with the concept of responsive resilience, which emphasizes the active role of human beings, who must also “respond”, i.e. not only react, but really answer to others. Only with human beings can the great transformation be imagined.*

*Yet this article does not ignore the question of spirituality in its discussion of resilience. It considers how the two are linked and what the implications are. As an example of such an integrative understanding of resilience, the article concludes by developing ideas and suggestions around breathing new life into the spirituality of peace.*

*The emphasis is less on rituals such as lighting candles, more on changing attitudes and behaviors. Conditions and behaviors can only really change in the model of just peace.*

---

sociologist Wolfgang Bonß, who drew a line between *simple* and *reflexive* resilience.<sup>4</sup> The former – simple resilience – is a response to a past event, while the latter – reflexive resilience – mobilizes resources in anticipation of future major and minor crises, in order to make provisions for them. Self-protection and the need for persistence – i.e. maintaining the status quo – are the primary focus of simple resilience. Reflexive resilience, in contrast, focuses on engaging with disruptions and challenges in a more productive way, aimed at learning and development.

Basically, it is always a matter of considering whether the thrust should be toward changing conditions, or returning to the initial structures. In the second case, these are seen as implicitly worth preserving, which signifies a first normative component. This may well be the goal of resilience in the material sciences (when a spring returns to its initial state), but less so when it comes to the major and pressing issues in a socio-ecological transformation of society.

Moreover, it is important to make an intelligent distinction between the target groups. Who or what should become resilient? The individual, or the society, or the structures? Psychology as a discipline has contributed a great deal to the understanding of resilience, and in a psychological discourse, for example, the focus is usually on the individual: How does one become psychologically resilient in crises and problem situations? What helps individuals to cope with crises? In the debate informed by ecosystem theory, however, there is more of a focus on an ecological system: By what measures can forests best be adapted to rising temperatures and the associated consequences?

Ultimately, one sees that the disciplines each work with a different understanding of resilience. For example, from a moral psychology perspective, Sautermeister emphasizes the role of facilitating and impairing factors: “As a variable and dynamic process parameter, resilience is multidimensional and dependent of situation-specific and biographical factors. Because of the interdependencies between vulnerability factors, risk factors and protective factors, it is not possible to derive a linear model of resilience.”<sup>5</sup>

This is relevant for the societal resilience discourse inasmuch as we should warn against a possible pitfall: focusing resilience efforts too much on the individual level and forgetting about the fundamental transformation of society. Placing the responsibility and burden of crisis management solely on the individual will lead to social upheaval in the climate change crisis, or possibly even thwart the fight against the causes, i.e. the shift toward a climate-friendly, sustainable way of life with a commensurate economic system.

To summarize once again: On the one hand, resilience can be understood as stability (persistence); one can think of the simple mean-

***Basically, it is always a matter of considering whether the thrust should be toward changing conditions, or returning to the initial structures***

ing of resilience – *the capacity to resist* – in the material sciences. But it also includes *adaptation strategies* (in climate impact research, this could be planting heat-tolerant trees, for example). Not to be forgotten in the concept of resilience presented here, however, is a third point: the question of *transformation*, i.e. a complete change affecting not only the individual but also society as a whole. In this way, one can place the full spectrum of possible measures on a scale of resilience efforts ranging from problem-oriented to solution-oriented. My understanding is that resilience must encompass all three dimensions.

### **From adaptation (of the individual) to transformation (of society)**

In this reflection on resilience, I am particularly interested in what contemporary theoretical approaches from social science can bring to the discussion. In particular, the account of adaptation presented by the sociologist Philipp Staab seems useful to me as an aid to thinking through the resilience discourse.

Firstly, adaptation can mean the stabilization of a social order, for example, also when confronted with climate impacts. But at the same time, in today's highly consumption-oriented society, adaptation is "perceived as an affront to the deserved self-fulfillment of the individual",<sup>6</sup> where required adaptation measures curtail an individual's lifestyle or self-fulfillment.

With the focus on adaptation, however, there is the danger not only that individuals might not "get on board", but also that it might not leave any room for other responses to normative questions. If adaptation is seen as the goal, the consequence may be that the struggle for fundamental changes in structures and systems at the political and societal level is no longer fought. The focus is then more on fighting symptoms and less on fighting the causes.

For example, under the exclusive paradigm of adaptation, it is possible that averting climate change and the discussion of its causes might no longer be given sufficient attention. Prevention practices, relating to climate change for example, no longer seem appropriate if the paradigm of adaptation as mitigation is applied too one-sidedly as a form of reflexive resilience. Therefore, adaptation must constitute only one dimension of resilience. And all measures must be considered to prevent the

***If adaptation is seen as the goal, the consequence may be that the struggle for fundamental changes in structures and systems at the political and societal level is no longer fought***

further progression of climate change.

Ethics therefore considers the interplay between individual and social ethical approaches and, more closely, the premises of organizational ethics, primarily in relation to structural questions. In this way, ethics responds to the focus on adaptation that accompanies the striving for resilience. As mentioned earlier, this adaptation usually takes place within the framework of already existing structures and conditions. At the same time, responsibility for the task of adaptation tends to be left

to the individual level. For this reason, in the context of resilience issues and measures, transformation – especially at the societal level – must be retained as a goal.

The geographer Markus Keck translates this into a concept of social resilience which consists of three components.<sup>7</sup> First, tactical resilience, the ability to cope with a crisis. Second, Keck talks about strategic resilience, which involves learning from past crises and adapting to future developments. Third, there is transformative resilience, i.e. the ability to change.

### **Relationship with the complementary concept of vulnerability**

In order to give further substance to the concept of resilience in a normative context, the common complementary concept of vulnerability (from Latin *vulnus*: wound, injury) will be briefly outlined at this point, and then thought through in terms of the resilience dimension. Resilience is often presented as a strategy for dealing with vulnerability, or as a counterpart to it. But this is too simple, as can be seen, for example, from the concept of resilience described by the German Ethics Council in its paper on *Vulnerability and Resilience in a Crisis – Ethical Criteria for Decision-Making in a Pandemic*.<sup>8</sup>

Vulnerability was a buzzword on everyone's lips during the pandemic crisis, when particularly vulnerable groups were accorded far-reaching protection measures. Along with the associated appeal for special protection, it should not be overlooked that the labeling of a group as vulnerable was accompanied by a certain stigmatization.

In contrast, it should be noted that vulnerability is an aspect of the human condition that is common to *all* human beings and inescapable. "It denies every form of idealisation which defines the human being first and foremost as a self-sustaining being that is only impaired in its self-sufficiency and strength if adverse events occur, and that needs solidary support only in these cases."<sup>9</sup>

Because humans are physical beings, the vulnerability of the body is an inescapable fact.

---

Social and mental vulnerability can become visible when recognition and appreciation are lacking. Humans are regarded as being not at the mercy of vulnerability, but as resistant to it. Thus, in the opinion of the German Ethics Council, resilience is conceived normatively as follows: “Rather, resilience is the power to deal with the challenges resulting from a situation of vulnerability or of actual harm, in a way that the option to successfully lead one’s life remains valid or may even be increased by an enhanced sensitivity for the vulnerabilities and strengths of life.”<sup>10</sup>

Like vulnerability, resilience is therefore also an anthropological given. It is about the self-preservation of the human being and of human beings as well as of the world. Without this will to self-preservation, the question of resilience cannot be asked any further. But to add to this basic assumption, the vulnerability interpretation trail must be pursued further. The consequences of thinking about common vulnerability as a social bond cannot be overestimated in terms of the link to solidarity and the desire for just participation.<sup>11</sup> If everyone is equally originally vulnerable, everyone also has the same claim to solidarity and justice.

As well as highlighting the human dimension of vulnerability, however, the German Ethics Council also discusses structural vulnerability and resilience – especially in view of the COVID-19 crisis. “The resilience of organisations can be seen in their capacity to adapt. In this context, *situational* resilience means dealing with unexpected events at the micro level (e.g. patient flows, bottlenecks in supply), *structural* resilience the optimisation of resources and practices at the meso level (e.g. adjustment of workflows, staffing, hygiene concepts or communication processes) and *systemic* resilience the long-term changes of resources and practices at the macro level (e.g. through administrative or political decisions).”<sup>12</sup>

If we think further not only about the structures but particularly the basic anthropological statements and take the concept of resilience seriously, then the highlighting of responsive resilience by Martin Schneider

and Markus Vogt is groundbreaking. For all resilience efforts, what is needed after all and ultimately are the human beings who react to the demands placed on them: “To be resilient means to act in a responsive manner, he or she gives an answer to something, to another person, to a situation, or to a development.”<sup>13</sup>

This concept is important for questions of climate research and more precisely the implementation of measures, but it could also benefit peace ethics. In his reflections on peace ethics and resilience, Alexander Merkl asks how previous thinking about security is changing in light of new concepts of resilience. Could resilience – one is almost tempted to say simple resilience – be used to initiate adaptation in a crisis to circumstances that supposedly cannot be changed?

## ***If everyone is equally originally vulnerable, everyone also has the same claim to solidarity and justice***

Does resilience mean something more like crisis prevention, or are we talking about an all-too-quick belief in progress? Is the demand for resilience only associated with and intended to combat symptoms, or also causes?<sup>14</sup>

This article, however, is not so much concerned with questions of security architecture. Rather, it seeks to link another concept with resilience – namely spirituality and especially the spirituality of peace – in order to justify and support the transformative goal of peace discourse.

With the quotation above from Jochen Sautermeister, it has already been suggested that a unilinear model from spirituality to resilience falls short of the mark. Just as resilience cannot be thought of as a simple counterpart in its relationship with vulnerability, nor should resilience be understood as an outflow from spirituality of whatever kind.

## Resilience and spirituality

When it comes to exploring the connection between resilience and spirituality, we need to get to the deep structure, in contradistinction to that which remains superficial and less concrete. At the same time, the aim is to highlight spirituality as a factor that can be productive in the resilience discourse.

If we refer once again to the various definitions of resilience, spirituality as a transformative force can be located on the individual level. Of course, different forms of spirituality would have to be distinguished here, but that is beyond the scope of this article. The dwelling on the purely individual level – which was already criticized in the resilience debate – should also be brought up in this discussion.

So, precisely in the connection between resilience and spirituality, it is important to take a look at the structures. In terms of different levels, this can mean distinguishing between first-order solutions (building dams in response to rising sea levels), and second-order solutions, which in this example would mean resolving issues of justice globally. We need to be clear about the structures behind both concepts.

As Sautermeister summarizes: “Ethical reflection on resilience with a moral psychology

*Alongside questions of peace ethics, such as the question of just war or just peace, spirituality is concerned with thinking about these abstract questions of life on a personal level*

orientation must therefore also take into account identity-forming processes of self-care, of practicing and training, of existential, moral and spiritual learning, and of the habitualization of corresponding behaviors, attitudes and lifestyles. For it is in them that human beings engage seriously in their struggle for self-development and meaning.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, looking at the underlying processes enables us to grasp precisely the depth dimension of spirituality. Resilience has also undergone the

same shift in thinking. In both cases, the aim is not simply to adapt, but to strive for creative transformation.

In my opinion, this is especially applicable to a spirituality of peace that is necessary in our times. Alongside questions of peace ethics, such as the question of just war or just peace, spirituality is concerned with thinking about these abstract questions of life on a personal level. Merkl / Schlögl-Flierl (2022) pointed out this inescapable connection between spirituality and moral theology.<sup>16</sup> Moving from the field of (theological) peace ethics to the spirituality of peace, it can be stated that the transformation which is central to resilience can only be achieved if these themes also penetrate to the spiritual level. But the direction of thinking can also be reversed: How can spirituality inform peace ethics? This will now be examined both theoretically and concretely.

### Responsive resilience: peace spirituality based on the doctrine of just peace

Peace spirituality can all too easily degenerate into a routine exercise and be perceived as such. Light another candle ... say a quick prayer for peace ... pin a peace badge on your lapel. What can you do when confronted with a war which is geopolitically close but ultimately far away from everyday life (unless you are in contact with refugees, of course), and as an individual person who is not directly affected?

Of course you can always say a prayer. But do you experience that as a consequential action, or more as an evasive maneuver, as a contemplative exercise for yourself? Peace in the world, which has become so brittle, is a theme at various points in the celebration of the Eucharist. But this may seem even staler than usual in times of a geographically proximate war and geopolitical upheavals, although of course the various wars around the world should not be forgotten. Such a feeling reflects a sense of perceived powerlessness at not being able to end the war by spiritual practice anyway. Finally, one also has to con-



---

sider whom to include in the prayer. The aggressors too?

So what to do? Perhaps resilience can give peace spirituality a helping hand: What does spirituality of peace mean in the light of resilience thinking? To conclude, I will explore this question, not by looking at different devout practices, but rather by considering the transformational effect between the two for spirituality and resilience, and, more precisely, as a connecting element for a spirituality of peace.

At this point it should be stated very briefly that not only each and every individual, but also the powerful must be lifted out of a possible helplessness. This is also a noticeable difference between the COVID-19 crisis and the still ongoing Ukraine war. During the pandemic, it was possible to protect oneself and others with simple measures, which admittedly were also felt by many to be very severe. But this activity, which was perceived to be more or less effective, is not possible in the search for peace when war is being waged only a few kilometers away.

What to do? It has been said that resilience here – and this should be remembered once again – should be understood responsively. It is about people acting in response to what is happening, i.e. actively participating. But how can this be done effectively when faced with war? When faced with what is no longer an abstract vision, but a concrete reality? It should not be denied that a spiritual “practice” understood in this way can prove to be exhausting in such a complex matter.

Three possibilities or places come to mind: First, it is time to ask the **question about shared responsibility and involvement**, and to do so clearly and publicly. If the transformative goal described above is to be taken seriously, it is essential to broaden the perspective and to reflect on and state what one’s own personal interest is. This involves not only the question of previous policies, but also, from a peace-spiritual perspective, one’s own interest, one’s own bias, which must first be consciously perceived in order to counteract an all-too-simple friend/foe formula: for oneself, but also in order to keep asking questions of politicians.

By what signs could or should one have recognized that war was inevitably imminent? How can all forms of nationalism be overcome? What dependencies were established and promoted in the past that have now led to problematic asymmetries? A spirituality of peace is concerned precisely with preparing the discourse for this far from easy undertaking. Yet the direction in which we look should not be backwards – but toward learning for the future.

The second possibility targets **increasing emotional blunting** in the face of and in times of war. The World Press Photo of 2022

*More than a few of you will have noticed that the question of the Ukraine war no longer moves and inflames the hearts and minds quite as much as it did, the longer it carries on*

is still dedicated to the horrors of war, personified by a fatally wounded pregnant woman in Mariupol. But how quickly public interest wanders to the next topic, along with media attention. More than a few of you will have noticed that the question of the Ukraine war no longer moves and inflames the hearts and minds quite as much as it did, the longer it carries on.

Spirituality here is understood as “being on the move”, as practicing a critical attitude and not passively suffering or enduring military strategic operations that are perceived to be unpreventable. The spirituality of peace becomes stronger in its political dimension. An attentive and alert reception of the media discourse is also part of this. In a spirit of responsive resilience, it could be said that it is a matter of allowing oneself to be moved again and again by the consistently terrible news. This would be one possible peace spirituality exercise, which of course everyone would have to put into practice on a daily basis.

Third, responsive resilience in the context of peace spirituality involves clearly addressing the question of the **foundation**, the fundamental attitude toward the legitimacy of mili-

tary force. Some of you may have noticed that there was no mention at all of “just war” in the subheading. For centuries, the question has been discussed as to when one can or may speak of a just war and what criteria must be fulfilled in each case. The new – not so old – paradigm of **just peace**, however, widens the perspective: It encompasses much more than the questions of the reasons and conditions for permitting the use of violence, because the prevention of violence is considered from the outset and the time horizon also is by no means limited to the events of war. It is about ways of ensuring peace so that conflicts do not lead to war yet again.

Thinking in categories of just war would therefore more likely be associated with simple resilience, and thinking in terms of just peace with transformative resilience. The transformative capacity would be more likely located in the concept of just peace, while the return to deterrence and armament would be a possible outflow from simple resilience.

***To simply put up with the war, not challenge arms deliveries, to delegate everything to others without complaint ... that would not be a resilient spirituality of peace***

The question of just peace transcends that of just war, while still giving space to the right of self-defense based on criteria that have long been discussed. The concept of just peace is more comprehensive, but also more complex, because transformation has to be taken into account.

***The Author***



*Kerstin Schlögl-Flierl has held the Chair of Moral Theology at Augsburg University since 2015, and serves on various committees as an advisor on ethical issues. For example, she has been a member of the German Ethics Council since May 2020, and a consultant to the Episcopal Subcommittee on “Bioethics” of the Doctrinal Commission (I) of the German Bishops’ Conference since 2016. Bioethics and climate ethics are her main areas of research interest. Since 2022, she has been a principal investigator at the Center for Responsible AI Technologies (RAICenter), which is concerned with issues of responsibility and trust in AI research.*

This also immediately echoes the shift in thinking about resilience: returning to existing conditions would be exactly the wrong way; instead, resilience thinking has brought the focus onto transformation. How can this happen? Not the unquestioning continuation of existing conditions, but the transformation toward just peace structures would be the way here. So it is about a change in behavior as well as in conditions. Conditions must be changed (indeed, they may first be perceived as changeable as a result of this resilience approach) in order to enable a just peace. Then it is not a jumping back into the original state that peace spirituality should pursue – which humans merely endure as passive figures – but instead actively doing something within the scope of one’s own possibilities.

What drives people to become active? Here I would like to direct your attention to the hope for a solution. This view of the goal also distinguishes peace ethics from a spirituality of peace – because the latter means being on the move and having a goal in mind, rather than hammering out criteria for a possible crisis. But along with this, it is basically a question of an attitude that is called for in our times. To simply put up with the war, not challenge arms deliveries, to delegate everything to others without complaint ... that would not be a resilient spirituality of peace as I have described it here.

**Conclusion: Understanding peace as a task again**

But why exactly is this something to strive for? Because all human beings are vulnerable, as outlined above. Here is the common bond that unites all people, and so promotes solidarity without regard to person or merit. Out of the experience of vulnerability, one enters into solidarity with those affected by war in different ways, and then adopts an active attitude that strives for transformation and envisions resilient, sustainable strategies. For me, this would be a living spirituality of peace that is underpinned by virtue ethics – in contrast to ossified forms like the routine recitation of peace prayers.

