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AGGRESSIVENESS IN MILITARY SERVICE: CONCEPTUAL AMBIGUITY, MULTILEVEL DETERMINANTS, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL MECHANISMS

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Abstract

Aggressiveness in military personnel is a complex behavioral and psychological phenomenon shaped by a wide range of determinants. Military service represents a high-demand environment where individuals are exposed to intense stressors, strict organizational regulations, deprivation-related experiences, and adaptation challenges. Additionally, traumatic exposure and collective climate within military units influence emotional regulation and aggression-related outcomes. This article provides a theoretical and analytical review of the key determinants of aggressiveness among service members: operational and chronic stress, disciplinary constraints, deprivation, trauma, adaptation pressure, and unit climate. Particular emphasis is placed on the interaction between individual vulnerability and environmental factors, including psychological mechanisms such as frustration, emotional dysregulation, hyperarousal, cognitive distortions, and social learning processes. Understanding these determinants is essential for developing preventive interventions and strengthening psychological resilience in military systems.

Keywords

aggressiveness, military personnel, stress, deprivation, trauma, adaptation, unit climate, emotional regulation

Introduction

Aggressiveness among military personnel has increasingly attracted scholarly attention due to its significant implications for operational effectiveness, psychological well-being, discipline stability, and interpersonal safety within military institutions. While controlled aggression may be considered an adaptive component of combat readiness and survival-oriented performance, uncontrolled or maladaptive aggression represents a serious risk factor for misconduct, interpersonal violence, self-destructive behavior, psychological breakdown, and decreased unit cohesion.

The military context is fundamentally different from civilian environments. It is characterized by strict hierarchy, limited autonomy, constant evaluation, high responsibility, and the requirement to maintain psychological stability under both routine stress and extreme conditions. Under such circumstances, aggressive reactions may emerge as behavioral responses to stress, frustration, perceived threat, or normative group influences.

At the same time, a major scientific challenge remains unresolved: the conceptual boundaries of “aggression” and “aggressiveness” are still ambiguous. The literature demonstrates that these terms are interpreted differently across biology, neuroscience, psychiatry, sociology, and psychology. This definitional variability complicates the development of coherent diagnostic criteria, research instruments, and prevention programs within military systems.

Therefore, the present article aims (1) to clarify the conceptual distinctions between aggression and aggressiveness, (2) to summarize the key theoretical perspectives that explain aggressive behavior, and (3) to systematize the major determinants of aggressiveness in military service conditions, including stress, regulatory constraints, deprivation, trauma, adaptation pressure, and unit climate.

Methods (Theoretical and Analytical Framework). This study is based on a theoretical-analytical review methodology. A review of scientific sources indicates that the definitions of aggression

and aggressiveness remain conceptually uncertain. According to T.G.Rumyantseva, the difficulty in defining this construct is associated with the existence of multiple approaches, each determined by the specific field of inquiry. In biology, attention is primarily focused on the goals and functions of aggression (adaptive or maladaptive). Neurophysiology examines the neural mechanisms underlying aggressive behavior. Psychiatry studies aggression in individuals with mental disorders, whereas sociology explores the emergence and expression of aggression under the influence of social factors.

Although psychology is traditionally recognized as an integrative center for aggression research, a fully unified understanding of aggression and aggressiveness has not yet been established. For instance, A. Bass defines aggression as behavior that includes threat or harm to others. L. Berkowitz emphasizes that classification of an act as aggressive should include not only physical injury but also humiliation, insult, or psychological degradation.

One of the most generalized and influential definitions was offered by R. Baron and D. Richardson, who define aggression as any behavior directed toward harming or insulting another living being who does not want to be treated in such a way. An important addition to this definition is that aggressive behavior often involves an attempt to cause maximum harm to the target while minimizing harm to oneself.

O.B. Bovt argues that it is methodologically appropriate to include the criterion of aggressive intent (presence or absence), because it allows researchers to assess attempts to harm others even if the attempt fails to reach the intended outcome. This helps distinguish aggressive actions from accidental harm, and from "well-intentioned actions" in which inflicting pain may be necessary [1].

Thus, the Baron and Richardson definition contains three important conditions:

1. aggression is intentional and goal-directed harm;
2. the target of aggression is a living being;
3. the victim is motivated to avoid such treatment.

