

PERCEIVED STRESS AMONG ARMED FORCES MEMBERS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the level of perceived organizational stress among active-duty personnel in the Romanian Land Forces. The main objectives are to assess the perceived stress level and to identify significant differences based on gender, the organizational structure of the armed forces and age group. The working hypothesis states that perceived stress levels vary significantly according to these demographic and organizational variables. The research was conducted on a sample of 397 military personnel selected from various units of the Romanian Land Forces. Data collection was carried out using the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), developed by S. Cohen and D. Janicki-Deverts, a validated psychometric instrument widely used to assess individuals' subjective perception of daily stress. The results highlight relevant differences in stress levels depending on the analyzed variables, offering a useful framework for understanding the impact of perceived stress on military personnel. The findings support the need for targeted organizational policies and adaptive intervention strategies to promote psychological well-being and enhance resilience within the military environment.

KEYWORDS: perceived stress, organizational stress, coping

1. Introduction

Occupational stress is one of the most prevalent and influential challenges in contemporary organizational environments. The accelerated pace of change, constant performance pressure, and complex work relationships often generate a tense professional climate with significant effects on both mental and physical health. Understanding the factors contributing to stress and its consequences on the individual and the organization becomes essential for developing effective management strategies. In the military context, these issues are even more critical

due to the specific nature of military activities, the high level of responsibility, strict hierarchy, and exposure to potentially dangerous or traumatic situations. Occupational stress in the military not only affects individual well-being but can directly influence operational capacity, group cohesion, and institutional effectiveness.

2. Organizational Stress in the Military Environment

Organizational stress is perceived as the adaptive response of employees to internal pressures from the organization.

Landrum et al. define it as the level of workplace demand that can disrupt or amplify the psychological state of the individual and alter normal functioning (Landrum, Knight & Flynn, 2012). The Job Demands-Resources Model (Demerouti & Bakker, 2001) provides a useful framework for understanding how the balance (or imbalance) between job demands and individual resources influences the emergence of stress. According to this model, stress occurs when job demands (e.g., workload, operational pressure, lack of decision-making control) exceed available resources (e.g., social support, autonomy, appropriate equipment). Applying this model in the military allows for a structured analysis of the imbalance between institutional expectations and the psychological needs of personnel.

Practical implications for the military include the need to develop organizational policies that reduce the impact of excessive psychological demands and strengthen available occupational resources. For instance, commanders can be trained to recognize signs of burnout and chronic stress, and leadership structures can implement proactive measures such as psychological counseling programs, debriefing sessions after demanding missions, or participatory feedback mechanisms. Furthermore, promoting an organizational climate based on mutual support, trust, and recognition can partially offset institutional pressures specific to the military. Consistent application of the Job Demands-Resources Model can thus contribute to enhancing individual resilience and reducing the risk of burnout among military personnel.

General organizational stress factors typically include work overload, ambiguous or conflicting roles, poor working conditions, and tense relationships with superiors. Finney et al. (2013) classify them into five main categories: job-inherent factors (e.g., workload), role in the

organization, workplace rewards, supervisory relationships, and organizational structure/climate. In the military, literature identifies several specific stress factors: high responsibility, dangerous missions, separation from family, rigid organizational culture, and lack of control over one's schedule. Research also shows that chronic stress can negatively impact both professional performance and the physical and mental health of service members (Adler et al., 2005).

3. Sources of Organizational Stress in the Military Environment and Perceived Stress

There are multiple sources of stress specific to the military organization that compound general occupational pressures. Britt, Castro and Adler (2006) refer to the high demands of operational activity. Military duties often involve physically and mentally challenging tasks carried out under unstable or dangerous conditions. Service members are frequently exposed to situations requiring constant vigilance, quick reactions, and continuous adaptability. Such pressure contributes to physical and mental exhaustion, facilitating the onset of chronic occupational stress syndrome.