- 
- 1 I would like to thank Rüdiger Frank for his constructive comments.
- 2 Cf. Schlögl-Flierl, Kerstin (2022): Was lehrt uns die Pandemie in ethischer Vergewisserung? In: Werz, Joachim and Faber, Toni (eds.): Zwischen Himmel und Erde. Die Himmelsleiter von Billi Thanner. Regensburg, pp. 106–114.
- 3 Cf. Schneider, Martin and Vogt, Markus (2017): Responsible resilience. Rekonstruktion der Normativität von Resilienz auf Basis einer responsiven Ethik. In: GAIA 26/S1, pp. 174–181.
- 4 Bonß, Wolfgang (2015): Karriere und sozialwissenschaftliche Potenziale des Resilienzbegriffes. In: Endreß, Martin and Maurer, Andrea (eds.): Resilienz im Sozialen. Theoretische und empirische Analysen. Wiesbaden, pp. 15–31.
- 5 (Translated from German.) Sautermeister, Jochen (2016): Resilienz zwischen Selbstoptimierung und Identitätsbildung. In: MThZ 67, pp. 209–223, p. 217.
- 6 (Translated from German.) Staab, Philipp (2022): Anpassung. Leitmotiv der nächsten Gesellschaft. Berlin, p. 26.
- 7 Keck, Markus (2015): Gewalt, Raum und Resilienz. Handeln im Kontext bewaffneter Konflikte. In: Korf, Benedikt and Schetter, Conrad (eds.): Geographien der Gewalt. Kriege, Konflikte und die Ordnung des Raumes im 21. Jahrhundert. Stuttgart, pp. 146–162, p. 147.
- 8 Deutscher Ethikrat (2022): Vulnerabilität und Resilienz in der Krise – Ethische Kriterien für Entscheidungen in einer Pandemie: Stellungnahme. Berlin, p. 24.
- 9 German Ethics Council (2022): Vulnerability and Resilience in a Crisis – Ethical Criteria for Decision-Making in a Pandemic. Opinion. Executive Summary & Recommendations. Berlin, p. 21.
- 10 German Ethics Council (2022), p. 22.
- 11 Cf. German Ethics Council (2022), p. 163.
- 12 German Ethics Council (2022), p. 24.
- 13 (Translated from German.) Schneider/Vogt (2017).
- 14 Merkl, Alexander (2017): Schlüsselbegriff Resilienz. Die europäische Sicherheitsagenda in ethischer Lesart. In: AMOS international 11, pp. 30–36.
- 15 (Translated from German.) Sautermeister, Jochen (2018): Selbstgestaltung und Sinnsuche unter fragilen Bedingungen. Moralpsychologische und ethische Anmerkungen zum Verhältnis von Resilienz und Identität. In: Karidi, Maria, Schneider, Martin and Gutwald, Rebecca (eds.): Resilienz. Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven zu Wandel und Transformation. Wiesbaden, pp. 127–140, p. 138.
- 16 Merkl, Alexander and Schlögl-Flierl, Kerstin (2022): Moralthologie kompakt. Regensburg.

# RESILIENCE, VIRTUE ETHICS, AND MENTAL HEALTH CARE

*Author: Craig Steven Titus*

## Introduction

The article examines three concepts that help us to understand the resolve of those who habitually and professionally engage with danger and difficulty. These concepts are resilience, virtue ethics, and mental health care. The article seeks a fuller account of virtue than is commonly found in the field by a larger analysis of the dimensions of virtue. In this context, the concept of resilience has been employed as a metaphor for the capacity of an object to spring back to its original shape, retain its integrity, and become steeled in the process. Applied to humans, the concept of resilience is employed to understand how human capacities can enable a person to face dangers and difficulties while pursuing the goods expressed in full human flourishing, including in the context of moral injury (morally injurious experiences).

The paper addresses three themes. First, the article addresses the dimensions of virtue ethics that make it resistant to narrow views of ethics and philosophical anthropology. An overview of thirteen dimensions of an Aristotelian-Thomist-personalist approach provides the structure for the paper to consider how virtues contribute to human flourishing. We call this an integrated Meta-Model of the person (or Meta-Model), which serves as a framework to incorporate insights from diverse sources.<sup>1</sup>

Second, throughout the analysis of these dimensions, we address the use of a mental health-based virtue approach to understand the person who suffers from having faced difficulties, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, suicidal ideation, and moral injury.<sup>2</sup>

Third, the article also takes into consideration three aspects of resilience as an example of an integrated virtue approach. The intersection of the fields of virtue ethics, mental health care, and military service offers an opportunity to address the interactive dimensions of virtue ethics incorporating insights from resilience and other virtue-based research and mental health practice.

## Abstract

*In the article, we present an expansive approach to the integration of virtue ethics with the concepts of resilience and mental health in the context of service providers, including the military. We ask how a virtue-based approach to ethics might address shortcomings of strictly rule-based, duty-based, and consequence-based perspectives on ethics. In a synthetic approach that employs spirituality as well, the article outlines thirteen dimensions of virtue, focusing on eight of them. It draws virtue-based sources from Western traditions, especially from the works of Aristotle and Aquinas and from personalist approaches.*

*We address how resilience, as manifest in virtuous acts and dispositions to act, can be understood to have three components applicable across different disciplines: (1) coping with or overcoming grave danger, stress, or trauma; (2) protecting and retaining the integrity of a person or group of people in difficulty; and (3) benefitting from post-traumatic growth.*

*Drawing insights from virtue-based anthropology, the article integrates contributions from resilience research, virtue ethics, the mental health sector, and the military. It uses examples that include the four cardinal virtues, in general, and other expressions of virtue that are especially pertinent to the context of health care and the military. We ask about the basic capacities, natural inclinations, and human desires that are the bases for the virtues: the intuited, felt, rational, willed, and pro-social experiences through fitting actions to become prepared for the complex and dangerous work of military leaders and soldiers, mental health workers and chaplains, first responders and police, and their families. Throughout the article, we examine the implications of an integrative approach.*

---

## Resilience, Virtue Ethics, and Mental Health Framework

We have construed a virtue ethics meta-model as a framework to incorporate insights into resilience and mental health care. Although the thirteen dimensions of virtue ethics overlap (Table I), there are compelling reasons to consider what each contributes to a deeper understanding of the person in a largely Aristotelian-Thomist-personalist approach. Nonetheless, in the paper, we will focus more in-depth on only eight dimensions of virtue considering the mental health and military fields.

The narrative of virtue ethics involves the major schools of moral theory, which have been influenced by the ancients, in particular, by Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics. In the Christian tradition, the Bible (Decalogue, wisdom literature, and apostolic moral counsel), Augustine of Hippo, and Thomas Aquinas have made enduring contributions. All these sources can be engaged in contemporary virtue ethics and mental health care that include attention to the ultimate meaning of life and flourishing through being open to spirituality and faith-based practices.

The renaissance of virtue approaches, though, has enlivened long-standing quarrels between competing visions of the place of perceptual, emotional, cognitive, volitional, and social development in ethics. Some contemporary writers reject virtue, which they see as a functional type of rigid action, duty, or rule-following without interpersonal commitments, social science without the person, psychology/mental health without normativity, philosophy without wisdom, and redemption without transcendence.

However, virtue theory raises positive opportunities for ethics (1) to accommodate virtue with law, duty, and normativity; (2) to integrate flourishing in a virtue approach; (3) to situate acts with relation to dispositions to act; (4) to integrate the input of the human sciences within a normative approach; and (5) to be open to transcendent meaning.

We have found that the capacity of virtue theory can be understood only when due at-

tention is given to the multiple dimensions of virtue. There are a growing number of attempts at grasping the completeness of virtues. From a psychological perspective, the VIA Inventory of Strength is the basis for Peterson and Seligman's classification of *Character Strengths and Virtues*:<sup>3</sup> wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. There are also a growing number of virtue research and scales that seek to test different definitions and descriptions of these virtues. In the military context, de Vries focuses on sev-

*We have found that the capacity of virtue theory can be understood only when due attention is given to the multiple dimensions of virtue*

en virtues for military praxis and character: responsibility, competence, comradeship, respect, courage, resilience, and discipline (as well as the practical wisdom that underlies them).<sup>4</sup>

We also are considering the virtue of resilience, which has historical precedent. Of special interest is the resilience that is found at the basis of a hope-filled, forward-leaning way of conceptualizing life in the face of everyday and uncommon stress and trauma. We use the notion of resilience to understand the person and interpersonal groups in difficulty. It has three biopsychosocial-spiritual components and involves the individual and interpersonal capacities to (1) cope with and overcome stress, difficulty, and trauma; (2) retain personal and communal wholeness and integrity in adversity; and (3) demonstrate post-traumatic growth in such situations. The article will provide samples of protective factors of resilience, risk, and vulnerability.<sup>5</sup>

**Table I. Thirteen Dimensions of a Framework for Virtue-Based Ethics and Anthropology<sup>6</sup>**

1. Virtue is performative (action-based).
2. Virtue has a perfective and corrective dimension (agent-based).
3. Virtue is purposeful (reason-based, teleological).
4. Virtue is ethical (moral norm-based).
5. Virtue is influenced by personal uniqueness, equal innate dignity, sex difference and complementarity.
6. Virtue is connective, relational, and developmental.
7. Virtue is learned through role-models (exemplars and mentoring).
8. Virtue is moderating (measured, golden mean).
9. Virtue is strength-based (preventative).
10. Virtue is nonreductionist (contextual).
11. Virtue is applied (research and practice).
12. Virtue is contextual (vocational commitments).
13. Virtue is open to the spiritual and to God (transcendent).

**1. Virtue is performative (action-based)**

*Dimension.* We express virtues in action, behavior, practices, and performance. We can speak of virtues as being performances, since virtuous acts and practices communicate good intentions and desires that support a narrative of goals, values, and commitments. According to Alasdair MacIntyre, a coherent set of practices and virtues underlies particular fields of action, such as mental health practice and military practice (praxis).<sup>7</sup>

We cannot train people to do something good by imagination or memory alone. Practices give direction to the imagination, memory, and instinctual evaluations that are part of the act. Of course, a virtuous act is done by doing, choosing, behaving, practicing, and performing it. Such morally significant action is both internal and external to the person.

*Implications for mental health and resilience.* For instance, we may plan to accomplish something difficult, such as traveling far

to visit an ailing mother or to participate in military deployment. However, our intention to face such hardships and their costs is significant but inadequate to complete the action. Therefore, the trainer must get the trainee to act bravely, that is, he must emphasize cognition, emotion, and behavior. We need to engage in performance for personal growth. This is more than merely psychological or internal behavior, however. It is moral action. It is the authentic moral performance of this child or that soldier. Although virtuous acts are at the heart of ethics, virtues must be practiced to strengthen brave acts and moral performance.<sup>8</sup> Resilience, in this context, is gained by virtuous practices that embody the goals of training and therapy, and other types of performance.

*Shortcomings of the performative dimension.* It is possible, however, to overly reduce the performative dimension of each virtue. We can overly focus on the type of performance that is being prepared. We can neglect the need to have contact with real people as exemplars of performance, to count the human cost of resilient action, and to be attentive to the multiple levels of human acts.

**2. Virtue is perfective and corrective (agent-based)**

*Dimension.* Virtues change us. Previous actions and choices continue to influence each active person (agent), our dispositions, and our character. As Aristotle affirms, virtues are about moral choices to act that inform the moral state of our character.<sup>9</sup> Virtues inform different operational dispositions and capacities that we can change, correct, and perfect. Because of the expansive nature of human neuroplasticity, our expression of virtue is perfective and corrective at different levels.<sup>10</sup> As Neb's postulate suggests, "Neurons that fire together wire together."<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, virtuous acts are complex, and the influence of our acts is not always visible to people or to instruments of observation. There are internal acts on which we do not follow through. For example, in the beginning, we may choose to do something (this choosing is an act of the will) that we might never actually accomplish,

---

since we do not get the chance to do what we intended to do. Such internal acts bring about changes in our dispositions to act in an analogous way in the future. Nonetheless, although we have tendencies to act virtuously again in a similar way, these tendencies may fail to be consistent.

Virtue and habituation theories and practices demonstrate that there is perfective and corrective plasticity at neurophysiological, psychological, and moral levels.<sup>12</sup> Such plasticity contributes, in a non-reductionist way, to accounting for human freedom. Genuine freedom is more than being free from what hinders us from doing what we seek to do. It involves becoming free to develop and use the skills that enable us to do things with excellence and fidelity. It is a positive disposition that makes it possible to bring about the intended good action of this son expressed to that mother, and of one comrade in arms to another and to the group.

Such good potential habits are rooted in our operative capacities and dispositions that are capable of change, such as sensory perceptions, imagination, emotions, intellect, and will. Since there are different dispositions, there are diverse groupings of types of virtues such as cardinal (moral), intellectual, and theological (spiritual) virtues.

*Implications for resilience and mental health.* The consistent performance of certain acts changes the disposition to act in the future. This fact is the heart of training. For instance, since our emotional capacities express fear and daring, we need the virtue of bravery to have a virtuous and reasoned use of these emotions when we address the difficulty in attaining good or avoiding evil. Because of the different emotional experiences and the different potential patterns of emotion-based virtues (moral virtues), we need to develop the courage, for example, to travel in dangerous weather or in hostile surroundings. Furthermore, there are also moral virtues of self-control to manage and balance emotions in the face of attraction and repulsion. For example, the trainee will need to be put into situations that train, evaluate, and make true her disposition to control her own emotions. This is

the steeling effect of human capacities that become resilient to stressors through being stressed. There are, of course, further skills, such as the need for the leader-in-training to practice how to influence the emotions of the team, including how to gain the capacity to motivate the team that is depressed, having lost a comrade in arms.

*Shortcomings of the perfective and corrective dimensions.* Can you get too much of a good thing? Can a virtue be too perfect and too much under control? There is not too much excellence in virtue. Rather, the

***Genuine freedom is more than being free from what hinders us from doing what we seek to do. It involves becoming free to develop and use the skills that enable us to do things with excellence and fidelity***

contrary is sure. We can confuse excellence with rigid coping, short-sighted integrity, and small-minded post-stress growth, which do not constitute a compelling view of virtue.

### **3. Virtue is purposeful (reason-based, teleological)**

*Dimension.* We associate virtues with reason, purposes, and goals. In the purposeful dimension, we implicitly and explicitly express our rational character, including the finality, callings, and direction of the virtues. First, we intuit or sense the purpose of life and the meaning of death. We implicitly participate in the reasons underlying the virtues. Second, we infer the particular purposes of the virtues through rational discourse and social narrative. We thus give reasons and deliberate about why and how to attain the desired end.

The purposeful nature of virtue draws on the end that is aimed at in the particular praxis or practices. Virtues are teleological inasmuch as they have the nature of being an end, a final cause that motivates us to act. We reason throughout virtuous action, for reason is directive even in performative and habitual ways. We often communicate the nature and context of reason through narratives of significant events concerning health, healing, life,

and death, and the courage to face the risks of life and death.

*Implications for resilience and mental health.* Because there are evolving social, political, military, and commercial contexts, there are new needs for training in virtuously resilient military forces, stable mental health care services, as well as chaplains, police, and entrepreneurs. These agents of change must be deliberate, give reasons, and act purposefully.<sup>13</sup> This need comes especially from the new situations of different conflicts and instability across the continents, where we need to cope with new experiences of difficulty, foresee challenges to our integrity, and make something new come out of stress, trauma, and danger.

*Shortcomings of the purposeful dimension.* We may underestimate the significance of deep inclinations toward self-preservation, goodness, truth, relationships, and beauty.

***Moral injury is the condition of psychological and moral suffering based on the perception of a moral violation, with or without any personal involvement, even when one merely sees an immoral act take place***

For instance, the value of relationships (e.g., daughter to mother or between soldiers) may lead someone to intentionally enter danger's way to protect the other. We can misunderstand that purposeful acts and dispositions to act are risky. They may lead to the loss of one's life or that of a loved one. When we commit ourselves to the good of family and defending the nation, we make the gift of self a purposeful choice. For instance, virtue-based practices include putting one's life at risk in caring for one's contagious mother or in military service.

**4. Virtue is ethical (moral norm-based)**

*Dimension.* Virtue is ethical. The ethical basis for virtue is the natural moral law, rational moral standards, codes of conduct for professions, and principles that lead to a good and flourishing life. The moral good is relative to each one of us and our responsibilities, but it is also objectively rooted to the common

good. Together, these virtue-norms are the standard for what we do and why we do it. Such virtue ethics is also called practical wisdom (or prudential personalism).<sup>14</sup> Aristotle understands the ethical notion of virtue to be "a state of character concerned with choice, lying in the mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the person of practical wisdom would determine it."<sup>15</sup>

*Implications for resilience and mental health.* We presuppose that virtue ethics can integrate the ethical dimension of pertinent rules, principles, duties, and consequences without reducing moral adjudication to rule-based, duty-based, or consequentialist approaches. In a synthetic approach that also employs spirituality (spiritual practices, principles, and commands), we recognize that there is an important place for the codes that are specific to particular praxis, for instance, the military codes of conduct and ethics, mental health care codes of ethics, medical codes of ethics, as well as the United Nation's international conventions (conventions on human rights), and the World Health Organization's code of ethics and professional conduct.

*Shortcomings of the ethical dimension.* The ethical nature of the virtues is found in the way that a person of practical reason, as an exemplar of ethics, argues about theory and application. Of vital importance, the virtue of practical wisdom is a matter of the practice of reason that concerns practically applied clinical, philosophical, and spiritual considerations.

For mental health praxis and military praxis to be effective, the medical and military personnel need (1) a full understanding of moral action and its related codes, principles, and duties; (2) the internalization of the virtues at the level of practical wisdom and conscience and (3) an appreciation of the differences between moral injury, ethical evil, and spiritual sin. Moral injury is the condition of psychological and moral suffering based on the perception of a moral violation, with or without any personal involvement, even when one merely sees an immoral act take place. Ethical praxis includes the agent's and the group's intentions, understanding of the moral action, and



the pertinent circumstances that concern the act and the agent.<sup>16</sup>

### **5. Virtue is influenced by personal uniqueness, equal innate dignity, sex difference, and complementarity**

*Dimension.* Virtues are unique since persons are unique. Of course, all persons are also equal in dignity, which serves as a common base for understanding human nature, human rights, and the spectrum of virtues. This equality applies to the sexes, as do the differences of the virtues that arise from the complementarity of the sexes, as found in the reproductive capacities, genetic expression (DNA and RNA), as well as personality tendencies. A person's virtues can take on characteristics that are marked by the complementary tendencies of the different sexes. Even when the sexes are different, a person's virtues can take on characteristics that are marked by complementary tendencies. According to Vitz,<sup>17</sup> women tend to be for others, while men tend to do for others. Women tend to aim at nurture and emotional intimacy, while men tend to aim at protection and physical pleasure. Women tend to seek to care for the other, while men tend to seek justice. It is possible to see each person uniquely and yet to see how studies give data and trends that apply in many but not all cases (bell curve phenomena), as is the case in sex differences apparent in aspects of alcohol use and abuse.<sup>18</sup> No woman or man is a statistic or a trend, but comparisons can help us be attentive to the real person in front of us.

*Implications for resilience and mental health.* Virtue ethics influence the tendencies of each unique person. Nonetheless, the resilience of a person or group of persons must rely on each person's common capacities and basic characteristics in the face of difficulties, as for mental health professionals applying curative practices or the commander's or soldier's work on battle readiness. The expression of mental health-focused virtue or military praxis-based virtue changes according to people's uniqueness as well as their common strengths.

*The shortcomings of the equal and complementary dimension.* There are frequent

misunderstandings about the equality, difference, and complementarity of the sexes. For instance, it has been argued that the virtue of courage expresses both similarity and difference between men and woman. Female expressions of courage tend toward more empathic expressions of related emotions. Male expressions of courage tend toward more initiative-taking expressions of related emotions.<sup>19</sup> Of course, the formation of virtuous capacities in people through just and caring actions builds upon personal uniqueness and integrity, while also establishing, in ways specific for each sex, further coping skills, unique integrity, and potential for post-traumatic change.

### **6. Virtue is connective, relational, and developmental**

*Dimension.* For a person's particular virtues to grow, they need to interconnect with other virtues and to social and psychological contexts. The person must recognize that virtues develop over time and thus need practice. According to Aristotle and Aquinas, virtues tend toward an interconnection among themselves, through the virtues of practical wisdom and love.<sup>20</sup> We use practical wisdom to form ourselves, including our desires and motions that come to participate in reason. We employ in-

***For a person's particular virtues to grow, they need to interconnect with other virtues and to social and psychological contexts***

tellectual means to realize the end of the other virtues, giving them rational coherency.