However, G.A. Gaydukevich points out that this definition lacks the concept of "social norm," which may result in misclassification when violence is socially authorized (e.g., legal punishment). The author suggests that this limitation may be overcome by including social evaluation as a criterion and defining aggression as motivated destructive behavior that contradicts the norms and rules of coexistence in society. Based on theoretical analysis of domestic and foreign approaches, S.L. Kravchuk proposed several conceptual interpretations:

1. Aggression as a mental state - temporarily determines an individual's attitude toward self and other objects (living and non-living), characterized by cognitive, emotional, and volitional components.
2. Aggression as a personality trait -serves as an internal motive or impulse for aggressive actions and reflects a stable readiness to act aggressively in certain situations when aggressive perception and behavioral tendencies exist.
3. Aggression as a "need-object" - functions as an independent value, acting as a goal and motive of behavior.
4. Aggression as behavioral manifestation - includes damage to inanimate objects and acts causing physical, moral, or material harm to living beings, toward whom the victim has motivation to avoid such treatment [5].

Aggression should be distinguished from aggressiveness. Aggression refers to specific behaviors and acts, whereas aggressiveness is a personality characteristic representing readiness or predisposition toward aggressive behavior. The distinction lies in the fact that aggressive acts may not always stem from trait aggressiveness, and an aggressive personality does not necessarily produce aggressive acts in all circumstances. Theoretical and empirical research also suggests that it is scientifically unfounded to interpret aggressiveness solely as a biological (innate or instinctive) trait. In real conditions, aggressive behavior emerges from complex

interactions between personality-related and situational determinants. Many authors interpret aggressiveness as an acquired characteristic shaped by social conditions.

Levels of aggressiveness are influenced by socialization processes, cultural norms, and social regulation—particularly norms of responsibility and punishment for aggression. The concept of aggression norms is considered at least in two aspects: the average socially acceptable level of aggression, and socially accepted behavioral standards within specific contexts. Some authors argue that the presence of a certain amount of aggressiveness in a well-developed personality supports social adaptation and resilience (e.g., overcoming life challenges). Without such energy, individuality may diminish and the person may become passive and conformal, with a lower social status [2].

According to O.Yu.Drozdov, within American psychological and pedagogical science, positively oriented aggressiveness (such as constructive stubbornness) contributes to adaptive development of certain forms of aggression.

In a similar line, A.I. Saliyev and I.M. Galyan emphasize that every person should possess a certain level of aggressiveness because aggression is an inseparable element of human activity and adaptation. Aggression may be regarded as a biologically purposeful form of behavior that supports survival and adaptation; however, it is simultaneously evaluated as evil and behavior contrary to the positive nature of human beings.

According to O.B. Bovt, when aggressiveness is self-directed and helps individuals achieve success without harming others, it cannot be classified as harmful, and reducing aggressiveness in such cases is not necessary. The author notes that the destructive component of human activity may be required in sports, creativity, and other fields. For example, aggression in martial arts (within rules) may be constructive for competition goals, although it might become destructive outside regulated contexts. Therefore, “positive aggression” can only be interpreted within a specific situation and context.

S.L.Kravchuk further suggests that aggression may carry ambivalent functions beyond positive and negative categories: it helps satisfy certain emotional needs, supports revenge motives, reduces emotional tension, acts as a form of catharsis, serves as a means to achieve goals, and contributes to solving both socially approved and socially disapproved tasks [3].

Most psychologists agree that aggression has two main forms: hostile (emotional) and instrumental. Hostile aggression occurs when the primary goal is to cause suffering or harm to the victim. Instrumental aggression occurs when aggression functions as a tool for achieving a separate objective (e.g., money, social status, territory). Instrumental aggression is often shaped by motivational circumstances and framed through socially directed goals.

Drozdov also notes that some aggressive acts may combine hostile and instrumental elements. A. Bandura, despite differences in goals, interprets both forms as goal-directed strategies, implying their instrumental nature in problem solving.

T.M. Kurbatova identifies three main levels (types) of aggression:

1. individual type - self-defense, protection of property and children;
2. subject-activity type - behavioral style associated with achieving goals and responding to success or threat;
3. personality type - linked to motivational system and self-awareness, expressed through gaining advantages. Violent means for achieving goals are often masked as instrumental aggression.

Finally, B. -Krahé proposed a broader typology of aggressive behavior based on: response modality (verbal/physical), quality (action/inaction), directness (direct/indirect), observability (overt/covert), provocation (provoked/unprovoked), intentionality (hostile/instrumental), type of damage (physical/psychological), duration (short-term/long-term), and social units involved (individual/group).

In sum, scientific literature demonstrates considerable conceptual diversity in aggression research. In classical terms, aggression is behavior aimed at harming another living being who does not want such treatment. A distinctive feature of aggressive behavior is an attempt to cause maximum harm while minimizing harm to oneself.

Results. Military service frequently involves high-pressure situations requiring rapid decisions, persistent vigilance, and physical endurance. Acute operational stress is associated with heightened physiological arousal and increased reactivity. Under stress, the threshold for irritation decreases, and aggressive responses become more likely due to reduced inhibitory control.