Furthermore, the strict hierarchical structure and predominantly authoritarian leadership style can contribute to a perceived lack of control over one's responsibilities, which is a known predictor of occupational stress. Since the military organization operates on a rigid chain of command and rational-legal authority, it can become a source of stress if not managed with flexibility, autonomy, or effective communication (Britt & Bliese, 2003). This often leads to role ambiguity and contradictory demands. Military personnel may be tasked with responsibilities that do not align with their training or that conflict with personal or

institutional values (e.g., peacekeeping missions in tense areas). This professional dissonance is a recognized source of stress (Papazoglou et al., 2020).

Work-life balance in a military career poses a significant challenge due to the demanding, unpredictable, and often invasive nature of service. Long hours, professional mobility, and hierarchical expectations can disrupt family relationships, civil life engagement, and personal time (Burke & Greenglass, 2001). Within the Job Demands-Resources Model (Demerouti & Bakker, 2001), work-life imbalance can be interpreted as a chronic psychosocial demand that, in the absence of compensatory resources (e.g., family support, free time, autonomy), leads to emotional exhaustion and professional dissatisfaction.

Another important stress source identified in the literature is exposure to traumatic events and life-threatening situations. Military personnel frequently face real threats to their own lives or the lives of their comrades, such as deployments, interventions in conflict zones, or humanitarian missions under extreme conditions. Repeated exposure to such events can result in acute stress, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other psychological disorders (Hoge et al., 2004).

Although psychological support programs have been developed, stigma related to seeking help for mental health issues still persists. Many service members perceive seeking support as a sign of weakness, which hinders early intervention and adequate treatment (Greene-Shortridge, Britt & Castro, 2007).

Occupational stress in the military is a complex phenomenon influenced by organizational, operational, and individual factors. A thorough understanding of these determinants is essential for developing policies tailored to military realities. Effective interventions should aim not only to reduce perceived stress but also to

combat stigma and strengthen both social and institutional support.

Given the specific characteristics of the military organizational environment, it inherently fosters stress, particularly for personnel who perceive themselves as having a limited ability to cope with its challenges.

Perceived stress represents the subjective evaluation of the extent to which one's life is unpredictable, uncontrollable, or overwhelming. According to Cohen & Williamson (1988), perceived stress reflects not only the presence of stressors but also how individuals assess their ability to manage them. Thus, two individuals exposed to the same stressor may report different levels of perceived stress based on their psychological resources, coping strategies, and available social support.

In the military context, perceived stress is particularly relevant as it captures individual psychological reactions to operational demands, hierarchical pressures, mission-related uncertainties, and the imbalance between professional and personal life. Furthermore, perceived stress levels are influenced by factors such as the functional organization of the military structure, career experience, and support from peers and commanders.

To measure this construct, the current study uses the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), developed by Cohen and Janicki-Deverts (2012), one of the most widely used international psychometric tools for assessing perceived stress in various occupational contexts.

4. Research Objectives and Hypotheses

The main objective of this study is to identify the level of perceived stress among military personnel in the Romanian Land Forces and examine how it varies by gender, age, and the type of military structure they belong to (e.g., command structures, operational units, logistical

support, etc.). The following hypotheses were formulated: perceived stress levels are higher among female personnel, those with greater seniority, and those serving in operational units.

5. Population and Sampling

The research population consists of approximately 58,000 active-duty military personnel in the Romanian Land Forces. To determine the sample size, we used the Taro Yamane (1967) formula, which estimates the necessary sample size for a known population with a $\pm 5\%$ margin of error. As a result, the final sample included 397 respondents, selected through purposive non-probability sampling. Of these, 309 were male and 88 were female. The average age of the respondents was 28 years.

6. Analysis of Perceived Stress Level among Military Personnel

To assess perceived stress levels, we used the 14-item Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-14), developed by S. Cohen and D. Janicki-Deverts (2012). This is a summative scale designed to measure the extent to which individuals perceive situations in their lives as stressful, unpredictable, or uncontrollable.