In the Christian tradition, we also recognize the efficacy of charity and friendship love to give further commitment, self-giving, and motivation that orders the other virtues toward personal unity. We need the embodiment of diverse virtues to achieve their own proper ends. It is by knowledge and by love, that is, by applied practical reason and self-giving that we find interpersonal relations and connection. Could a soldier be courageous if he

did not also control his desire for mind-altering substances or creature comforts, but was distracted from the need to plan, train, and deploy in a way that is attentive to the best rational practices of strategy?

We are social through the expression of virtues since they support the interpersonal dimension of human nature. This type of development of the virtues is based upon the capacities that underlie the cardinal (moral), intellectual, and theological (spiritual) virtues. For example, there are virtues that shape emotions (moral virtues of self-regulation and courage). There are also virtues that transform the will (justice and self-giving love) and other virtues that transform the intellect (the intellectual virtues of wisdom, knowledge, and understanding).

*Implications for resilience and mental health.* We connect the resilience resources among themselves through participating in practical reason and empathy-love. For instance, prosocial skills underlie the successful interaction of commanders and soldiers, supervisors and mental health caregivers. There is need for prosocial value-based leadership that involves a proper level of training to build up personal and group morale and competency. The development of such virtues is born of experience, even negative experience. For instance,

## *Part of the challenge of teaching virtues is that individual models can differ so radically*

post-traumatic stress and moral injury can, when successfully overcome, give to the group resilience and a basis of mutual trust.

*Challenges of the connective, relational, and developmental dimensions.* Those who are not intentionally involved in the interconnected and developmental efforts of the virtues often misunderstand the relational dimension of the virtues. This misunderstanding arises especially when we conceptualize the virtues as disengaged, solitary, and static. Moreover, the developmental and relational dimension requires that we affirm the need for both inde-

pendence and dependence in the expression of the virtues.

### **7. Virtue is learned through role-models**

*Dimension.* We acquire virtue through a combination of admiration and emulation, reason and principles, emotions and actions, and dispositions and character, as we have suggested. The most crucial aspect of learning virtue involves the admiration and emulation of role-models, which leads to the practice of the virtues. Role-models elicit mimetic desire. We acquire virtuous dispositions (*habitus*) through contact with exemplars who creatively and truthfully model virtues. The acquisition of these characteristics is based on the emotional admiration of the exemplars, who motivate people. It is also based on understanding the moral content of these models and their implicit and explicit principles and ends. For instance, we admire heroes, saints, and wise men and women, such as brave mental health caregivers and soldiers, who risk their lives for the common good, the nation, their families, and even strangers.

These exemplars can inspire others to at least consider acting in ways that are worthy of risking their lives as well. Moral exemplars of truth provide the cognitive source of admiration, while moral exemplars of goodness effectively attract us to admire the models. According to Linda Zagzebski, virtue might best be understood to be taught through theory and practice, including course work and everyday narratives, but it is first learned by the emulation of exemplars. She affirms in a semantically externalist or moral realism where the emulation of exemplars is at the basis of moral learning.<sup>21</sup>

*Implications for resilience and mental health.* Part of the challenge of teaching virtues is that individual models can differ so radically. There are vocations, relationships, dispositions, behaviors, and histories that differ in their capacity to promote resilience and influence mental health. Admittedly, in its performative, perfective, and ethical dimensions, virtue is not like mathematical calculations, which involve simply correct or incorrect answers, but we have the cognitive capacity to

cope with such difficulties, and models can show the way toward integrity, even lost integrity that is recovered over time and that results in moral growth.

*Challenges to the learning by role-model dimension.* Although the acquisition of moral virtue can be expressed in the formative effect of both real life and narrative accounts of role-models, there are realist (the truth of the matter existing outside of the mind) and non-realist (the denial of any real truth worth fighting for) approaches. A non-realist, relativist approach to the acquisition of moral virtue challenges personal and group formation of character. When the source of the moral character of language is not understood to exist outside of one's mind, challenges arise in the account of the moral character of virtue acquisition through role-models. A disconnected socio-linguistic network is not realist, but rather relativist. It does not link together social and language references, moral motivation and the moral object of the virtues, and thus it weakens the pedagogical power of role-models.

We find another challenge when people admire, emulate, and become attached to a model or hero who is grossly immoral. Nonetheless, there is inevitably the need to admit some level of ambiguity in any hero, which can be the basis of moral resilience in guarding our integrity in the face of our model's mistaken actions.

### **13. Virtue is open to the spiritual/transcendent and to God**

*Dimension.* The classical virtue-based approach correlates the practice of the virtues of faith, hope, and charity- and friendship-love with positive effects of spiritual and transcendent health and growth in the transformation of the other virtues, making them graced virtues (infused virtues). Such practices that are open to spirituality and to God include faith-based rituals, communal prayer, personal prayer with God, the ritual of forgiveness, and the practice of meditation and contemplation. The construct of virtue, from a Meta-Model perspective, is open to the integration of natural bases of mental health and graced or supernatural extensions of holiness.

The human capacities for virtue (material cause) are perfected at natural and supernatural dimensions (formal, efficacious, and final causes). This ancient Christian principle holds that grace transforms nature, according to the manner of nature.<sup>22</sup> This approach to virtue is open to the spiritual/transcendent, as when spiritual practices strengthen people's resolve regarding the ultimate purpose in life (as is the case in faith), or their finding meaning and

## ***A growing number of qualitative studies demonstrate that, with religious practice and spirituality, potential resilience and growth can arise in the face of struggles***

support in difficulty (hope), or their unity and mutual self-gift through faith communities (charity).

*Implications for resilience and mental health.* A growing number of qualitative studies demonstrate that, with religious practice and spirituality, potential resilience and growth can arise in the face of struggles.<sup>23</sup> Other studies identify that some daily spiritual practices positively correlate as a protective factor for spiritual resilience in morally injurious experiences, increased coping with difficulty, and higher levels of forgiveness. Researchers have identified the experiences of military personnel who have drawn on religious and spiritual resources to overcome the effects of moral injury. Moreover, studies on soldiers and veterans have shown that their resilience finds its sources in spirituality (protective factor), meaning (finding and making meaning), and identity (including communities of faith).<sup>24</sup>

*Challenges of being open to transcendence.* There are also negative impacts and distortions of religion and spirituality in moral injuries when someone conceives of God as hateful or punitive. Other negative correlations are found when people obscure and distort the natural positive inclinations toward goodness, existence, truth, relationships, and beauty. There is lastly the negative impact of practicing rigid religious principles, self-condemnation, and disillusionment of belief.<sup>25</sup>

## Implications of a multi-dimensional virtue- and resilience-based approach to mental health

**What are the implications of the present study?** One of the most radical findings of this article is that an account of philosophical anthropology, human character, and ethics will be inadequate without a multi-dimensional understanding of the nature of virtue. Identifying this complex approach to virtue brings the discussion of virtue ethics to a more compelling level.

**What are the dimensions not explored in this article?** (Table I names them all) They are virtue as moderating, preventive, non-reductionist, applied, and vocational: (8) Virtues are moderating. We aim at excellence through virtue by avoiding extremes of excess and deficiency. For instance, we seek to regulate the emotion of fear to better serve rational goals bolstered through courageous service. (9) Virtues are preventative. We develop character strength and refined emotions that protect the person and the community. For instance, the virtue of hope overcomes distorted thoughts and feelings about difficult-to-attain ends. (10) Virtues are nonreductionist. We live out virtues in contexts open to evidence about best practices. For instance, we desire sources that are evidence-based, value-based, and truth-seeking. (11) Virtues are applied in practice. We apply virtue in theory and through practice. For instance, we seek to enhance professional skills and long-term flourishing

through the context-based practices of the virtues that underlie the particulars of military practice. (12) Virtues are vocational. We find flourishing through vocation-based virtues that are linked to fundamental commitments. For instance, we find meaning in responding positively to the call to form a family and defend one's nation.

**How can a more complete account of virtue be provided for the military, mental health care, and other service providers?** Resilience is a complex phenomenon that is based on observation and experience of common and not-so-common encounters of danger and difficulties for mental health professionals, military, and first responders. When training leaders and soldiers, for example, there is a benefit in focusing on a robust understanding of resilience that includes coping with combat danger, retaining personal and communal integrity even after stress, and growing stronger in the wake of trauma. Leaders need to develop the habit of seeing what kind of positive result can come from negative experiences. Such habitual attentiveness seeks the underlying positive aspect of difficult and negative ventures. This kind of search leads to a greater disposition to identify more readily basic desires for existence, goodness, truth, relationality, and beauty.

**What is the range of impact in a multi-dimensional approach to virtue?** The virtue-based approach to ethics can accommodate profession-based and faith-based ethics. This presentation is meant to affirm that the rule, duty, and consequence-based approaches need to be complemented by reflections proper to professional ethics (e.g., the inclusion of a military code of ethics) and faith-based ethics (spirituality and tradition-based), for instance, such approaches must also respect the moral consciences of military personnel and make a compelling case for ethics. This integrated, profession-based, and faith-based approach can only be developed more fully in another work.

In conclusion, debates between act-based ethics and agent-based ethics can find reso-

### The Author



*Dr. Craig Steven Titus is a Professor of integration at Divine Mercy University (DMU, Virginia). He has a doctorate in theology (University of Fribourg, Switzerland) and a Master's Degree in Philosophy. He has published over 60 journal articles, book chapters, and books, including "Virtue and Resilience: Aquinas's Christian Approach to Virtue Applied to Resilience" (in Nathan H. White and Christopher C. Cook (eds.): "Biblical and Theological Visions of Resilience", Routledge, 2022). He is a co-editor*

*and contributor of "A Catholic Christian Meta-Model of the Person: Integration with Psychology and Mental Health Practice" (DMU Press, 2020).*

lution in virtue-based ethics, where the act and the disposition to act, the agent and the community, natural law and revelation and grace all find places fit to each. A renewed vision of virtue theory rooted in practical wisdom and open to spirituality and faith-based practices will need to demonstrate a capacity to account not only for the desire for flourishing and the trajectory of the development of character and virtue but also for the existence of persistent weaknesses, patent errors, and the possibility of the divided self and fractured communities. Such a Meta-Model approach to virtue will need to adjudicate the viability of a multi-dimensional virtue approach that integrates classical and modern ethical theories with input from contemporary human sciences, each at their own level of competency and normativity.

1 The recently published work by Vitz, Paul C., Nordling, William J. and Titus, Craig Steven (eds.) (2020): *A Catholic Christian Meta-Model of the Person: Integration with Psychology and Mental Health Practice*, Sterling, VA, presents thirteen dimensions of virtue. To provide depth yet present the larger context, we address eight of the most salient dimensions in this paper.

2 Jinkerson, Jeremy D. (2016): *Defining and Assessing Moral Injury: A Syndrome Perspective*. In: *Traumatology*, 22(2), pp. 122–130. <https://doi.org/10.1037/trm0000069> (all internet sources accessed 1 June 2023).

3 Peterson, Christopher and Seligman, Martin E. P. (2004): *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*. Oxford et al.

4 de Vries, Peer (2020): *Virtue Ethics in the Military: An Attempt at Completeness*. In: *Journal of Military Ethics* 19, no. 3 (2020), pp. 170–185. Another catalog of virtues is by Erikson (1964): *Care, Competence, Fidelity, Hope, Love, Purpose, Will, and Wisdom*. Military catalogs tend to be more traditional, including the four cardinal virtues: practical reason, justice, temperance, and courage, and others: honor, discipline, and loyalty, as well as new virtues emerging because of changes in military tasks: protecting the vulnerable and handling media coverage. See also: Olsthoorn, Peter (2013): *Virtue Ethics in the Military*. In: van Hooft, Stan and Saunders, Nicole (eds): *The Handbook of Virtue Ethics*. Abingdon/ New York, pp. 365–374.

5 White, N. H. and Cook, C. C. (eds.) (2020): *Biblical and Theological Visions of Resilience: Pastoral and Clinical Insights*. Routledge.

6 Titus, C. S. et al. (2020): *Fulfilled in Virtue*. In: Vitz, Paul C. et al. (eds.), see endnote 1.

7 MacIntyre, Alasdair (1999): *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Humans Need the Virtues*. Chicago.

8 MacIntyre, Alasdair (1999), see endnote 7.

9 Aristotle (1941): *Nicomachean Ethics* (trans. W. D. Ross). New York, Bk. II, ch. 6, 1106b25–1107a2.

10 Doidge, N. (2007): *The Brain That Changes Itself: Stories of Personal Triumph from the Frontiers of Brain Science*. New York.

11 Siegel, D. J., & Bryson, T. P. (2011): *The Whole-Brain Child*. London.

12 De Haan, Daniel D. (2012): *Thomistic Hylomorphism, Self-Determinism, Self-Determination, Neuroplasticity, and Grace: The Case of Addiction*. In: *Proceedings of the ACPA* 85, pp. 99–120.

13 Cornum, R., Matthews, M. D. and Seligman, M. E. P. (2011): *Comprehensive Soldier Fitness: Building Resilience in a Challenging Institutional Context*. In: *American Psychologist* 66(1), pp. 4–9. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0021420>.

14 Ashley, Benedict M. (2013): *Healing for Freedom: A Christian Perspective on Personhood and Psychotherapy*. Washington, DC.

15 Aristotle (1941), see endnote 9, 1106b36–1107a3.

16 John Paul II (1993): *On the Splendor of Truth* [Encyclical: *Veritatis splendor*]. Vatican City.

17 Vitz, Paul C. (2022): *The Complementarity of Women and Men*. Washington, DC.

18 Nolen-Hoeksema, S. (2004): *Gender Differences in Risk Factors and Consequences for Alcohol Use and Problems*. In: *Clinical Psychology Review*, 24(8), pp. 981–1010. doi:10.1016/j.cpr.2004.08.003.

19 Gross, Christopher, et al. (2020): *Man and Woman*. In: Vitz, Paul C. et al. (eds.) (2020), see endnote 1, p. 187.

20 Aristotle (1941), see endnote 9, vi, 13. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I–II, question 65.

21 Zagzebski, Linda (2017): *Exemplarist Moral Theory*. New York.

22 Aquinas: *Summa Theologica*, I, 62.5.

23 Currier, J. M. et al. (2016): *Spirituality, Forgiveness, and Quality of Life: Testing a Mediation Model with Military Veterans with PTSD*. In: *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 26(2), pp. 167–179.

24 Brémault-Phillips, Suzette et al. (2019): *Spirituality and moral injury among military personnel: a mini-review*. In: *Front. Psychiatry* 10, pp. 5–7. <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsy.2019.00276/full>.

25 Brémault-Phillips, Suzette et al. (2019), see endnote 24.

# DISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION RESILIENCE

*Authors: André Schülke / Alexander Filipović*

In 1996, the sociologist Niklas Luhmann wrote: “What we know about our society, indeed about the world we live in, we know through the mass media.”<sup>1</sup> He was referring to the fact that as we attempt to understand an increasingly complex world, we have less and less information from our own experience to draw on. So we are necessarily dependent on information brought to us by third parties. Among these third parties are actors who spread disinformation as a way of asserting and expanding their political, economic and military influence outside their territory.

According to the definition provided by an expert group appointed by the European Union, disinformation “includes all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit.”<sup>2</sup> Disinformation, often imprecisely referred to as “fake news”, has become a prevalent feature of current media communications, and is the subject of widespread discussion in the field of media ethics.<sup>3</sup> Disinformation appears threatening when it is planned and carried out as a campaign to disrupt democratic processes, or generally to unsettle people in the way they relate to the world. Since we can assume that the originators of disinformation will continue their efforts to expand their influence in the media space, two aspects of these campaigns deserve our closer attention: a phenomenological interpretation of the methods used to exert influence on the individual, and possible strategies for defending against disinformation. With this approach, the present text focuses on the individual and his or her patterns of reception, while considering the fundamental dialectical relationship between an individual and the society to which he or she belongs.

*This text incorporates ideas and passages of text from André Schülke’s dissertation which are not individually identified. The dissertation is currently being prepared for publication.*

## *Abstract*

*The increasing reliance of modern individuals and societies on second-hand information enables the use of disinformation campaigns in political, military and other conflicts. By spreading “fake news” on a mass scale, state actors attempt to undermine the structural and functional integrity of their adversaries. Disinformation is intended to promote the constitution, entrenchment and spread of non-rational “mental models of reality” among target groups.*

*It does this by using regression triggers (emotions, resentments, existing conspiracy mentality) which shift information processing from a rational to a developmentally lower, less rational level. So despite their “irrational” content, disinformation campaigns are highly rationally organized instruments of destruction, directed particularly against the open societies of the West.*

*Knowing their mechanism of action also forms the basis for building resilience – i.e. awareness as immunization against the intended activation of regression triggers. Media literacy is the ability to develop and maintain a non-deficient mental model of reality from the daily stream of information. It requires independent acquisition, memorization and updating of knowledge, training in the capacity to reflect, and responsible media reception.*

*This is an extensive preventive educational task for the state, demanding considerable resources. It is becoming more urgent in view of a presumed expansion of disinformation campaigns. But in addition, other measures to avert or contain possible harmful consequences for open, pluralistic societies must also be considered: at the societal level, for example, the suppression of socioeconomic factors that generate anxiety and uncertainty. And at the media level, increased transparency, rigorous debunking, and legal action against false reports and conspiracy narratives.*

---

## Disinformation

Actors who disseminate disinformation are usually pursuing very specific goals. Disinformation put out by state actors is often aimed at undermining and – if successful – destabilizing the structural and functional integrity of a social, economic or military opponent.<sup>4</sup> It usually has an indirect and subtle effect, as it attempts to induce changes in the *mental models of reality* held by individuals in the attacked community and, as a result, to change their behavior in ways which harm that community.

A mental model<sup>5</sup> of reality can be defined as a representation of facts, of a process, or of an action, which relates to the real world, in the mind of an individual. It provides the cognitive framework within which this individual perceives other persons and objects in his or her environment, and assigns meaning and thus significance to their interactions and relations. Furthermore, the mental model allows the individual to recognize changes in the interactions and relations between the perceived persons and objects, and so predict their future state over a sufficient period of time with reasonable certainty. In other words, it allows the individual to anticipate probable future developments and, based on that, to plan alternative actions and actual behaviors.

Disinformation methods thus encompass all rationally planned and long-term attempts by an actor, a group of actors, an institution or a state to plant false, inaccurate or misleading information in the worldview of the target audience. To achieve this, they usually aim to constitute a non-rational mental model of reality in the minds of their recipients, which is maintained through cognitive regression.<sup>6</sup>

But if it now becomes apparent, especially in pluralistic and democratic societies, that individuals and groups are induced under the influence of disinformation to behave and act in ways that impact negatively on the social, political and economic fabric of that society, then the question arises as to how this challenge can be countered.

Along with the more typical material methods of defending against disinformation – dis-

closure of sources, demanding media transparency, taking legal action<sup>7</sup> and debunking – another method is to acquire and develop disinformation resilience. Disinformation resilience can be defined as a capacity that “immunizes the targets of disinformation campaigns – whether entire societies, particular social groups, or political institutions – [...] against intended harmful effects, without stopping the activity itself.”<sup>8</sup> On the phenomenal level, this means an individual’s ability to recognize disinformation for what it is, see through its manipulative intent, and neutralize it.