When stress exposure becomes prolonged and recovery resources are insufficient, chronic stress evolves into emotional exhaustion and burnout-like symptoms. This condition undermines patience, empathy, and self-control and increases sensitivity to minor provocations.

Stress contributes to aggressiveness through several mechanisms:

- hyperarousal (intensified physiological activation and irritability),
- cognitive narrowing (limited problem-solving, rigid interpretations),
- reduced self-regulation (difficulty controlling emotional impulses),
- frustration accumulation (gradual buildup of internal tension).

Thus, stress functions not only as a direct trigger but also as a cumulative risk factor shaping aggression over time.

Military institutions are organized around strict discipline, formal regulations, and restricted personal freedom. While these principles promote operational stability, they may also generate psychological tension in individuals with low tolerance for control or high autonomy needs.

Regulatory constraints may create persistent frustration, especially when personal needs conflict with institutional demands. This frustration can be redirected into aggression, particularly when service members feel powerless.

Psychological reactance theory explains why individuals sometimes respond aggressively to perceived threats to freedom. Constant monitoring, limitations of privacy, and restricted communication may evoke reactance reactions, leading to protest behavior, hostility, and passive-aggressive tendencies.

Military service often includes deprivation experiences such as:

- sleep deprivation,
- limited family contact,
- restricted leisure opportunities,
- emotional deprivation,
- sensory overload or monotony,
- reduced privacy.

Sleep deprivation is one of the most empirically supported predictors of irritability, impulsivity, and aggression. It disrupts attention control, reduces frustration tolerance, and weakens emotional inhibition.

Social deprivation increases loneliness, emotional instability, and maladaptive coping. In such states, individuals may externalize distress through aggressive acts.

Traumatic experiences including combat, witnessing violence, loss of peers, and life-threatening incidents represent critical determinants of aggression in military contexts.

Post-traumatic stress symptoms (hypervigilance, intrusive recollections, irritability) increase aggressive reactivity. Aggression may function as a defensive reaction when threats are perceived even in safe environments.

Moral injury (guilt, shame, betrayal) can also contribute to internalized anger that becomes displaced onto others through hostile interactions.

Trauma contributes to aggressiveness through:

- threat perception bias,

- hyperarousal and anger bursts,
- avoidance and emotional numbing,
- identity destabilization,
- reduced empathy and trust.

Military adaptation requires psychological restructuring, behavioral standardization, and assimilation into new norms. Transition stress may include:

- loss of civilian identity and habits,
- pressure to conform to military values,
- competitive evaluation,
- fear of failure and punishment.

Adaptation pressure creates uncertainty and tension. Aggression may serve as a coping tool to regain control or assert status. Internal value conflicts also increase irritability, especially when emotional expression is suppressed.

Unit climate refers to interpersonal atmosphere, leadership style, cohesion, and normative regulation of behavior. It is among the most influential determinants of aggressive behavior.

In toxic climates (humiliation, hazing, bullying, authoritarian leadership), aggression can become normalized. Social learning mechanisms suggest that aggressive models are imitated when tolerated or rewarded.

Conversely, supportive climates reduce aggression through:

- psychological safety,
- fair discipline and justice,
- mutual respect,
- emotional support,
- constructive conflict resolution.

Unit climate therefore amplifies or buffers aggressive tendencies depending on leadership style and group norms.

Aggressiveness in military contexts rarely results from a single determinant. It emerges through interactions such as:

- stress × deprivation (fatigue amplifies irritability),
- trauma × unit climate (trauma effects worsen in toxic environments),
- adaptation pressure × regulatory constraints (reactance increases hostility),
- low self-regulation × chronic stress (impulsivity increases aggression).

These interactions highlight the need for multilevel prevention combining individual training, leadership interventions, and organizational improvements.

Discussion. Based on the determinants discussed, preventive strategies should include:

1. Stress management programs (breathing techniques, self-regulation training),
2. Sleep and recovery interventions,
3. Trauma screening and confidential counseling,
4. Unit climate monitoring and leadership training,
5. Adaptation support systems for newly enlisted service members,
6. Aggression de-escalation and conflict resolution training.

A systematic prevention approach should not rely solely on disciplinary punishment. Instead, it should prioritize early psychological diagnostics, resilience training, and supportive service culture.

Conclusion. Aggressiveness among military personnel is a multidimensional phenomenon influenced by stress, regulatory constraints, deprivation, trauma exposure, adaptation pressure, and unit climate. These determinants shape aggression through frustration accumulation, emotional dysregulation, hyperarousal, cognitive distortions, and social learning mechanisms. Understanding aggressiveness in military contexts requires an integrated perspective that includes both individual traits and environmental influences. Developing evidence-based

prevention strategies and strengthening supportive unit climates are essential for improving psychological safety and operational stability within military systems.

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