Studying perceived stress among military personnel is especially important given the demanding and often unpredictable nature of military activities. Perceived stress reflects how military personnel subjectively evaluate operational demands and their available personal resources for coping with them. This perspective is essential, as the psychological impact is shaped not only by the objective presence of stressors but also

by personal interpretations of those stressors.

Research has shown that high levels of perceived stress are associated with a range of negative outcomes, including reduced vigilance, concentration difficulties, sleep disturbances, irritability, and increased risk of emotional exhaustion or adjustment disorders. In the military, where performance and effective stress response are critical, evaluating perceived stress enables early identification of vulnerable personnel, guides psychological interventions, and supports the development of organizational strategies for enhancing resilience and well-being. Thus, perceived stress becomes a valuable indicator for maintaining both operational efficiency and psychological health among military personnel.

Although the Perceived Stress Scale was not specifically created for military environments, it is sufficiently flexible and psychometrically valid to be applied in this context. In the military, the PSS-14 assesses general psychological stress by reflecting how service members perceive and evaluate stressful situations in their lives, including work-related stressors.

From the analysis of the data, we observed – although the original authors of the scale do not categorize items this way – that two dimensions can be conceptually extracted. One is a **resilience dimension**, which we call **copng ability**, consisting of items related to confidence, adaptability, and internal coping resources. The second is **stress vulnerability**, or **perceived stress**, comprising items reflecting emotional reactivity, lack of control, and distress caused by unexpected events (perceived loss of control in the face of adversity).

Table no. 1*Averages on the two dimensions of self-perceived stress*

	How often have you:	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very often	Mean
Perceived Stress (Mean 1.39)							
1.	Have been upset about something that happened unexpectedly	16.4	38.0	26.2	13.6	5.8	1.54
2.	Felt that you are unable to control the important things in your life	38.5	36.8	15.9	5.8	3.0	0.98
3.	Felt agitated and stressed	16.1	38.3	26.2	13.4	6.0	1.54
4	Found that you couldn't handle all the things you had to do	20.1	45.1	18.9	10.1	5.8	1.36
5.	Have been angry about things that were happening that were out of your control	15.6	42.6	20.9	14.9	6.0	1.53
6.	Felt that difficulties were piling up so much that you couldn't overcome them	23.7	41.6	22.9	7.1	4.7	
Coping Ability (Mean 2.83)							
7.	felt that you were dealing effectively with the important changes that were happening in your life	2.8	8.8	15.9	50.8	21.7	2.79
8.	felt confident in your ability to solve your personal problems	1.8	7.6	11.1	39.4	40.1	3.08
9.	felt that things are going in your favor	2.8	12.1	24.7	39.7	20.7	2.63
10	been able to control irritation in your life	4.0	7.5	21.7	43.6	23.2	2.74
11.	felt like you were in control of things	1.6	7.3	15.6	50.1	25.4	2.90
12.	thought about the things you have to accomplish	2.0	5	20.8	46.3	25.9	2.89
13.	successfully coped with everyday problems and inconveniences	3.3	8.8	11.3	39.8	36.8	2.98
14.	been able to control the way you spend your time	2.2	11.1	23.7	46.9	16.1	2.63

The analysis of the two dimensions – perceived stress and coping ability – reveals a profile of psychological resilience among the military personnel in the sample.

Respondents reported low levels of perceived stress, average 1.39, and a high level of coping ability, average 2.83, suggesting adaptive responses to occupational demands. In military settings, perceived stress is influenced by both external operational demands and internal appraisal mechanisms (Adler et al., 2005). The low average stress score in this study indicates that respondents rarely experienced emotional distress related to unexpected or uncontrollable events. Such a result may reflect the protective role of military training, which is designed not only to build physical endurance but also to

strengthen emotional control and stress tolerance (Hourani et al., 2011). Repeated exposure to high-pressure scenarios may facilitate the development of stress inoculation, whereby individuals become desensitized to routine stressors (Meichenbaum, 2007).