## Mental models of reality

The starting point for our considerations on the impact of disinformation and how to defend against it is Walter L. Bühl’s model<sup>9</sup> of information processing in the human brain. We can use this model to get an understanding of how disinformation affects the recipient’s mental model of reality, with a phenomenological approach. Bühl’s model is based on an analytical distinction between magical, mythical, ideological and reflexive-discursive structural levels of information processing in the human brain.

The structural levels identified by Bühl and the functional cognitive components that differentiate these levels are outlined below. The cognitive components can be understood as particular processes for the generation of meaning. As these processes interact in the mind of a recipient, they constitute his or her mental model of reality. It turns out that only the cognitive components associated with the reflexive-discursive model fulfill the requirements of rationality. In general, however, one has to assume that each individual’s mental model of reality comprises a mix of components from different ideal types of mental models. But this also provides us with a set of instruments which allow us to assess the “degree of rationality” of mental models:<sup>10</sup>

Reflexive-discursive (rational) mental models of reality distinguish between the observational level and the theoretical level. They reject supernatural explanations of observa-

tions, link their statements and propositions by the rules of logic, and can be regarded as hypothetical, intersubjectively testable, falsifiable and provisional.

Ideological and pseudoscientific (non-rational) mental models of reality mirror the structure of scientific knowledge. They suppress discourse and reflection, proclaim a teleology, and are self-immunizing.

Mythical (non-rational) mental models of reality offer supernatural explanations for events in the world. They convey an illusion of understanding the world and the whole universe, and follow the “logic of archaic opposition”. In other words, they are unable to effectively separate things and events which appear to be adjacent or similar in form in space and time, and instead merge them together, while viewing things and events that cannot be merged as being in opposition to one another.

Magical (non-rational) mental models of reality attribute an external cause to every occurrence in the world. They establish a connection between unconnected facts, deny the role of chance, and seek to influence fate through rituals and formulas.

Reception can now be understood as a cognitive challenge, where an individual is

## *One emotion that disinformation campaigns very often target is anxiety*

confronted with the task of incorporating new information about events in the world into his or her already existing mental model of reality. When all structural levels of information processing are functionally integrated, an individual has the capacity to constitute and maintain a coherent mental model of reality in his or her consciousness, to modify it if necessary, and to act in accordance with it. However, if an individual is not able (anymore) to integrate new information meaningfully at a higher structural level of information processing, this integration takes place – if at all – on a developmentally lower level.<sup>11</sup> This is where disinformation starts to work, by activating regression triggers.

## **Disinformation campaigns**

Regression triggers are stimuli that initiate the transition from a rationally oriented structural level of information processing to a structural level that includes, in particular, non-rational components. Triggers for such transitions are anxiety triggered by emotions, resentment, and a latent conspiracy mentality.<sup>12</sup> They take effect both on individuals and within groups of like-minded people. The formal constitutional rule for non-rational mental models of reality can therefore be described as follows: Regressive information processing provides the method; disinformation supplies the material.

Emotions are induced by the perception of a person, an event, a situation, or a message, and are therefore related to this perception. One is angry with someone, proud of oneself, happy about something, or afraid of a spider or of bad news. Emotions differ in quality and intensity. Every emotion includes a physiological, a cognitive and a conative component.<sup>13</sup> The physiological component includes involuntary reactions and central nervous processes. One central nervous process that plays an important role in information reception is activation of the amygdala, a part of the limbic system responsible for evaluating incoming information. Activation of the amygdala marks the transition from the physiological to the cognitive component of emotion. This leads to a received message being judged as good or bad, as harmless or a threat. This judgment results in an experiential component, i.e. a subjective feeling that influences the recipient’s mental model of reality and consequently his or her behavior. Emotions therefore have a high potential to contribute to the constitution of non-rational mental models of the world.

One emotion that disinformation campaigns very often target is anxiety. In contrast to fear, which is directed at a concrete object and disappears along with that object, anxiety often develops from feelings of uncertainty or a diffuse sense of threat which the affected individual cannot clearly identify or put a finger on. This feeling can be triggered when



an individual is confronted with distressing socioeconomic developments; or when a recipient pieces together the lies of disinformation dressed up as news (fake news) on the apocalyptic general themes of war, hunger, disease and death, to form a dystopian eschatological narrative about the end of the world. The result is a phenomenon described by the Thomas theorem: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences." Current examples of non-rational mental models of reality that can have deadly consequences can be found among members of the "Reichsbürger" movement, right-wing extremists, and believers in conspiracy narratives.

Fake news – as a constituent part of disinformation – is also believed particularly when it fuels an existing resentment<sup>14</sup> or helps to reduce cognitive dissonance. Resentments are negative emotions that arise in response to hurt or injured feelings. Amlinger and Nachtwey reconstrue this emotion as specific to our "regressive modernity", in which opportunities for freedom simultaneously grow and are restricted.<sup>15</sup>

This general context can be furnished with specific content and reformulated as follows in light of current events: Russian propaganda in the form of fake news is believed because it helps to fuel an existing resentment against the Western model of society and its progressive transformation of norms, and reduce cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance arises from the fact that many Western media have reported on behavior of the Russian leadership that is inconsistent with the positive image that many people had of it in all those years before the invasion of Ukraine. It could also be that a feeling of powerlessness in the face of a pluralistic democratic society characterized by equality, tolerance and freedom of the press may lead to an authoritarian regression and to a desire for strict rules, in the hope that order will unfold out of the chaos of the pluralistic world.

Authors of disinformation campaigns also try to strengthen the non-rational mental models of groups within the attacked community that are prone to a conspiracy mentality, and separate them from the value consensus

of their community. Conspiracy mentality, for its part, is characterized by regression from the reflexive-discursive level of information processing to the ideological structural level, which extends down to the mythical level. Consequently, it is directed against minorities in one's own society who are perceived as alien, malevolent, and possessed of supernatural powers. Their intentions and plans, it is believed, are to destroy the host society in

***There is good reason to believe that current reporting on the topics of espionage, sabotage, cyber attacks, terrorist attacks, armed conflicts and wars – especially on the internet and in social media – contains a high proportion of disinformation***

which they reside, and their long-term goal is for world domination. Therefore, they must be fought with all available means.

### **Disinformation resilience and media literacy**

There is good reason to believe that current reporting on the topics of espionage, sabotage, cyber attacks, terrorist attacks, armed conflicts and wars – especially on the internet and in social media – contains a high proportion of disinformation. The question therefore arises as to how this challenge to reason can be countered, and what can be done about the many individuals in an attacked society who, as a result, have withdrawn into a non-rational phenomenal world. Media practice and the inclination of humans to participate in the affairs of the world suggest that total avoidance of new information will not be possible. So the answer is to establish and develop disinformation resilience as a kind of individually realized immunity against mental and cognitive regression triggers. In the form of a skill, the aim is to increase the "willingness to engage with questions of truth in a rational form"<sup>16</sup>.

As mentioned earlier, disinformation resilience immunizes against the intended harmful effects of disinformation campaigns. It does so by building awareness of the cog-

nitive processes that facilitate regression by generating anxiety, uncertainty and resentment. To achieve this, its most important strategy is to teach media literacy, as well as educating people about the historical backgrounds of the “usual suspects” who are commonly named as the ones pulling the strings in supposed conspiracies.

Media literacy is an individual’s ability to constitute a non-deficient mental model of reality from the wide stream of information flowing at us every day. This was already a required part of media ethics in the context of the knowledge society discussed in the 2000s,<sup>17</sup> and it is significant again today in the context of increased uncertainty (Covid ...) about what can and should be considered true knowledge. A non-deficient mental model

Media literacy is thus a cognitive skill for maintaining a rational mental model of reality, in the sense that the rationality of an individual’s decisions increasingly also depends on his or her media literacy. And last but not least, another feature of media literacy is that recipients become aware of possible misperceptions and cognitive distortions,<sup>18</sup> and take this into account when forming their judgments. Misperceptions and cognitive distortions can also encourage the formation of non-rational mental models of the world.

### Educational processes

Media literacy must therefore be oriented toward counteracting any kind of information processing that constitutes non-rational mental models of reality. The most important strategy in this process is the acquisition of knowledge. Individuals take pride in acquiring knowledge for themselves. This should be taken into account in the design of educational processes. It is not a matter of simply confronting individuals with knowledge contrary to existing non-rational models of the world and asking them now to believe this contrary knowledge. This approach would itself not be rational. Rather, it is about empowering recipients to conclude, through their own reflection, that the content of non-rational models of the world is in many cases counterfactual and implausible.

Media literacy also includes the ability to access consistent knowledge and make well-founded judgments, without having to rely on the algorithms of Google et al. Media education must therefore teach why it is still important to be able to retrieve factual knowledge directly from memory – despite Wikipedia and Alexa – and that it matters which sources one draws one’s knowledge from. This is because during the reception of new information, media users already transfer the details into general semantic categories; they draw on the information available to them at the time of judgment in order to form their judgments.<sup>19</sup> They retrieve this information from their stored body of knowledge. So judgments are formed even before the almost re-

### *It is not a matter of simply confronting individuals with knowledge contrary to existing non-rational models of the world and asking them now to believe this contrary knowledge*

el is congruent with the structure of reality and can therefore be kept correctable and hence also free of contradictions over a long period of time. Maintaining such a mental model requires recourse to the reflexive-discursive structural level of cerebral information processing.

Media literacy also encompasses the ability to recognize language games and visual elements that are likewise designed to create and convey uncertainty and anxiety. It recognizes that there are sources which are not committed to the truth, and helps make recipients more alert to the methods of disinformation, and to methods of defending against it.

### The Author



*André Schülke is a doctoral student with Prof. Filipović. His dissertation on the social psychology of non-rational worldviews is currently being prepared for publication.*

flexive reach for the smartphone. Conversely, however, this also means that false information retrieved from memory with regard to an issue being judged can lead to judgments that are not appropriate to the issue. Therefore, in addition to questioning the plausibility of new information, its verification by means of source and fact checking is also necessary. Formal knowledge and formal education reliably protect a recipient from non-rational mental models of the world only if he or she is prepared to subject his or her knowledge to ongoing review in light of social, economic and political reality.

Media literacy implies responsible media reception.<sup>20</sup> This acknowledges that when a recipient chooses their source, they assume responsibility for that choice and therefore responsibility for what they are being informed about. It follows that they are also responsible for the mental model of reality that unfolds in their mind as a result of their reception. In this reception process, the quality of the knowledge conveyed by the source influences the rationality of the recipient's mental model that is forming. For example, it will hardly be possible to constitute a non-deficient mental model of reality from fake news. Therefore, from a media ethics perspective, all recipients should develop an awareness of their responsibility in the context of their media use. To the best of their ability, they should satisfy themselves of the truth of the information, the truthfulness of the informants and the reliability of the sources – and not spread lies, fake news or bullshit, as this is ethically unjustifiable. In this connection it is particularly important to bear in mind that disinformation, once it has gone viral, cannot usually be contained.

### **Disinformation resilience as a foundation of the open society**

With the Russian army's invasion of Ukraine, the spread of disinformation on the internet and in social media forums and chat rooms has also surged. In view of this development, which is directed in particular against the open societies of the West, and the possible

consequences resulting from the behavior of those who succumb to disinformation campaigns, the question arises: What can be done to counter this attack on the pluralistic and democratically constituted society?

By making normative statements, media ethics can influence media reception. By pointing to the causes of non-rational constructs which can guide human behavior, it

### ***From a media ethics perspective, all recipients should develop an awareness of their responsibility in the context of their media use***

can suggest ways of neutralizing regression triggers. Only if disinformation campaigns are successfully counteracted is it possible to prevent a further spread of non-rational mental models of reality and their consequences. Thus there are three levels on which a pluralistic and democratic civil society can in principle respond to the challenge to reason:

- On the level of society as a whole, through measures to stop, or at least suppress, distressing socioeconomic trends that create anxiety and foster a conspiracy mentality.
- On the media level by disclosing sources, demanding media transparency, debunking and taking legal action where fake news, hate speech and conspiracy narratives are being spread – whether by direct compilation or by providing distribution channels for their dissemination.

#### **The Author**

*Prof. Dr. Alexander Filipović, born in 1975, is a social ethicist specializing in media ethics, technology ethics (digital ethics), political ethics and philosophical pragmatism. After studying Catholic theology, communication science, and German language and literature, Alexander Filipović received his doctorate from Bamberg in 2006. His habilitation thesis at the University of Münster in 2012 explored fundamental questions of Christian social ethics within the context of philosophical pragmatism. Until January 2021,*



*he was Professor of Media Ethics at the Munich School of Philosophy. He is a fellow at zem::dg – Center for Media Ethics and Digital Society, writes a blog ([www.unbeliebigkeitsraum.de](http://www.unbeliebigkeitsraum.de)) and co-edits the media science journal "Communicatio Socialis".*

- On the phenomenal level of individual persons considered in this text, by teaching media literacy in all educational institutions.

Given the current status of digital means of communication, media literacy is one of the fundamental cultural techniques of our society – just like reading, writing and arith-

***An individual's lack of media literacy exposes him or her to an increased risk of falling victim to a disinformation campaign***

metic. An individual's lack of media literacy exposes him or her to an increased risk of falling victim to a disinformation campaign. Since disinformation is an attack on the open society as a whole, media literacy should be practiced and encouraged from an early age in educational institutions. In order to pursue this strategy successfully – and since current developments suggest that disinformation campaigns are more likely to expand than be scaled back in the near future – sufficient material and human resources are required in addition to measures designed for the long term. And this means “a strong and slow boring of hard boards” with “both passion and perspective.”<sup>21</sup> The details, one could add, would be decided by the *Kultusministerkonferenz* (the assembly of ministers of education of the German states).

It can further be noted that decision-making should not ignore the fact that prophylaxis usually costs less than repairing political, economic, social and, in extreme cases, military damage caused by the effects of disinformation in a community under attack. However, successful prophylaxis is followed like a shadow by the “prevention paradox”, i.e. the fact that the success of prophylaxis is unmeasurable because no damage occurs when prevention is successful. This leads to the conclusion that further prophylaxis is no longer necessary. However, this erroneous conclusion should be avoided at all costs.

## Conclusion

It is clear that a not insignificant part of current media communication takes place in a field of conflict between disinformation campaigns and defense against them through disinformation resilience. These two strategies can be summarized and contrasted as follows.

Disinformation campaigns are rationally organized. To achieve their destructive goal of undermining and destabilizing a community that has been deemed hostile, they appeal to the irrational anxieties, resentments and latent conspiracy mentalities of the individuals in that community. This is done for the purpose of inducing those individuals to constitute a non-rational mental model of reality and, as a consequence, to act in ways that are detrimental to their own community. Thus rationality is pitted against non-rationality.

Disinformation resilience, on the other hand, attempts to prevent precisely this by also using a rational approach to explain how regression triggers work, and provide methods for neutralizing them. The means to do this are supplied from extensive research findings in psychology and social psychology, which are described in detail in numerous studies. Teaching disinformation resilience in all educational areas makes an important contribution to establishing and developing reception skills among media users. Competent application of these methods dispels a diffuse sense of threat, counteracts a conspiracy mentality by reducing distrust of others, increases trust in a pluralistic society and its democratic institutions, leads away from immaturity, and opens up new horizons for thought.

- 1 (Translated from German.) Luhmann, Niklas (2017): *Die Realität der Massenmedien*. Berlin.
- 2 European Commission (2018): Report of the independent High Level Group on fake news and online disinformation. <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/final-report-high-level-expert-group-fake-news-and-online-disinformation> (All internet sources accessed May 16, 2023).
- 3 Cf. Schicha, Christian, Stapf, Ingrid and Sell, Saskia (eds.) (2021): *Medien und Wahrheit*. Baden-Baden; Ulrich, Christine and Filipović, Alexander (2021): *Die Wahrheit der Medien. Der Wirklichkeitsbezug in medienethischer Perspektive*. In: Bründl, Jürgen, Schmitt, Alexander and Lindner, Konstantin (eds.): *Zählt Wahrheit heute noch? Theologische und interdisziplinäre Sondierungen in postfaktischer Zeit*. Bamberg, pp. 421–454.
- 4 Cf. Heil, Karl Moritz (2021): *Kollektive Strategien zur Abwehr digitaler Desinformation. Resilienz und Abschreckung bei EU und NATO*. Munich, pp. 35 ff.
- 5 On this point, see Moser, Karin S. (2003): *Mentale Modelle und ihre Bedeutung. Kognitionspsychologische Grundlagen des (Miss-)Verstehens*. In: *Schriften zur Symbolforschung*, vol. 13. Bern, pp. 181 ff.
- 6 On this point, see Ruhrmann, Georg et al. (2003): *Der Wert von Nachrichten im deutschen Fernsehen. Ein Modell zur Validierung von Nachrichtenfaktoren*. Wiesbaden, p. 215.
- 7 Löber, Lena Isabell and Roßnagel, Alexander (2020): *Desinformation aus der Perspektive des Rechts*. In: Steinebach, Martin et al. (eds.): *Desinformation aufdecken und bekämpfen*. Baden-Baden, pp. 149 ff.
- 8 (Translated from German.) Heil, Karl Moritz (2021), see endnote 4, pp. 51 f.
- 9 Bühl, Walter L. (1984): *Die Ordnung des Wissens*. Berlin.
- 10 On this point, see Bühl, Walter L. (1984), see endnote 9, pp. 2043.
- 11 Bühl, Walter L. (1984), see endnote 9, pp. 43 ff.
- 12 Moscovici, Serge (1987): *The Conspiracy Mentality*. In: Graumann, C.F. and Moscovici, S. (eds.): *Changing Conceptions of Conspiracy*. New York, pp. 151–169.
- 13 On this point, see Haußecker, Nicole (2013): *Terrorismusberichterstattung in Fernsehnachrichten: visuelles Framing und emotionale Reaktionen*. Baden-Baden, pp. 77 ff.
- 14 On this point, see Müller, Robert (2019): *Ressentiment und Faschismus*. In: *weiter denken. Journal für Philosophie online*. [https://weiter-denken-journal.de/herbst\\_2019\\_faschistische\\_versuchungen/Ressentiment\\_und\\_Faschismus.php](https://weiter-denken-journal.de/herbst_2019_faschistische_versuchungen/Ressentiment_und_Faschismus.php).
- 15 Amlinger, Carolin and Nachtwey, Oliver (2022): *Gekränkte Freiheit. Aspekte des libertären Autoritarismus*. Originalausgabe. Berlin.
- 16 (Translated from German.) Dietz, Simone (2021): *Wahrheit in der digitalen Kulturindustrie*. In: Schicha, Christian, Stapf, Ingrid and Sell, Saskia (eds.): *Medien und Wahrheit*. Baden-Baden, pp. 4358. <https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748923190>, p. 54.
- 17 Filipović, Alexander (2007): *Öffentliche Kommunikation in der Wissensgesellschaft. Sozialethische Analysen*. Bielefeld.
- 18 On this point, see Heil, Karl Moritz (2021), see endnote 4, pp. 25 ff.
- 19 On this point, see Brosius, Hans-Bernd (1995): *Alltagsrationalität in der Nachrichtenrezeption. Ein Modell zur Wahrnehmung und Verarbeitung von Nachrichteninhalten*. Wiesbaden, pp. 127 ff.
- 20 On this point, see Funiok, Rüdiger (2007): *Medienethik*. Stuttgart, pp. 155 ff.
- 21 Weber, Max (1946): *Politics as a Vocation*. Reprinted from: idem: *Essays in Sociology*. Translated, edited, and with an introduction by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. New York. [https://ia804700.us.archive.org/10/items/weber\\_max\\_1864\\_1920\\_politics\\_as\\_a\\_vocation/weber\\_max\\_1864\\_1920\\_politics\\_as\\_a\\_vocation.pdf](https://ia804700.us.archive.org/10/items/weber_max_1864_1920_politics_as_a_vocation/weber_max_1864_1920_politics_as_a_vocation.pdf).

# RESILIENCE

## A CARE ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE

*Authors: Eva van Baarle/Peter Olsthoorn*

### Introduction

Soldiers from different countries return home from their deployment relating stories of witnessing moral violations committed by local people, by their colleagues or commanders,<sup>1</sup> or having transgressed moral boundaries themselves. An increasing body of evidence shows that experiences with moral transgressions and dilemmas where competing values collide, can cause mental health problems in soldiers,<sup>2</sup> including “moral injury.”<sup>3</sup> There is thus growing awareness of the need to support employees in dealing with these dilemmas.<sup>4</sup>

Confrontations with such situations can violate a person’s deeply held values, and accordingly have a “devastating impact on the emotions, relationships, health, and functioning of affected individuals.”<sup>5</sup> Due to their values being violated in certain situations, substantial numbers of soldiers have developed feelings ranging from guilt and shame, to anger and betrayal.<sup>6</sup> Soldiers may struggle with profound “moral disorientation,” involving a confusing loss of previous certainties about what is right and wrong; consequently they engage in an “ethical struggle” with profound questions about personal goodness and the meaning of right and wrong, good and evil.<sup>7</sup>

### Resilience training – creating false meaning?

The seemingly increasing prevalence of moral injuries raises a number of questions. In what way should we offer these soldiers support? And how do we create a fighting force that is fit enough to win complex wars? An often-heard solution nowadays is *resilience*: the ability to bounce back from shocking experiences and not be disrupted by them;<sup>8</sup> to become more “resilient”—“happy, optimistic, adaptive, and mentally agile.”<sup>9</sup> The armed forces of Australia, Canada, and the United States have introduced influential resilience programming, and this might inspire other countries to follow suit. The popularity of resilience training in the military is partly explained by the fact

### Abstract

*Not only the direct physical experiences of deployment can severely harm soldiers’ mental health. Witnessing violations of their moral principles by the enemy, or by their fellow soldiers and superiors, can also have a devastating impact. It can cause soldiers’ moral disorientation, increasing feelings of shame, guilt, or hate, and the need for general answers on questions of right and wrong. Various attempts have been made to keep soldiers mentally sane. One is to provide convincing causes for their deployment, which risks an “end justifies the means” way of thinking. The good cause can provide a moral justification for horrible atrocities. Another method, introduced in the USA, Canada, and Australia, aims to strengthen military personnel’s resistance by promoting and maintaining a happy, optimistic state of mind through the use of positive psychology. Alongside making soldiers “morally fit” for all kinds of situations, the focus could also be on moral recovery and forgiveness. Such a care-based military ethics approach, aimed at mutual understanding and interdependence, could help soldiers handle the emotional impact of moral conflicts. This demands that military units reflect on their organizational culture and rethink oaths and codes of conduct that focus mainly on efficiency and readiness, as well as the soldierly self-image with its seemingly still deeply rooted warrior ethos. Today, resilience and positive psychology in the military is apparently mainly geared to assuring its soldiers’ readiness. An appropriate set of virtues and understanding of virtue ethics that are less centered on self-perfection and autonomy could point to a different form of character-building and lead to a better understanding of others.*

that it is based on positive psychology, which in turn harks back to Aristotelian virtue ethics.<sup>10</sup> For some years, western militaries have professed to grounding their ethics training on this Aristotelian approach to virtues. It focuses on the kind of person one wants to be, calling for the development of good predispositions. This is in keeping with many militaries' tendency to move their ethics education away from a functional approach concentrating on military effectiveness, towards a more aspirational approach that focuses on character and aims to make soldiers better people.<sup>11</sup>

Although resilience training that focuses on meaning-making is laudable, it fails to address the complexities and tensions within these experiences; instead it encourages soldiers to see value and purpose in their experiences. The tragedy is that moral dilemmas are not resolved, values collide, and you often have to choose between mutually exclusive choices of action. It may therefore not always be possible to reinterpret a moral dilemma in a positive light. Moreover, there are cases documented where soldiers struggling with shame and a guilty conscience were better able to come to terms with their experiences by condemning, not justifying them.<sup>12</sup> Institutional efforts to make soldiers view their actions as purposeful may even create rather than prevent moral conflict-colored problems, because people are encouraged to do things they might later come to regret, giving rise to a sense of disillusionment, betrayal, and anger.<sup>13</sup>

It seems, for instance, that feelings of guilt and shame can play an important role as heuristic tool to help realize what is wrong and as an incentive to refrain from acting inappropriately. Social psychologist Albert Bandura argues that people with high ethical standards can behave unethically if they find ways to justify their behavior, thus avoiding the feelings of guilt or shame that would normally prey on their minds when not living up to their ethical standards. According to Bandura, "there are many social and psychological maneuvers whereby moral self-sanctions can be disengaged from inhumane conduct."<sup>14</sup> Moral justification (what I do is for a good reason) is such a maneuver.

In a worst case scenario, resilience training might numb military personnel. When psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton wrote about U.S. service men killing 400 Vietnamese civilians at My Lai in 1968, he describes how "the most malignant actions can be performed with minimal guilt if there is a structure of meaning justifying them, even an illusory pseudo-formulation of the kind existing at My Lai (...)" In his view, "this way of avoiding guilt can render extremely dangerous any group of ordinary people (that is, devoid of any diagnosable illness)

## *In a worst case scenario, resilience training might numb military personnel*

who happen to possess lethal weapons."<sup>15</sup> Lifton shows that soldiers in Vietnam lived in an "inverted morality,"<sup>16</sup> with their relationship to the war being one of "parallel illusion, deception, and self-deception."<sup>17</sup>

### **Ethics of care**

A recent article by Van Baarle and Molendijk<sup>18</sup> reflects critically on these training programs and resilience debates.<sup>19</sup> Drawing on the ethics of care literature, they argue that it is possible to offer an alternative or additional approach to support soldiers, by looking at "resilience" as well as "moral recovery,"<sup>20</sup> "moral repair,"<sup>21</sup> or "forgiveness"<sup>22</sup> through a theoretical and practical lens. This approach resembles restorative organizational responses to moral transgressions that specifically attempt to heal damaged relationships between actors as opposed to violations of laws or codes of ethics.<sup>23</sup> Opening up through dialogue, and being willing and able to share concerns are considered important aspects of learning and creating a safer workplace.

In light of the above, care ethics offers an interesting perspective connoting the relational intricacies and implications of moral injury in the armed forces. In order to translate this perspective in practice, military ethics training can play an important role in "caring about,

caring for, caregiving, and receiving care”<sup>24</sup> in order to support soldiers dealing with the emotional impact of moral issues.

An ethics of care perspective emphasizes the concrete needs of people with whom we have relationships.<sup>25</sup> It is driven by the emotions flowing from those relationships, rather than as a private disposition, and involves the idea of care not only as a value but also a practice. Ethics of care considers dependence and the need for responsibility and care as characteristic for the human condition and highlights the social nature and interdependency of human life rather than independence and individual autonomy.

In care ethics, the starting point for morality is the relational involvement with others, not

recognize their needs. Second, responsibility, or *caring for*, accepting moral responsibility for the work that needs to be done. Third, competence, or the actual work of *caregiving*. Fourth, responsiveness, or *care receiving*, having given care, this requires responsiveness to the reaction of the care receiver.

These four phases can be seen as an intertwined, mutually reinforcing process. In *Caring Democracy*,<sup>29</sup> Tronto added a fifth phase, *caring with*, to emphasize that care involves a paradigm shift from autonomy and contractual moral obligations to a focus on relationships and responsibility. *Caring with* is an activity that demands constant engagement with others, including solidarity and trust. It presupposes addressing power relations and domination in order to include others’ voices. Accordingly, diverse phases of care such as attentiveness and responsiveness are not mere individualistic values or virtues: they should be seen as existing in interactions with others, meeting or responding to others’ needs, not from the premise of “the perfection of the virtuous individual” nor “a focus on the care giver’s performance.”<sup>30</sup> Philosophers like McIntyre also stress that in Aristotelian virtue ethics, to achieve a good life, one must get involved in meaningful actions with others; it is not a solitary project.<sup>31</sup>

## ***A care-ethical approach does not begin with an abstract set of moral rules and interdictions***

the separation from them. The corresponding moral presupposition is responsibility for others.<sup>26</sup> A care-ethical approach does not begin with an abstract set of moral rules and interdictions.

Joan Tronto and Berenice Fisher include both public and private aspects in their broad definition of care:

“A species of activity that includes everything we do to maintain, contain, and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves and our environment.”<sup>27</sup>

They introduce four phases of care that can help us understand how to *apply* care, each with its own moral dimension.<sup>28</sup> First, attentiveness, or *caring about*, to see the other and

### **Practical implications**

While the relationship between fostering reflection on moral dilemmas, moral injuries and resilience has not yet received the necessary attention in research, the literature suggests that soldiers who are struggling to cope can benefit from interventions that develop an ethical frame of reference that enables them to make sense of their moral injury experiences.<sup>32</sup> Being aware and attentive of one’s personal moral values *and* the values of others, recognizing situations where these values are at stake, and being able to put the moral dimension of these situations into words, seem to strengthen military personnel’s ability to communicate and justify to themselves and others why they choose to prioritize and act upon a specific value. In practical terms,

### **The Author**



*Eva van Baarle is assistant professor of Military Ethics and Philosophy at the Netherlands Defence Academy. In 2018, she obtained her doctorate with her research into fostering the moral competence of military personnel through ethics education. She is currently involved in the action research “Towards a socially safe Defence culture” as project leader.*



this requires investing in employees with solid listening and communicative skills and providing them with adequate training and support and to foster an organizational culture that values and acknowledges these skills for the various phases of care. This implies extensive reflective consulting processes and organizational structures that empower employees to discuss moral issues and to enable ways of fostering moral learning. The ability to be accountable for one's actions when faced with a moral dilemma, to consciously choose between conflicting values while knowing that some values will have to be violated, may help avoid the feeling of having failed morally or succumbing to an overwhelming feeling of guilt.<sup>33</sup>

To make this possible might require adjusting military personnel's social identity, or self-image.<sup>34</sup> Notwithstanding the current war in Ukraine, for most Western militaries, peacekeeping and humanitarian missions are still their core tasks. These "Operations Other Than War" are, however, sometimes seen as lesser than "the real thing."<sup>35</sup> Yi describes how U.S. Marines follow a martial arts program aimed at keeping them in touch with their warrior ethos after an era when the military was seen "as an instrument of social engineering."<sup>36</sup> This Marine Corps Martial Arts Program (MCMAP) still exists and in its current form "to strengthen the mental and moral resiliency of individual Marines through realistic combat training, warrior ethos studies, and physical hardening."<sup>37</sup> Research into the behavior of U.S. military personnel participating in Operation Restore Hope in Somalia during the early 1990s found that military personnel falling back on warrior strategies during peacekeeping are more likely to have escalating conflicts with the local population. Soldiers identifying with their warrior role created negative stereotypes about the Somali, resulting in a hostile attitude towards locals.<sup>38</sup> Interestingly, Op den Buijs, Broesder and Meijer found that identifying with the peacekeeper role is also better for a soldier's psychological wellbeing: it is in general psychologically more rewarding than identifying as a warrior, especially when there is no well-defined enemy or if the warrior role

conflicts with diplomacy and development roles.<sup>39</sup> It is therefore a pity that we have seen the proliferation of the term warrior at the expense of the humbler word soldier—something that probably does not contribute much to adjusting the above-mentioned image.

Finally, oaths, codes of conduct, and lists of values or virtues communicate what an organization considers important, and by showing due regard to outsiders' interests, it can alter that self-image. The codes, oaths, and values currently formulated in most militaries are undeniably somewhat one-sided as they main-

***The virtues needed today are probably more about demonstrating care and benevolence to others, than about demonstrating one's own physical courage, loyalty, and discipline***

ly concentrate on the organization's interests and aims. For instance, the virtues that prevail in most militaries, such as courage, loyalty and discipline, are not particularly helpful to the local population in countries where military personnel are deployed.<sup>40</sup> Evidently, today's soldiers need virtues, but not necessarily the functional variety that are commonplace at present. The obvious question is to what extent, at a time when many armed forces consider promoting universal principles as their main reason for being, they can reformulate military ethics to include outsiders' interests more than is currently the case. The virtues needed today are probably more about demonstrating care and benevolence to others, than about demonstrating one's

### **The Author**

*Peter Olsthoorn is associate professor in Military Leadership and Ethics at the Netherlands Defence Academy. Besides leadership and ethics, he teaches on armed forces and society, war and the media, and on ethics and fundamental rights for Frontex.*

*His research is mainly on topics such as military virtues, military medical ethics, armed drones, and the ethics of border guarding.*



own physical courage, loyalty, and discipline. The ethics of care is actually not at all at odds with the military's preferred method of teaching virtues: according to some authors, care ethics is a branch of virtue ethics.<sup>41</sup> Opting for a set of virtues centered around care would also match the more aspirational and less functional approach that militaries are moving towards in their ethics education.

### Discussion

In the early days of military psychiatry, suffering from mental injuries such as shell shock was initially seen as a failure; military psychiatrists were employed to return soldiers to the front as soon as possible, not least by administering treatments so severe that they made the battlefield look relatively attractive. Nonetheless, it was also psychologists who drew attention to the fact that in modern warfare, the chances of psychological harm are much greater than physical harm. The rise of military psychiatry and psychology ultimately led to more understanding for those who

*Insofar as militaries promote “resilience” with a view to enhancing their personnel’s “readiness,” it also underlines a rather functional approach to training that mainly serves the military organization’s interests*

broke down.<sup>42</sup> Breaking down is thus no longer considered a moral failure. At the same time, the idea that commonsense psychology can be applied to have soldiers return to the front as soon as possible proved persistent.<sup>43</sup> Especially in wartime, the principle of salvage (i.e., returning as many soldiers to duty as quickly as possible) takes precedence. What we see today is that resilience training and positive psychology are applied in order to ensure soldiers are “ready,” and minimize the risk of them breaking down. Undoubtedly, this can be a good thing: military personnel attach great value to being able to, as they say, “look at yourself in the mirror,” and resilience training might help them pass that test. Such resilience would also aid the military as a col-

lective “fighting force” and ultimately also the survival of the political community it serves. However, insofar as militaries promote “resilience” with a view to enhancing their personnel’s “readiness,” it also underlines a rather functional approach to training that mainly serves the military organization’s interests. This has clear drawbacks, the most important being that it can desensitize military personnel to outsiders’ suffering. What is more, such a functional approach is not only at odds with an ethics of care, but also with the virtue ethics at the heart of the positive psychology and resilience training that many militaries profess to embrace. Virtue ethics puts the emphasis on the agent’s character and “human flourishing in relation to others,” not so much their readiness.

1 Schut, Michelle and Van Baarle, Eva (2017): Dancing Boys and the Moral Dilemmas of Military Missions: the Practice of Bacha Bazi in Afghanistan. In: International Security and Peacebuilding: Africa, the Middle East, and Europe, edited by Abu B. Bah, pp. 77–98. Bloomington; Vikan, Cornelia (2017): Responsibility in Complex Conflicts: An Afghan Case. In: Journal of Military Ethics, vol. 16, no. 3–4, pp. 239–55.

2 Ritov, Gilad and Barnett, Zion (2014): The interrelationships between moral attitudes, posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms and mixed lateral preference in Israeli reserve combat troops. In: International Journal of Social Psychiatry, vol. 60, no. 6, pp. 606–612; Jordan, Alexander H., et al. (2017): Distinguishing war-related PTSD resulting from perpetration- and betrayal-based morally injurious events. In: Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy, vol. 9, no. 6, p. 627; Wisco, Blair E. et al. (2017): Moral injury in US combat veterans: Results from the national health and resilience in veterans study. In: Depression and anxiety, vol. 34, no. 4, pp. 340–347.

3 Litz, Brett T. et al. (2009): Moral injury and moral repair in war veterans: A preliminary model and intervention strategy. In: Clinical psychology review, vol. 29, no. 8, pp. 695–706; Frankfurt, Sheila and Frazier, Patricia (2016): A Review of Research on Moral Injury in Combat Veterans. In: Military Psychology, vol. 28, no. 5, pp. 318–30.

4 Litz, Brett T. et al. (2009); Molendijk, Tine et al. (2022): Contextual dimensions of moral injury: An interdisciplinary review. In: Military Psychology, vol. 34, no. 6, pp. 742–53.

5 Griffin, Brandon J. et al. (2019): Moral injury: An integrative review. In: Journal of Traumatic Stress, vol. 32, no. 3, p. 358.

6 Litz, Brett T., et al. (2009).

7 Molendijk, Tine (2018): Toward an interdisciplinary conceptualization of moral injury: From unequivocal guilt and anger to moral conflict and disorientation. In: New Ideas in Psychology, vol. 51, pp. 1–8.