It is important to note that a low stress perception does not indicate the absence of stressors, but rather the individuals' ability to cognitively and emotionally regulate their response to them. This aligns with the military ethos, which values self-discipline, control, and operational readiness under pressure.

Moreover, the military environment often fosters unit cohesion, strong leadership, and shared mission orientation, which are known to buffer the effects of

stress (Bartone, 2006). The sense of predictability and procedural structure in military operations may further contribute to a reduced perception of stress, even in objectively demanding circumstances.

Conversely, the high score in coping ability demonstrates that respondents perceive themselves as competent in managing challenges and maintaining emotional regulation. This aligns with findings from military psychology research, which emphasize self-efficacy and cognitive flexibility as core components of resilience (Meredith et al., 2011).

Taken together, these findings suggest that the military personnel in the sample exhibit a psychologically resilient profile, marked by a low perception of stress and a high confidence in their coping resources. These outcomes are consistent with prior research indicating that structured environments, cohesive teams, and personal efficacy are key protective factors against occupational stress in military contexts (Adler et al., 2005; Bartone, 2006). Such psychological attributes are crucial not only for individual

mental health but also for operational performance, mission readiness, and long-term career sustainability. Nonetheless, future studies should investigate how these patterns vary by rank, deployment status, and exposure to combat or critical incidents. In addition, longitudinal approaches could assess whether resilience remains stable or fluctuates over time, particularly in the face of cumulative stress exposure.

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Regarding the analysis of how perceived stress varies according to the independent variables – namely gender, age, and the type of military structure to which the personnel belong (command structures, operational units, logistical support, etc.) (see Figure no. 1) – the following aspects were observed.

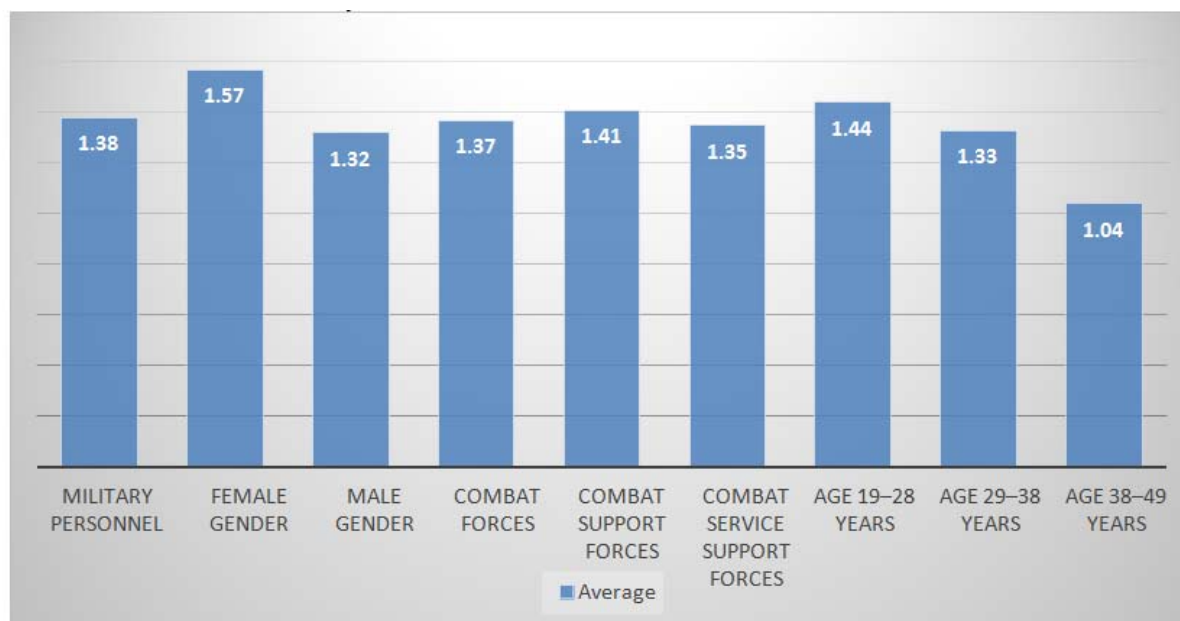


Figure no. 1: *Graph of the general means of the responses by category*
(Source: Own processing based on collected data)