- 8 Litz, Brett T. (2014): Resilience in the aftermath of war trauma: a critical review and commentary. In: *Interface focus*, vol. 4, no. 5. <https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/epdf/10.1098/rsfs.2014.0008> (all internet sources accessed 31 May 2023).
- 9 Howell, Alison (2015): Resilience, war, and austerity: The ethics of military human enhancement and the politics of data. In: *Security Dialogue*, vol. 46, no. 1, p. 15–32. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0967010614551040>.
- 10 Van Zyl, Llewellyn E. et al. (2023): The Critiques and Criticisms of Positive Psychology: A Systematic Review. In: *Journal of Positive Psychology*, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17439760.2023.2178956>.
- 11 Olsthoorn, Peter (2021): Military Virtues for Today. In: *Ethics and Armed Forces/Ethik und Militär*, no. 2, pp. 24–29. <https://www.ethikundmilitaer.de/en/magazine-datenbank/detail/2021-02/article/military-virtues-for-today>.
- 12 Litz, Brett T. et al. (2009).
- 13 Shay, Jonathan (2010): *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat trauma and the undoing of character*. NY: Simon and Schuster.
- 14 Bandura, Albert (1999): Moral disengagement in the perpetration of inhumanities. In: *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, vol. 3, no. 3, pp. 193–209.
- 15 Lifton, Robert Jay (1973): *Home from the War: Learning from Vietnam Veterans*, New York, p. 57.
- 16 Lifton, Robert Jay (1973), p. 59.
- 17 Lifton, Robert Jay, p. 65.
- 18 Van Baarle, Eva and Molendijk, Tine (2021): Resilience as the Road to Mental Readiness? Reflections from an Ethics-of-care Perspective. In: *Journal of Military Ethics*, vol. 20, no. 2, pp. 129–144.
- 19 Eidelson, Roy, Pilisuk, Marc and Soldz, Stephen (2011): The dark side of comprehensive soldier fitness. In: *American Psychologist*, vol. 66, no. 7, pp. 643–644.; Litz, Brett T. (2014).
- 20 Cullen, John G. (2022): Moral recovery and ethical leadership. In: *Journal of Business Ethics*, vol. 175, no. 3, pp. 485–497.
- 21 Vives-Gabriel, Jordi, Van Lent, Wim and Wettstein, Florian (2022): Moral Repair: Toward a Two-Level Conceptualization. In: *Business Ethics Quarterly*, pp. 1–31.
- 22 Fehr, Ryan, and Gelfand, Michelle (2012): The forgiving organization: A multilevel model of forgiveness at work. In: *Academy of Management Review*, vol. 37, no. 4, 664–688.
- 23 Dekker, Sidney and Breakey, Hugh (2016): ‘Just culture’: Improving safety by achieving substantive, procedural and restorative justice. In: *Safety science*, vol. 85, pp. 187–193; Van Baarle, Eva et al. (2023): Sexual Boundary Violations: Exploring How the Interplay Between Violations, Retributive, and Restorative Responses Affects Teams. In: *Journal of Business Ethics*, pp. 1–16.
- 24 Fisher, Bernice and Tronto, Joan (1990): Toward a feminist theory of caring. In: *Circles of care: Work and identity in women’s lives*, pp. 35–62.
- 25 Gilligan, Carol (1993): *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women’s development*. Harvard University Press; Tronto, Joan (1993): *Moral boundaries: A political argument for an ethic of care*. New York.
- 26 Edwards, Steven D. (1990): Three versions of an ethics of care. In: *Nursing philosophy*, vol. 10, no. 4, pp. 231–240.
- 27 Fisher, Bernice and Tronto, Joan (1990), p. 39.
- 28 Fisher, Bernice and Tronto, Joan (1990), p. 41.
- 29 Tronto, Joan (2013): *Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality, and Justice*. New York, London.
- 30 Tronto, Joan (2013), p. 51.
- 31 Tholen, Berry (2018): Political responsibility as a virtue: Nussbaum, MacIntyre, and Ricoeur on the fragility of politics. In: *Alternatives*, vol. 43, no. 1, pp. 22–34.
- 32 Bica, Camillo C. (1999): A therapeutic application of philosophy: The moral casualties of war: Understanding the experience. In: *International Journal of Applied Philosophy*, vol. 13, no. 1, pp. 81–92.
- 33 Litz, Brett T. et al. (2009).
- 34 Franke, Volker C. (2003): The Social Identity of Peacekeeping. In: Britt, Thomas W. and Adler, Amy B. (eds): *The Psychology of the Peacekeeper: Lessons from the Field*. Westport, pp. 31–52.
- 35 Robinson, Paul (2007): *The Way of the Warrior*. In: *Spectator*, June 13.
- 36 Yi, Jamison (2004): MCMAP and the Warrior Ethos. In: *Military Review*, Nov–Dec, pp. 17–24.
- 37 MARINE CORPS ORDER 1500.59A. <https://www.marines.mil/Portals/1/Publications/MCO%201500.59A.pdf?ver=2019-09-27-154522-420>.
- 38 Miller, Laura and Moskos, Charles (1995): Humanitarians or Warriors? Race, Gender, and Combat Status in Operation Restore Hope. In: *Armed Forces and Society*, vol. 21, no. 4, pp. 615–637.
- 39 Op den Buijs, Tessa, Broesder, Wendy and Meijer, Marten (2012): Strain and stress. Role ambiguity in an unfriendly environment. In: Beeres, Robert, Soeters, Joseph and van der Meulen, Jan (eds): *Mission Uruzgan*. Amsterdam, p. 114.
- 40 Olsthoorn, Peter (2010): *Military Ethics and Virtues: An Interdisciplinary Approach for the 21st Century*. London and New York.
- 41 Halwani, Raja (2003): Care ethics and virtue ethics. In *Hypatia*, vol. 18, no. 3, pp. 161–192.
- 42 Wessely, Simon (2006): Twentieth-century Theories on Combat Motivation and Breakdown. In: *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 41, no. 2, pp. 268–286.
- 43 Military psychologist Shabtai Noy writes about the treatment of soldiers suffering from combat stress, suggesting that indirect messages should be conveyed to the psychologically injured that they are not really ill and should return to their unit soon – “In general, a few hours rest or overnight sleep should suffice.” Noy, Shabtai (1991): *Combat Stress Reactions*. In: Gal, Reuven and Mangelsdorff, A. David (eds.): *Handbook of Military Psychology*. Chichester, p. 523.

# “WE ALL HAVE OUR-BREAKING POINT”

*What can be done to increase the resilience of German military personnel? What does it take to survive the stresses and strains of deployment? What about acceptance of mental disorders among military personnel, and how can a professional approach help?*

*The editorial team at “Ethics and Armed Forces” spoke with psychologist Dr. Ulrich Wesemann from the Psychotrauma Center at the Bundeswehr hospital in Berlin.*

**Dr. Wesemann, resilience is a complex concept. How would you define it from the point of view of psychology, in just a few words?**

Resilience is commonly defined as a certain ability to resist or persevere in the face of critical situations, so it means remaining psychologically stable and not allowing the stress of the situation to affect you. Whether it is always possible to do that is another question. I see it as a continuum between two opposite poles: on the one side is resilience, the ability to endure or resist, and on the other is vulnerability – a kind of sensitivity or susceptibility. So it does not matter so much which term you use.

**What is it that makes people resilient or vulnerable? Do these tend to be fixed personal characteristics – are some people more resilient and others more vulnerable – or can resilience be acquired and learned?**

Both. There are various theories. Many experts assume that there is a genetic component first of all. But others take the view that resilience can be acquired. I think it is a combination of both. For example, the fact that psychotherapies are effective shows that you can influence resilience.

## Profile



*Priv.-Doz. Dr. Dipl.-Psych. Ulrich Wesemann is a clinical psychologist in the Psychotrauma Center at the Bundeswehr hospital in Berlin, and a lecturer at the Charité Berlin. His research focuses on deployment-related psychological disorders with a view to optimizing deployment preparation and post-deployment care, and reducing the stigma associated with psychological problems.*

**Could you give a rough estimate of the ratio between invariable factors and those that can be influenced?**

No, the extent to which environmental or genetic factors play a role cannot be expressed as a percentage. Resilience research is a huge field, but it cannot make one hundred percent predictions. Overall, the studies that have focused more on vulnerability are stronger. So vulnerability factors seem to give better predictions. But if we say that these are basically the same as resilience, then we have to conclude that resilience research has not quite found the right influencing factors yet. You would only need to reformulate the vulnerability factors and call them resilient. For example, “sleep problems”, “physical complaints” or “depressed mood” could become “healthy sleep”, “physical wellbeing” or “balanced mood”. That would take greater account of a person’s current psychological states, which are definitely indicators of resilience.

**In your view and based on your experience, what are the factors that influence resilience the most? Are they internal or external factors?**

I think that locus of control is a very important factor, i.e. the perception of how much control we have over situations and events. How predictable are they, how much can we influence them? That seems to play a big role. Self-efficacy is also a very important factor. We would tend to describe these as traits, i.e. stable factors that change relatively little over time. Among the external factors, the most important is group cohesion – in the military, this is called camaraderie – and a good social fabric at home. These are the most important elements that are most likely to make people resilient.

**Is the effect cumulative – in other words, does having more positive factors make you more resilient?**

You cannot simply add them up, but on the other hand, it is clear that it is always better if a person has more of these factors.

---

**What role do sport and physical exercise play in resilience? And if I may ask a personal question: What is your most important resilience resource?**

I would say my family is my most important source of resilience. They give me a lot of support and strength. But actually, leisure activities – whether sport or something else – in general, a full personal life with nice things to do and good friendships, that plays a big role. A certain level of satisfaction with one's job is also part of it: to see a purpose and enjoy going to work, having good relationships with colleagues.

**So can you really predict whether someone will cope better or worse with difficulties, based on factors like these? Some people argue that resilience only becomes apparent in the actual situation in which individuals experience stress.**

People who have the appropriate factors will withstand certain situations better than those who lack them. Such predictions are certainly possible, but are more appropriate when applied to a large group; they should not be applied to individuals.

**And what about military personnel, who are not only exposed to potentially traumatic experiences during deployments, but also experience high stress and other adverse circumstances? Do they have a higher risk of psychological disorders as a result?**

Yes, because of their job they have an increased risk of developing an occupational mental disorder. According to our studies, the most common are anxiety disorders, followed by around two percent of post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD) and depressive episodes. The one-year incidence of mental disorders among military personnel following a deployment is higher than in the general population. If we now look at whether those affected suffered a critical event, we see that those who did have a six to seven times higher risk of developing a disorder. Without this critical event, military personnel are in a range similar to that of the ordinary population. Of course, being away from home and the condi-

tions during deployment act as stress factors in themselves. Even if these are regarded as rather normal conditions in the military, they are still a risk factor.

**So if it is really all about the deployments and what is experienced there, how do you go about preparing for them, how can you strengthen resilience in a preventive way?**

This may sound a bit disappointing for psychologists, but the most important thing is

***It is not about getting through all critical situations symptom-free, but finding the most professional way of dealing with them***

the ability to act confidently, i.e. training for performance in various critical situations. What exactly happens during operations is unpredictable to some extent. But if military personnel have practiced particular military situations and acquired a certain level of confidence in their actions, this is a protective factor that also transfers to other situations. During the 2016 Christmas market attack in Berlin, for example, we saw that it was far more stressful for firefighters to take on tasks that were usually outside their area of responsibility. So there is already a whole range of factors that we can influence, e.g. through training. The next thing is good equipment. Apart from that, group cohesion is important, i.e. building camaraderie. That happens automatically during a deployment, but it can also be encouraged.

Finally, it is useful to know about mental disorders. We have used a computer-based training program called CHARLY for this purpose. The approach behind it was called "From Hero to Pro". That means it is not about getting through all critical situations symptom-free, but finding the most professional way of dealing with them. Destigmatization is a big topic here.

**Isn't CHARLY also a way of experiencing that some stress reduction techniques – such as breathing exercises – really work?**

That's right. Training participants rehearse critical situations in a photo-realistic way. It is an immersive experience, and they then have to calm their own excitement. So it is about emotional anticipation. If they have prepared themselves for such critical situations, then naturally they no longer seem as overwhelming as they would without preparation. The most important factor, as I said, is performance, to make sure that they really stay in control of a situation. If soldiers train their emotions to achieve this, then of course there is a much greater chance that they will get through it well.

We observed good effects from the training even during the deployment preparation stage. Those who had been prepared for deployment with CHARLY had fewer symptoms of PTSD following active service in Afghanistan (the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission). So it really is an effective tool.

## *When external stress becomes too much, we all get sick – some of us faster than others*

**Is CHARLY still being used?**

No, the project has ended now, and it was not designed for the whole military, but only for various task forces such as explosive ordnance disposal teams and the medical service. But of course there are also other preventive training programs in the Bundeswehr. For example, the B.E.S.S.E.R. method is currently being taught extensively. It is a form of mental first aid, which anyone can use to help people who are in psychological shock.

**Do the German armed forces also carry out pre-screenings to identify certain risk factors?**

The Psychological Service of the German armed forces has a screening instrument – the “mental fitness assessment” – which can be carried out individually, or also in a group

setting. Every member of the military can take the test voluntarily and then receive guidance from troop psychologists. It is not intended as a selection tool, but rather to identify problems in particular areas, which can then be addressed individually. Basically to see if there are weaknesses somewhere, and what can be done about them. For example, with social skills training, sleep training, or exercises to reduce symptoms of overexcitement. This can be done in both individual and group settings. The Psychological Service is currently developing various training programs around these goals, and recently launched trainSLEEP – a self-learning tool to help you improve your sleep.

**But military resilience programs have attracted a fair amount of criticism. One example is the Comprehensive Soldier and Family Fitness program in the United States. It is strongly influenced by positive psychology, and has been accused of promoting problematic attitudes, along the lines of “you just have to change your mindset, then you can handle anything”. What do you say to that? Where does the resilience concept reach its limits?**

As far as I know, the U.S. program was hyped a lot at first, but was then increasingly criticized for having been hastily cobbled together and transferring things from a civilian to a military context without evaluating them properly. And of course, resilience training has its limits because we all have our breaking point. When external stress becomes too much, we all get sick – some of us faster than others. Some with a stomach ulcer, others perhaps with a depressive episode. Resilience cannot be trained to infinity.

I don't think we're doing too badly with our approach to “mental fitness”. We train on an individual basis, where there is a need for training. We can't say all that much about the overall success at the moment, but I am really quite confident.

**You mentioned the stigmatization of mental disorders. Being resilient and robust is part of the self-image of soldiers; people also talk**

---

about a “rescue mentality”. **Is there a greater understanding of mental disorders now, also following the experiences of overseas deployments?**

In the military, as in other forces and services, there is actually far more acceptance of occupational mental disorders than in the general population. Unfortunately, however, the opposite is true as far as the individual affected is concerned. Based on deployment statistics, which record all military personnel who have received psychological treatment in connection with their deployment, we see that it takes an average of three and a half years before they seek treatment for the first time – if they do at all. We assume there is a large number of unreported cases.

Last year, we were at the Interschutz trade fair in Hannover. We used a questionnaire to survey more than 1,000 personnel in other forces and services, most of them firefighters, to find out how they felt about stigmatization. In response to the hypothetical question of whether they would rather have an equivalent psychological disorder or physical illness, the majority opted for the physical illness. So the psyche still seems to be a big mystery. But there is a need for a professional approach to dealing with occupational and personal psychological stress, hence our slogan “From Hero to Pro”.

**What exactly do you mean by that?**

I think it is important to understand that the military, police or firefighter profession is not first and foremost about “being a rescuer”, but about doing your job well – for example, helping people. And at the same time paying attention to how you feel about work-related stress, and finding a good way to deal with it. As I said earlier, stressful situations can always arise that are overwhelming – and here a professional approach is needed in the sense of accepting help or getting help. Psychological problems are an occupational risk that should be accepted as such and taken seriously.

**So more should be done to reduce stigmas, especially at the individual level?**

Yes, unfortunately there is still work to be done. Incidentally, it may be due to the fear of institutional stigmatization if people do not seek professional treatment. People fear poorer career opportunities, or that their superiors or colleagues will think badly of them. That is why we started establishing destigmatization programs some time ago. But they were limited to the military. Now we

***Incidentally, it may be due to the fear of institutional stigmatization if people do not seek professional treatment***

have developed a simple non-expert assessment questionnaire. It is designed to enable partners of *Bundeswehr* personnel to better assess the psychological state of the person concerned. This can serve as a basis for discussions, or as a starting point for requesting advice about other services. We hope that this will strengthen their partnership. Additionally, it could help soldiers seek support earlier. The questionnaire is still being validated. In a pilot phase, we have already been able to identify disorders quite successfully. We are now testing it on a larger scale.

**Is this essentially an attempt to activate the social environment as a resilience factor?**

Of course we’ll have to see whether gentle pressure from the family is enough to make someone seek treatment. But this is also just a tool to push back the stigma. After all, we do have quite good therapeutic measures to treat most mental disorders. But if those affected don’t come, it is difficult to help them; and the longer they wait for treatment, the more difficult it becomes.

**So with psychological disorders too, the earlier you seek treatment, the better the chance of successful treatment?**

Generally speaking, that is true, but of course not in every individual case. For example, a depressive episode may subside on its own. On the other hand, we also know that once it

has occurred, the chances of another one occurring are significantly higher, so early treatment absolutely makes sense. The mental fitness assessment is also designed to work preventively, before a psychological disorder develops.

**The principles of *Innere Führung* (leadership development and civic education) are sometimes mentioned in connection with resilience factors.<sup>1</sup> How important is people-oriented leadership in general, especially in the military?**

A recently published study showed that social support has a significant impact on psychological symptoms.<sup>2</sup> Social support in this case

## *Good leadership is an extremely important factor in resilience*

was understood to mean not only the family, but also colleagues and superiors. We have already tried replicating the study, and found that social support during deployment, especially from superiors, is reflected in psychosomatic health. We also concluded that good leadership is an extremely important factor in resilience. Or – if it is lacking – it is a vulnerability factor.

The meaningfulness of deployment is also an important protective factor. If the soldiers don't see a meaning in it, they are less motivated and, of course, more vulnerable when they run into difficulties.

**Don't certain value orientations also make people more susceptible to so-called moral injuries? Aren't "morally sensitive" soldiers more easily shaken when they encounter situations during deployments that completely contradict their values?**

Unfortunately you're right about that. There are studies, for example by Professor Peter Zimmermann et al., that tend somewhat in this direction. They show that soldiers with a strong "traditional" value orientation, for example, are more susceptible to depressive

symptoms in such situations. So these value orientations seem to be predictors of moral injuries. It is important to note that these are not a diagnosis in themselves, but psychological disorders can develop from them as a consequence. From the deployment statistics, we found that moral injuries have increased in recent years.

**As Professor Zimmermann says, it is also a sign of a strong moral orientation if soldiers encounter problems in such situations and do not simply let the experience bounce off them. So are we faced with a dilemma that cannot be fully resolved?**

That's right. We cannot hire antisocial people for that reason, even if they might be more resilient in some situations. There is just as much a need for empathy. One solution would be to understand such value orientations as a risk factor, and then train other influencing factors. As I said, the resilience concept has many variables and possibilities. For example, the Psychological Service now offers preventive measures for dealing with moral conflicts, if needed. These are suitable for intervention at an early stage to avoid psychological disorders from developing in the first place.

**Let me briefly turn to another topic. In the Ukraine war, people often speak – perhaps somewhat carelessly – of the strong resilience of the Ukrainian population. But the people there have been experiencing intense violence for over a year. What awaits this country?**

We can observe this in other war contexts as well: Most of the time, the soldiers hold out until the end. But once the war comes to an end, sadly we have to expect massive psychological repercussions. Not only among military personnel, but also among the civilian population.

**At the moment, the principal goal is probably to make the soldiers fit to fight again ...**

Unfortunately, in war the individual person does not play a major role. Rather, they are expected to function. Whether they suffer harm



---

as a result is usually a secondary consideration as long as they don't fail. Let us at least hope that they all receive appropriate help as early as possible..

**Dr. Wesemann, thank you very much for the interview.**

*Questions by Rüdiger Frank.*

1 Beck, Julia (2020): Psychische Resilienz – Begriffe, Konzepte und deren Verankerung in der Inneren Führung. In: Hartmann, Uwe, Janke, Reinhold und Rosen, Claus von (Hg.): Jahrbuch Innere Führung. Berlin, pp. 216–229.

2 Thomas, S. et al. (2022): Examining bidirectional associations between perceived social support and psychological symptoms in the context of stressful event exposure: a prospective, longitudinal study. In: BMC psychiatry, 22(1), p. 736. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-022-04386-0>.

# RESILIENT MILITARY FAMILIES CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES PRESENTED BY THE ZEITEN- WENDE – GERMANY’S HISTORIC GEOPOLITICAL SHIFT

*Authors: Alexandra Hoff-Ressel,  
Peggy Puhl-Regler, Peter Wendl*

## Current developments

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, in violation of international law, abruptly changed the global security situation. Since then there have been daily reports about refugees, casualties, destruction, military offensives and the importance of arms supplies. The accompanying footage is hard to watch, even for adults. On the other hand, we seem to have become accustomed to the proximity of war and only really react emotionally to the superlatives of horror.

For the Bundeswehr, this means a renewed focus on its core mission of providing national and collective defense – and new challenges for military families. For example, within the framework of NATO’s NRF (NATO Response Force) and VJTF (Very High Readiness Joint Task Force), soldiers must be ready to deploy at very short notice (between 48 and 72 hours) if defense becomes necessary. What has always been the case for special forces is now becoming a reality for many more. In 2023 alone, almost 17,000 soldiers and their partners, children and families will need to be ready to fulfil this mission immediately in the event of an emergency.<sup>1</sup> For an effective support and prevention, we have to ask ourselves once more what this change might mean for relationships, but also for the physical and mental health of soldiers and their families. Worries and anxieties will not be alleviated in the long term if they are suppressed and kept quiet, not even if those affected simply try to play them down. After all, many children and teenagers come into contact, for example in day-care centers and schools, with refugee children who have experienced terrible things. Apart from that, children are exposed to images and reports from war zones in the media all the time, but unlike adults they are much less able to block them out. Now soldiers too need to address the question of how much attention they should pay to their families’ fears and concerns about their own deployment scenarios or a possible “cold start” with

## Abstract

*The start of Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine in February 2022, in violation of international law, shocked people across Europe and, indirectly, marked a turning point also for military families in Germany’s armed forces, the Bundeswehr. Virtually overnight, the servicemen and women and their families were confronted with new core tasks in national and collective defense. At the same time, they were already facing – and will continue to face – challenges in reconciling family and service (e.g. due to multiple transfers, the resulting need to commute or move, overseas deployments, and the diverse military exercises). This now raises further questions for the future: How can – to name just two aspects – Bundeswehr families be both sensitized to and prepared for possible deployments in the context of collective and national defense, but also for less planning certainty in the case of short-term deployments (“cold starts”)?*

*In such circumstances, it is particularly important to strengthen and foster the resilience of families. This needs to be considered from two perspectives: fostering the resilience of families as a unit (family resilience) and the resilience of individual family members (individual resilience). Both are mutually interdependent. The following article primarily outlines the underlying parameters that shape family resilience in general and the resilience of military families in particular.*

*Particular emphasis is placed on the importance of sharing fears and expectations. Based on these aspects, steps for ensuring a resilient partnership and family structure are then identified.*

very little preparation. So for which issues do they already need appropriate support from the Bundeswehr's network of psychosocial services, in particular the military chaplaincy, *Lebenskundlicher Unterricht* (character guidance training), social services/counselling or family support facilities?<sup>2</sup> What support do those need who have to bear the consequences of Germany's *Zeitenwende* from back home? This includes not only the families of those on active service but also those of reservists or civilian employees.

### **Family resilience – sources of strength in challenging times**

Family resilience needs to be considered from two perspectives: fostering the resilience of the family itself as a unit (family resilience) and of individual family members (individual resilience). They are reciprocally dependent on each other. From a preventive point of view, three basic pillars are essential for family resilience:

- Firstly, the couple's dependable commitment to each other and the resulting conviction that they can find meaning together in the face of challenges. This conviction is underpinned by shared values, such as faith and spirituality, but also by the experience that it is easier to deal with problems and upheavals together.
- Secondly, there is this bond through reliable organizational patterns as a couple and family, as well as the flexibility to change and adapt these when necessary. Activating and maintaining social resources plays an important supporting role in this regard. This includes nurturing friendships and supportive contact with relatives.
- Thirdly, successful communication and the ability to solve problems together are also key family processes. To achieve these, it is essential for the partners to gain mutual clarity through regularly sharing fears and anxieties on the one hand, and hopes and expectations on the other. Constructively articulating fears and expectations is therefore key to building family

resilience. In addition to providing fundamental reassurance, it is therefore essential to take appropriate steps together in order to minimize the burdens or at least mutually recognize them and implement solutions. This requires taking responsibility for oneself and others and also being a role model, especially for children.<sup>3</sup> For partnerships and families, fostering resilience therefore means creating space for one another so that feelings can be expressed – again and again – in a secure way.

In addition to the pillars already mentioned, the key factors that strengthen the resilience of military families in particular include other aspects that will be discussed in more detail below. These include planning and spending time together in a constructive and attentive way<sup>4</sup> (1), maintaining a constant dialogue – even over long distances and

## ***Constructively articulating fears and expectations is key to building family resilience***

times (2), actively conveying a sense of mutual dependability – not just presupposing it (3), and repeatedly clarifying for each other the meaningfulness and comprehensibility of the challenges facing the (military) profession that are important to the family (4). Given the challenging conditions and demands that soldiers face as a profession, these aspects can otherwise develop their own negative dynamic, increasing vulnerability and explicitly weakening family resilience. For example, frequent absences for service reasons (e.g. for exercises, training and deployments) can interfere with the elementary need to spend time together in one place. The same applies to commuting and the time spent travelling by road or rail. Permanently restricted communication, for example during deployments, sea voyages or special exercises, puts a long-term strain on the important exchange and networking within the partnership and family.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, when individual members can count on each other

in difficult times, whether together or in separate locations, challenges and crises can be better overcome. This not only strengthens family resilience and thus the quality of the relationship, but also makes each individual more resilient.

The importance of parents and other caregivers from the social environment as role models should not be underestimated in building individual resilience in children and teenagers. The way they deal with difficult situations and issues provides adolescents with crucial guidance and strategies for action. Through their behavior, adults can help children and teenagers to adopt positive patterns of behavior and strengthen their own abilities. For instance, to take a seemingly

*An important aspect of families’ resilience skills is learning to shape what can be changed and to accept what cannot be changed*

banal example, the mere fact that things do not always go according to plan helps them to learn to cope better with setbacks. It can also prevent unrealistic perfectionism.<sup>6</sup> After all, an important aspect of families’ resilience skills is learning to shape what can be changed and to accept what cannot be changed.

These aspects shall now be examined in more detail with regard to their significance for military families.

*The Author*



*Alexandra Hoff-Ressel holds a degree in education and is a research assistant at the Center for Marriage and Family in Society (ZFG). As part of the collaboration with the Catholic Military Chaplaincy, she focuses on the reality of life in military families, particularly from the perspective of children and teenagers. She is also active in various advisory bodies, including the Family and Service working group within the German Federal Ministry of Defense’s (BMVg) “Netzwerk der Hilfe” support network.*

**(1) Time together – for strong military families**

Family relationships are strengthened by the time spent together in a constructive and caring way. Those who plan and spend time together in an appreciative way, engaging in action and interaction, develop a secure and positive bond. This includes helping one another and providing emotional support, especially in challenging times. For children, stable emotional relationships with supportive adults are fundamental in developing resilience. These may be their parents, or in their absence other reliable and close caregivers. Ideally, they feel safe, secure and loved within the family system, and are supported and encouraged in their actions.<sup>7</sup>

Many servicemen and women have intermittent or regular long-distance relationships with their partners, families and friends. They may be deployed on operations, exercises and training, or their duty station may be in a different city from their social environment. In addition, they may be transferred to different locations, which may mean a new start and the loss of their local social environment. The window of opportunity for military families to spend time together at a shared place, where their lives are primarily centered, is therefore severely limited at many stages of their lives. For them, the desire for spontaneity often has to give way to long-term planning that provides support but leaves little room for unexpected developments. This makes it all the more important for military families to set aside time for the partnership and family, and to find creative means to connect with each other in a variety of ways. To create opportunities for togetherness and to use the time available as quality time, it is necessary to utilize all available resources. Every conscious moment spent together is valuable (including via digital media); even brief interactions and gestures help to strengthen family bonds and promote the well-being of individual family members.<sup>8</sup> For children’s and young people’s resilience in particular, it is important that the frequently absent par-

ent spends exclusive, attentive and, if possible, individual time with them. This gives adolescents the reliable opportunity to talk to their fathers or mothers, for example about events and the feelings they arouse, but also without an immediate reason. Ideally, there should be a ritual as to how and where these moments can be shared. Joint activities also help to rebuild intimacy and to reconnect after difficult events or long periods of absence. For infants up to primary school age, it is important to sense their parents' closeness through sensory impressions as well as feelings, such as gestures and facial expressions. Older children and especially adolescents spend much of their time outside the family. Nevertheless, most of them want to also spend time together as a family. If circumstances sometimes make it impossible to have enough time for each family member, creating perspectives and making joint plans for the future, such as planning the next long weekend, a holiday together and foreseeable joint activities, contributes significantly to stable family resilience.<sup>9</sup>

## **(2) Maintaining dialogue – building trust, resolving conflicts**

A strong foundation is created when family members communicate honestly with one another. In this atmosphere, joys should be shared, but negative thoughts, feelings and problems can and must also be addressed. Dealing with them openly promotes mutual understanding within the family. It paves the way for the development of joint strategies for coping with challenging situations and supports the capability to take action. This is particularly important when children have to justify their parents' profession or deal with negative statements about the *Bundeswehr* and its tasks. In order to enter into and maintain a dialogue as a military family, the content of the dialogue must also be considered: What topics are we actually talking about together? Are we as a family able to talk about unpleasant or difficult issues? And how can we create a relaxed framework for doing this? As military families face special and some-

times new threats, (climate-related) political and social challenges, alongside with personal and family pressures, it takes courage to learn to put these emotions into words and identify their own feelings about them. This is how children and teenagers learn: "It's important and enriching to talk about what's bothering me – and I'm allowed to!" While teenagers in particular may not always

### ***As military families face special and sometimes new threats, it takes courage to learn to put these emotions into words and identify their own feelings about them***

want to talk to their parents for a variety of reasons, it is still important for caregivers to signal their willingness to talk in an unobtrusive way and to be alert to opportunities: "If you want to have a chat, I'm here for you!"<sup>10</sup>

It is not always easy to find the right words to talk about conflictual or value-laden issues as a couple, and also with children. Children and teenagers in military families sometimes ask very searching questions about possible threats, the rationale behind military missions (and not just since the withdrawal from Afghanistan), personal readiness to make sacrifices, but also about possible dangers ("What might happen to you?"). Parents and partners should be able to provide information, at least about their own position. Therefore, it is still very important that children in military families are given space to express their feelings, questions and fears about the war (in Ukraine) and other conflicts. Even after such a prolonged period of conflict, their concerns need to be taken seriously and their questions answered as best as possible. But we must also accept that there are moments and events that can leave us – adults and children alike – speechless or numb in the face of senseless suffering. Recognizing and accepting one's limits is also an important aspect of family resilience.<sup>11</sup>

**Excursus: Possible fears and threats to military families**

Three categories of fear to which military families may be particularly exposed due to the nature of the soldier’s job are briefly outlined here. Firstly, there are **physical** threats, such as the fear of death or injury. Current events or the daily news in the media can heighten these fears enormously.<sup>12</sup> The *Bundeswehr’s* new focus on collective and national defense will require a candid discussion about possible scenarios and the necessary support for military families. Closely related to this is a second category of possible fears: **mental** (psychological) threats. These include, for example, the fear of personality changes, moral injury or possible traumatization, but also the fear of burnout and the worry of falling ill as a result of experiences that are difficult to cope with, for example during deployments or similar missions.<sup>13</sup> A third major category should not go unmentioned: **social** threats. Typical of these are fears of negative impacts on the partnership,

in different ways – as well as those who support them in the *Bundeswehr’s* Psychosocial Network. They too have families (of origin), relationships and important people who are irreplaceable for a healthy social life.<sup>16</sup> Children often experience and cope with the aforementioned challenges in different ways, depending on their age and life situation. Their emotions, reactions, behavior and fear of loss are not the same as those of adults. They therefore need preventive and accompanying support that is tailored to their needs.

**(3) Dependability – building self-confidence and self-efficacy**

One aspect of family resilience for military families is dependability. Couples, children and teenagers who can trust in the unconditional support provided by their respective partners, parents or caregivers can build their self-confidence and self-efficacy. They learn that their needs are taken seriously.<sup>17</sup> Couples, children and teenagers from military families experience dependability, for example in long-distance relationships, when the absent person and the family members at home regularly demonstrate that they are connected and keep in touch as best they can, despite the distance, in everyday life and in times of crisis.<sup>18</sup> “Hold the fort for me while I’m away” is a commonly heard sentiment in this context. It is important, however, that the support and appreciation is always mutual.

**(4) Meaningfulness and comprehensibility – basis for understanding and willingness to change**

Understanding why and for what reason something happens or is endured (such as a transfer, deployment or exercise, but also the threat situation as a soldier) makes it easier to cope with the stress involved or to accept the unchangeable. Understanding the reasons for this helps both children and adults to constantly readjust their own attitudes. In the context of the *Bundeswehr*, this resilience factor relates to questions such as: Why am I

*It is important that the support and appreciation is always mutual*

family or friends, and the general fear of the effects of prolonged separation.<sup>14</sup> The challenges and stresses of a long-term or regularly long-distance relationship are particularly worth mentioning here.<sup>15</sup> Of course, these three categories overlap in terms of their content and impact. And all the fears affect both the soldiers and their relatives at home

*The Author*



*Peggy Puhl-Regler has a degree in education and is a research assistant at the Center for Marriage and Family in Society (ZFG). As part of the collaboration with the Catholic Military Chaplaincy, she focuses on family life under special conditions, including the anxieties of children from military families. She is also active in various advisory bodies, including the PTSD working group within the German Federal Ministry of Defense’s (BMVg) “Netzwerk der Hilfe” support network.*

a soldier? Why am I prepared to endure the challenges, burdens and deprivations that this profession entails? It is not easy for military families to keep finding new answers to these questions, but it is essential. It is also the only way they can continue to keep the social environment informed.<sup>19</sup>

In conclusion, it is important to emphasize that far from being just a burden, the aforementioned aspects that are so important for the resilience of couples and military families also provide an excellent treasure trove of experience and valuable development potential on which relationships and personalities can grow.<sup>20</sup>

## How to successfully support military families

Soldiers make an important contribution to the security of our country. This contribution is increasingly perceived positively in the current global situation (coronavirus pandemic, war in Ukraine). In order to fulfil this mission – often throughout their professional lives – they take on many challenges, including for their partnership and family. Military families need to be able to cope with the many challenges of balancing family and service in order to remain stable and resilient as a couple and as a family in the long term. In order to strengthen their individual and, in particular, their family resilience, they need knowledge about and access to resources that are familiar with the specific demands of this profession.

Support from the *Bundeswehr* Psychosocial Network (PSN) can be helpful in this regard. In addition, a large number of organizations within and outside the *Bundeswehr* also offer special support and counselling services for soldiers and their families.<sup>21</sup> However, their services need to be promoted much more actively, so that those affected do not have to seek help, but at best are already familiar with the services in phases when they are not yet under duress. In addition to the developments affecting the *Bundeswehr* itself, changes within families must also be taken into account in ensuring fam-

ily resilience: these include the challenges posed by different family models, but also normative-biographical changes and crises during couples' lives, which in the worst case are reflected in the divorce rates.<sup>22</sup> Above all, however, the already mentioned uncertainties resulting from Germany's *Zeitenwende*, its tectonic geopolitical shift, will bring new opportunities, but also questions, burdens, fears and worries for military families. Making and keeping them resilient can only succeed if support initiatives network, cooperate and make their skills and services known to the families.

The Psychosocial Network, and in particular the military chaplaincy within it, has considerable preventive potential for strengthening the resilience of couples and families by offering – in addition to basic pastoral care in all life situations – formats for protected exchange which, through networking, strengthen social resources and promote a valuable sharing of experiences. Finally, diverse pastoral or religious, spiritual or even communal formats, especially in the case of intensive events such as family weekends, offer space for participants to express their joys, hopes, sorrows and anxieties (cf. *Gaudium et spes* 48). In this context, it is worth mentioning the collaboration that has existed for over twenty years between the Catholic Military Chaplaincy and the Center for Marriage and Family in Society (ZFG) at the Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, in cooperation with experts from the PSN, it is important to support those soldiers who are highly stressed due to their inability to process experiences and images,

### The Author

*Dr. Peter Wendl is a graduate theologian and works as a trauma counsellor and therapist providing individual, couple and family therapy. As the Research Project Manager at ZFG, he has been responsible for the open-ended collaboration with the Catholic Military Chaplaincy since 2002. Since then he has conducted more than 350 couple and family seminars – mostly in cooperation with the Catholic Military Chaplaincy and for the German Bundeswehr. He has authored numerous publications on partnership, family and parenting, especially on military families.*



and who have been directly or indirectly confronted with injuries, death, traumatization or the use of firearms. The *Bundeswehr* Psychotrauma Center in Berlin and the ASEM, an important ecumenical pastoral care project led by the Protestant Military Chaplaincy, are of outstanding importance in this regard. Developing fundamental awareness of the vulnerability of the body and soul is intrinsic to the very nature of being a human and soldier, and therefore also has its place in the character guidance training (*Lebenskundlicher Unterricht*, LKU) curriculum. This is where essential foundations for ensuring individual and family resilience can be strengthened.

Since 2002 there has been intensive cooperation between the Catholic Military Chaplaincy and the Center for Marriage and Family in Society (ZFG) at the Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt. This collaboration has resulted in practical initiatives and publications for military families, couples and especially children. These offer strategies for reducing and coping with the special challenges, deprivations and stresses.

In the context of commuting and long-distance relationships, these include, for example, the publications *Gelingende Fern-Beziehung: Entfernt zusammen wachsen* (Succeeding at a distance: Growing together at a distance) and *Soldat im Einsatz – Partnerschaft im Einsatz* (Soldier in action – Partnership in action) as well as the brochure *Zusammen schaffen wir das!* (Together we can do it!). The ZFG's series of children's books specially aimed at infants up to primary school age includes titles such as *Jonas wartet aufs Wochenende* (Jonas waits for the weekend), *Mamas/Papas Auslandseinsatz* (Mummy's/Daddy's mission abroad) and *Wie Papa wieder lachen lernt* (How Daddy learns to smile again). All publications are available free of charge to members of the *Bundeswehr* from the Catholic Military Chaplaincy.<sup>24</sup>

1 Cf. Manthey, Florian (2022): Jahr der Zeitenwende: Verteidigung im Fokus. <https://www.bmvg.de/de/aktuelles/jahr-der-zeitenwende-verteidigung-im-fokus-5539454> (accessed 22 December 2022); Krone, Alexander (2023): Fragen und Antworten zur VJTF. <https://www.bundeswehr.de/de/aktuelles/meldungen/vjtf-speerspitze-schnelle-nato-eingreiftruppe> (accessed 21 April 2023).

2 Cf. Wendl, Peter, Puhl-Regler, Peggy and Hoff-Ressel, Alexandra (2023): In Worte fassen, was Angst macht: mit Kindern (noch immer) über den Krieg reden. In: Christ in der Gegenwart. Freiburg, p. 5 f.

3 Cf. Fröhlich-Gildhoff, Klaus and Rönna-Böse, Maïke (2021): Resilienz in Familien, in: Menschen stärken. Resilienzförderung in verschiedenen Lebensbereichen. Wiesbaden, p. 43. As well as, by way of example: (2003) Family resilience: a framework for clinical practice, *Family Process* 42: p.1 ff.

4 This does not only mean activity! It can also mean passivity in appreciative and attentive "doing nothing".

5 See Wendl, Peter (2019): Soldat im Einsatz – Partnerschaft im Einsatz. Praxis- und Arbeitsbuch für Paare und Familien in Auslandseinsatz und Wochenendbeziehung, Freiburg.

6 Cf. Fröhlich-Gildhoff, Klaus and Rönna-Böse, Maïke (2021), see endnote 3, p. 45 f.

7 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 44.

8 See Zentralinstitut für Ehe und Familie in der Gesellschaft (2022): Zusammen schaffen wir das! Informationen und Hilfen für Eltern, Kitas und Schulen rund um Auslandseinsatz und Wochenendbeziehung.