Regarding *gender differences*, female personnel report the highest average stress level, (1.57), noticeably higher than their male counterparts (1.38). In military contexts, however, stress perception may be influenced by factors like role demands, organizational culture, or exposure to operations. Women represent a small percentage of military personnel, especially in command positions or combat units. This minority status exposes them to: the pressure to demonstrate constant competence, the lack of a sense of belonging, and social isolation. Related to this, Kanter (1977) demonstrated that tokenism in a single-gender dominated environment increases psychological stress through hypervisibility and disproportionate expectations.

Overall, women in the military environment tend to report higher levels of perceived stress – not due to lower resilience, but as a result of systemic and contextual challenges such as discrimination, multiple role pressures, social isolation, and insufficient institutional support. These realities underscore the need for gender-sensitive military policies that promote inclusion, equity, and dedicated psychological support.

Regarding *military specialties* within the Land Forces, combat forces report the lowest average stress level, with an average of 1.32, followed by combat support roles, with an average of 1.37, and combat service support roles, with an average of 1.41. This pattern may reflect either greater stress resilience or a normalization of high operational demands among frontline personnel. In contrast, support roles may encounter stress related to task overload, role ambiguity, or a lack of protective factors such as unit cohesion (Bartone, 2006).

In terms of age categories, the highest levels of perceived stress are reported by personnel aged 19-28 years, with an average of 1.44, followed by age category

of those 29-38 years (1.33), and finally the 39-49 age group (1.04). These findings suggest that younger service members may perceive higher stress, possibly due to lower operational experience, reduced coping maturity, and challenges in adapting to military life.

7. Conclusions

The findings from the quantitative analysis provide meaningful insights into how individuals perceive and manage stress-related experiences. The data suggest the existence of two distinct yet inversely related psychological dimensions: resilience and perceived uncontrollable stress. The analysis of the final mean scores from the questionnaire administered to personnel within the Romanian Land Forces reveals a generally favorable perception regarding personal control, adaptability, and psychological resilience. The overall mean score of 1.38 indicates a tendency toward effective management of day-to-day challenges. Female respondents stood out with higher scores on most of the analyzed items – such as adaptability to change, confidence in solving personal problems, management of irritability, positive perception of event outcomes, and control over workload – suggesting a higher self-assessment of coping abilities and greater emotional resilience compared to their male counterparts.

From a functional perspective, personnel in support and combat support roles generally recorded higher scores in terms of adaptability and perceived control, unlike those in combat roles, who scored close to or slightly below the overall mean. Age-related differences were also evident: younger military personnel exhibited higher levels of optimism and a more positive perception of task completion and the general course of events, whereas older personnel demonstrated stronger stress management and ability to handle difficult situations, albeit with a somewhat lower

perception of personal control and confidence in problem-solving.

These differences highlight the need for the development of tailored psychological interventions that consider the specific characteristics of each personnel segment in order to strengthen resilience within the Romanian Land Forces.

These findings have important implications for psychological interventions. Strengthening individual resilience (through cognitive-behavioral techniques, emotional regulation training,

or structured problem-solving approaches) may not only reduce perceived stress but also enhance one's sense of control and effectiveness in everyday life. From an organizational perspective, fostering environments that promote clarity, support, and autonomy could further buffer the impact of stress-inducing conditions. And could contribute to the foundation of institutional policies oriented towards personalized psychological support and efficient management of operational stress within the Land Forces.

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