9 Cf. Puhl-Regler, Peggy (2016): Ängste von Kindern. Präventive und begleitende Maßnahmen für Einsatzzeit und Grundbetrieb. <https://edoc.ku.de/id/eprint/19931/> (accessed 20 April 2023).

10 Cf. Puhl-Regler, Peggy, Ressel, Alexandra and Wendl, Peter (2022): Mit Kindern über den Krieg reden: Was Kinder brauchen und Eltern wissen sollten. Eichstätt, p. 1 ff.

11 Cf. Wendl, Peter, Puhl-Regler, Peggy and Hoff-Ressel, Alexandra (2023): see endnote 2; Berndt, Christina (2013): Resilienz. Das Geheimnis der psychischen Widerstandskraft. Munich, p. 67 ff, p. 82 ff.

12 Cf. Wendl, Peter (2019): see endnote 5, p. 47 ff.

13 Cf. the brochures published by the Bundeswehr's Psychotrauma Center at the Bundeswehr Hospital Berlin: "Wenn der Einsatz noch nachwirkt..." and "Wenn der Einsatz nicht endet...".

14 Cf. Wendl, Peter (2021) *Gelingende Fernbeziehung: entfernt – zusammen – wachsen*, Freiburg, p. 32 ff.

15 Cf. Wendl, Peter (2019) *100 Fragen, die Ihre Beziehung retten*, Munich, p.142 ff.

16 Cf. Wendl, Peter (2010): Psychohygiene von Militärseelsorgern: ein "Resilienz-Routenplaner" – Spiritualität – und psychische Widerstandsfähigkeit im Kontext von Auslandseinsätzen stärken; *id.* (2016): Was Militärseelsorger\* bewegt: Reflexion – Selbstkonzept – Perspektive.

17 Cf. Krenz, Armin (2008): *Kinder brauchen Seelenproviant. Was wir ihnen für ein glückliches Leben mitgeben können*. Munich, p. 132 ff.

18 Cf. Zentralinstitut für Ehe und Familie in der Gesellschaft (2022): see endnote 8.

19 Cf. Wendl, Peter (2019): see endnote 5, p. 49 ff.

20 Regarding the aspects of family resilience in military families described above, see: Wendl, Peter (2019): see endnote 5, p. 49 ff.



---

21 The postcard booklet provided by the “Netzwerk der Hilfe” support network provides an overview of the support services for military families, both within and outside the Bundeswehr. The booklet is available within the Bundeswehr under the DSK number FF328220248.

22 Cf Wendl, Peter (62019) for fundamental comparison, see endnote 15.

23 See the information box for more details.

24 For more information on the collaboration and related publications, visit <https://www.ku.de/en/research/research-infrastructure/research-institutions/center-for-marriage-and-family-in-society>.

# “I WANT TO BE A ROLE MODEL” PORTRAIT OF BJÖRN BAGGESEN

*Düsseldorf will be hosting the Invictus Games from September 9 to 16, 2023.*

*Frigate captain Björn Baggesen competed in last year's Games in The Hague. Ethics and Armed Forces tells his personal “resilience story” about sport as therapy and the importance of the Games.*

*Saturday, May 13, 2023, 7.30 a.m. Loud beats reverberate through the biathlon arena in Oberhof, Thuringia. Nearly 7000 runners crowd into their starting blocks. In the midst of it all, frigate captain Björn Baggesen and his wife Grit wait for her starting signal. Actually, they had both originally planned to complete the half-marathon today, at the 50th Rennsteig Run – but that's a longer story. To understand it, we have to go back a few years.*

## The accident

On August 17, 2016, the day that divides his life into before and after, Björn Baggesen is on his road bike near his home in East Frisia. Triathlon training means speed and tunnel vision. Because the wind keeps pushing him out onto the rain-soaked country road, he cycles along the curb. He doesn't see the Mercedes parked on the side of the road until it is far too late. He crashes into the rear spoiler at around 35 km/h. He briefly sees himself lying on the road, then loses consciousness.

When he wakes up again, he's in hospital in Sande with a “complex midface fracture”, i.e. fractures of the cheek and orbital bones. The 12th thoracic vertebra is also fractured. The doctor doesn't mince his words: “The good news is: you've survived.” Which, however, doesn't exactly say much for his future capabilities. While they might be able to patch him together, the doctor is sure he won't be able to run more than six kilometers in future.

At first, Baggesen says, he was completely devastated. His initial thought was: “I guess that's it. What am I going to do now?” There is one thing he is particularly afraid of: going blind. He's overjoyed when he can see through his swollen eyes for the first time.

And it doesn't take long for him to find the doctor's prognosis too pessimistic. “I didn't believe it,” he says. “Not me, I can do it.”

But this conviction is soon put to the test in the coming months. Alone in August 2016 he undergoes three different operations. He is transferred to the *Bundeswehr* hospital in Hamburg, where his spine is stabilized, his shattered eye-nose area is repaired, and an emergency operation is performed to remove a bone fragment that has come dangerously close to his left optic nerve.

Baggesen doesn't talk much about this time. One can only guess how he felt. He is grateful to keep his post; but for the time being there is no question of him being fit for shipboard duty. He doesn't give up, but how can he go on? In Wilhelmshaven, where he is stationed as commander of the BRAVO crew on Frigate 125, he seeks advice from the head of the medical service for the 2nd flotilla. And she has an idea: the *Bundeswehr* Sports School in Warendorf, North Rhine-Westphalia, provides sports therapy – that could be just the right approach for him.

She's right: in Colonel Dr. Andreas Lison, the head of sports medicine at Warendorf, Björn Baggesen finds not only someone who shares his passion for endurance sports, but also a doctor and supervisor who confirms his positive attitude. “Forget about the six kilometers. You look pretty good,” Dr. Lison tells him. With two titanium rods and nine screws several centimeters in length in his back, he is admitted to the sports therapy program in November 2016.

## Carrot and stick approach

His training group is a “mixed bunch”, as he calls it. And that's not without reason at Warendorf. Because everyone has different ailments, everyone receives individualized treatment. This is precisely what Baggesen sees as an advantage: the fact that the entire group doesn't fixate on one problem in particular such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Although everyone “carries a lot of baggage,” they are all in the same boat and



## Back on track

*By 2017, thanks to the therapy at the sports school in Warendorf, Baggesen is sufficiently back in shape to complete a triathlon. The picture shows him at a later race in Lübeck in 2018. Working towards realistic sporting goals and testing his own limits has been, and continues to be, an essential part of his recovery. But it's important for him not to become too obsessive about it.*

can support each other and bring different perspectives to the table. The visible expression of this situation: Everyone wears sports gear – there are no uniforms or rank insignia here.

There is one aspect that Baggesen deems to be particularly important: therapy is not about feeling sorry for yourself or your comrades. “There’s no place for pity here,” he says. If you act like that, you might as well go home. Instead, the focus is on the future, away from your own limitations and toward what everyone wants to and can achieve. “You’ll probably have to buy a new road bike,” Dr. Lison tells him – the old one was no longer usable.

At Warendorf, he takes advantage of the wide range of sports on offer, sharing ideas

with his coaches and drawing up training plans with them. As in any good managerial process, they set individual targets with their patients – sporting as well as mental or nutritional; everything can be important. Baggesen also signs his first target agreement to improve his performance capability and prepare for the upcoming surgery. “In three months,” it says, “I want to reach a personal score of at least 25,000 points in my training diary.” To achieve this, he has to do regular strength and fitness exercises. He also commits to losing at least 2.5 kg over the next six months.

At Warendorf, but especially at home, the work gets underway in the three months between the sports medical check-ups to test his performance: changing the diet, comple-

ting the sports program, documenting the training status. And sticking with it. “It gives you a tool that you can use for yourself,” says Baggesen. But it also requires personal toughness, he adds. Of course, goals are reviewed to see if they are realistic. “But if someone consistently misses their targets, eventually they’re out.” He himself has seen a comrade leave the group because of this.

But for Björn Baggesen, it “clicked in his head,” as he puts it. The therapy embraces everything he brings with him – his sporting ambition and his conviction that he can achieve more than others believe he is ca-

## *In June 2017, less than a year after the accident, he completes his first triathlon*

pable of. Above all, it gives the whole thing a framework; he gets professional advice and the confidence he needs. He regularly surpasses his targets and quickly regains his fitness.

In June 2017, less than a year after the accident, he completes his first triathlon. When he stands at the start in Lübeck, he still has the stabilizers in his back. Fortunately, he says, he has never had any pain with them. But soon after he has to go under the knife again: the metal parts are removed. He has eleven operations in total. Despite this, he continues to train and compete in races, including a 70.3 Ironman in 2018 on the island of Rügen; he now works for Navy Command in Rostock. Before that, he reaches another important milestone: by January 2018 he is fit enough for shipboard duty, enabling him to return to his post as commander of the DELTA crew. Standing in front of the crew again as a role model, showing that you can come back – that’s what motivated him, says Baggesen. But there’s one thing he’s sure of: “I couldn’t have done any of this without Dr. Lison.”

## **An offer too good to refuse**

In 2019, he is back in Warendorf for performance diagnostics when his supervisors from the sports therapy group approach him: Would you like to take part in the Invictus Games in The Hague?

First they have to explain to him what the Games are all about. He’s never heard of them before. And his initial inclination is to say no: after all, he wasn’t disabled while on active service, and surely there are more suitable candidates? But he’s made to understand that this is not how it works. They want to see him, who has completed his rehab so consistently, at the start. Also as an incentive for others.

Then comes a prolonged lean spell. The games are postponed twice because of the coronavirus pandemic. What’s more, he isn’t able to prepare properly. For personal reasons, he has in the meantime accepted an advisory post at the Federal Ministry of Defense in Berlin. The conditions in Rostock, with the familiar swimming pool on the doorstep and the running track around the corner, are all missing here. In 2022, when The Hague is finally ready to host the Games, he travels to the Netherlands with around 20 athletes and the support team to represent Germany at the Invictus Games from April 16 to 22. However, he has been in much better shape before.

Nevertheless, Björn Baggesen’s sporting performance at the Invictus Games could not be better. He reaches the finals in both the cycling and swimming events, and in the pool he swims the 50m freestyle in 31 seconds and the 100m in 1:18 minutes – both new personal best times.

And in the end that’s what really matters at the Games, he says: that everyone does their best, or at least makes every effort. Who ends up where in the medals table is irrelevant. The Games are, of course, a contest – “but in the end, everyone stands with their head held high.” Because they gave it their all. Because they have shown themselves and others what they are capable of. Whether it’s three or six meters in the long jump.

In The Hague, he experiences much of what he already knows from sports therapy in a concentrated form. Pride in his own achievements. The joy in others' achievements. The mutual support. The uninhibited way people get along with one another. One person may be missing an arm, another both legs. So what? "That's just the way it is," says Baggesen. And then words fail him when he tells us about David, the U.S. soldier whose legs were amputated on both sides to just below the waist. How well and quickly he swam. How proud his parents sitting next to him were. How they cried when he gave them a commemorative medallion. "I didn't think it would affect me so emotionally," he says.

Above all, he's glad he didn't turn down the chance to take part. He would have missed out on a lot. The confirmation that the mental aspect is the most important thing. Meeting patron Prince Harry and his wife Meghan, who mingle with the athletes and also take an interest in those accompanying them. "Absolutely authentic and charismatic," says Björn Baggesen.

Here, at the Invictus Games, it's not so much the story of suffering that counts, but what you can and want to achieve. Björn Baggesen admits that this may be difficult to understand for those who are not affected themselves. Nevertheless – or perhaps precisely for that reason – he believes that the Games and the issues they highlight deserve a much higher profile in the *Bundeswehr*, politics, and the public eye. The fact that some who go on missions for their country do not come back safely. The fact that there are so many rehabilitation and therapy services that he himself has benefited from. "I hope the Invictus Games will have a lasting impact," says Baggesen. Whether the motto is "A Home for Respect" or whatever, it doesn't matter to him. Something else seems much more important to him: that this "home" remains open even after the Invictus Games are over again.

## Functioning as a team

He admits that the sports therapy and the Games were also a learning process for him. In particular, he struggled with PTSD symptoms. At one point during the Invictus Games there was a loud bang and a poster fell over. "Immediately two people took cover," he says. "But then you take them aside and say: It's okay, do you need any help?" Therapists were even present at the opening and closing ceremonies, where there was loud clapping, he says. He now realizes how difficult it must be to find your feet again in a post when dealing with such symptoms and fears. "And then when someone stands there with a mindset like I used to have, and says: Stop moaning and get on with your job? I don't think it's that simple."

Not to mention the "Family & Friends", as family members and supporters are known in the Invictus Games parlance. All those close to the traumatized and injured, they're the ones who ultimately go through the most. The spouses, but also the children, who often

## *At the Invictus Games, it's not so much the story of suffering that counts, but what you can and want to achieve*

have to make their own sacrifices and can develop their own anxieties as a result. Björn Baggesen also knows this from stories told by his wife Grit, who herself works as a trauma counsellor, including in the ASEM pastoral care program for people suffering from the consequences of military deployments, and is familiar with such secondary traumatization. "The families can't possibly cope on their own," she says. Instead of well-intentioned platitudes they need support, space – and recognition. Like at the Invictus Games, where family and friends are also acknowledged, or at the reception held at the Federal Ministry of Defense in April 2023, where Boris Pistorius presented everyone – the athletes and their families – with a medallion. This event meant something to both.

## The Author



Rüdiger Frank is copy editor at „Ethics and Armed Forces“

Björn Baggesen says that those affected must also understand that they are not lone warriors. You shouldn't focus on your sport and neglect everything else, nor should you expect those close to you to constantly motivate you or put up with you. During his first time in Berlin, when he couldn't train, he fell into a rut and even got a little sick. His wife pulled him out of it and gave him tips on how to build up new routines. He has now

## *Björn Baggesen says that those affected must also understand that they are not lone warriors*

got into the habit of doing stability exercises with push-ups and yoga elements right after getting up at 5:30 a.m. It's no fun, he says – but without that grueling morning workout, he ends up paying the price a few days later.

So that the focus isn't always on just one person, Björn and Grit Baggesen have come up with what they jokingly call a “lose-lose situation”. On a regular basis, one of them plans something out of the ordinary, a sporting goal that challenges both of them. For example, Grit, a competitive athlete herself and a long-time member of the national free-diving team, organized a trip to Finland last year. Ice diving under a frozen lake, 20 meters in 4-degree cold water, from one self-drilled hole to another. The preparation alone was a horror for him, Björn Baggesen recounts. But he got through it. Last year he got his revenge with an Olympic triathlon at Lake Werbelin. This is also how the idea came about to compete together in the half-marathon at the Rennsteig Run this year..

### **Five days in intensive care**

On April 26, 2023, just before the race, the twelfth operation is scheduled. A final operation on the paranasal and frontal sinuses, a minor matter compared with what he has already endured. But there are complications, his oxygen levels suddenly deteriorate. Apparently, water had got into his lungs. At

the insistence of his wife, he is transferred to the intensive care unit, where he is placed on a ventilator like a Covid patient. The doctors are not sure whether he will make it. On the first evening, says Grit Baggesen, she was told that it could be “touch and go” that night.

But things turn out well. After five days, Baggesen is able to leave the intensive care unit. And a week later, he is fit enough to accompany his wife to the Rennsteig Run. “Run for me,” he told her. “Don't give up, or everything will be about me again.”

*At the Rennsteig Run on May 13, Björn Baggesen has meanwhile arrived in Schmiedefeld to pick up Grit after the half-marathon. On the sports field, which has been converted into a finish area, there is a festival atmosphere with the smell of bratwurst and beer. When they meet up again among the thousands of exhausted, sweaty runners and spectators, he gives his wife, who ran a personal best of 2:17 hours today, a big hug. It's a win-win situation.*



## Flying the flag

*Representing Germany at the Games has given Björn Baggesen extra motivation. On the one hand you are competing for yourself, on the other hand for your country – “your attitude has to be right.” Even if the medals table is ultimately less important.*

**You can find more pictures to this story on our homepage:**

**<https://www.ethikundmilitaer.de/en/magazine-datenbank/detail/2023-01/article/i-want-to-be-a-role-model-portrait-of-bjoern-baggesen>**





[www.ethicsandarmedforces.com](http://www.ethicsandarmedforces.com)



This issue and all other issues of “Ethics and Armed Forces” can be found **in German and English** on the homepage of the e-journal.

## Full issues of “Ethics and Armed Forces”

- 2022/2 War in Ukraine
- 2022/1 Women, Peace and Security
- 2021/2 Innere Führung and Military Ethos
- 2021/1 Climate Change as a Threat Multiplier
- 2020/2 Corona Pandemic
- 2020/1 Nuclear Deterrence
- 2019/2 Ethics for Soldiers
- 2019/1 Conflict Zone Cyberspace
- 2018/2 European Army
- 2018/1 Strategic foresight
- 2017 Terror
- 2016 Innere Führung
- 2015/2 Hybrid warfare
- 2015/1 Military medical ethics
- 2014/2 Cyberwar
- 2014/1 Drones and LAWS

# IMPRINT

The e-journal “Ethics and Armed Forces” (ISSN 2199-4137) is a free-of-charge, non-commercial, digital publication containing journalistic and editorial content. It is produced by Zentrum für ethische Bildung in den Streitkräften – zebis, Herrengraben 4, 20459 Hamburg. Director of zebis: Dr. Veronika Bock

**Note: The published articles do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the editors and publishers.**

### Editors

Prof. Dr. Andreas Bock, Dr. Veronika Bock,  
Prof. Dr. Thomas Elßner, Prof. Dr. Johannes Frühbauer,  
Prof. Dr. Fred van Iersel, Prof. Dr. Alexander Merkl,  
Norbert Stäblein

### Advisory Board

Lothar Bendel, Heinrich Dierkes, Msgr. Bernward Mezger,  
Dr. Angela Reinders, Cornelius Sturm, Kristina Tonn

### Copy Editors

Rüdiger Frank

**Person responsible for content pursuant to section 55 (2) of the German Interstate Broadcasting Agreement (Rundfunkstaatsvertrag, RStV)**

Dr. Veronika Bock, Herrengraben 4, 20459 Hamburg

### Contact

Tel.: +49(0)40 - 67 08 59 - 51, Fax 67 08 59 - 3

E-Mail: [redaktion@zebis.eu](mailto:redaktion@zebis.eu)

### Service provider as the legal entity of Zentrum für ethische Bildung in den Streitkräften – zebis

Katholische Soldatenseelsorge (KS)

### Legal form

Anstalt des öffentlichen Rechts

### Supervision

Catholic military bishop for the German armed forces (Bundeswehr)

Am Weidendamm 2, 10117 Berlin

### Authorized board of directors of KS

Director at KMBA

Msgr. Wolfgang Schilk

Diplom-Kaufmann Wolfgang Wurmb

Am Weidendamm 2

10117 Berlin

### Kontakt KS

Telefon: +49(0)30 - 20 617 - 500

Telefax: +49(0)30 - 20 617 - 599

[Info@Katholische-Soldatenseelsorge.de](mailto:Info@Katholische-Soldatenseelsorge.de)

Date of Publication: 15 June 2023



[ethicsandarmedforces.com](http://ethicsandarmedforces.com)



**zebis**

**Zentrum für ethische Bildung in den Streitkräften**

Herrengraben 4  
20459 Hamburg

Tel. +49 40 67 08 59 - 55

Fax +49 40 67 08 59 - 59

[info@zebis.eu](mailto:info@zebis.eu)

[www.zebis.eu](http://www.zebis.eu)