INDIVIDUAL ADAPTIVE PERFORMANCE IN WAR ENVIRONMENT*

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Abstract: Individual adaptive performance as a psychological phenomenon has been drawing attention for over two decades. Despite numerous researches, there is no generally accepted operationalisation of this concept. During the last quarter of a century, the security environment of many countries has become more complex and unpredictable, which has guided some armed forces to study and implement adaptive skills for the execution of a wide range of military operations. The examination of individual adaptive performance in war environment has been conducted for the purpose of a clearer defining of its structure. The research is of qualitative character and well grounded in theory. For the requirements of the model of individual adaptive performance, we have carried out the interviews with twenty participants in the 1990s war activities in the territory of former Yugoslavia. Based on the acquired data, we have established the structure of individual adaptive behaviour: anticipative, transformational, combat-situational and relaxation behaviour. Some further investigation is required for a quantitative confirmation of the proposed model of adaptive performance in war environment.

Key words: *individual adaptive performance, war environment, crisis situation, anticipative behaviour, transformational behaviour, combat-situational behaviour and relaxation behaviour.*

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Introduction

In the contemporary world, the armed forces of all the states invest significant resources in order to prepare adequately for armed battles. Armed conflicts present a challenge for overall human potential, since the individuals in them get exposed to numerous stressors that could lead to negative physical and psychological consequences (Bartone, 2006). Bearing in mind that in the early 21st century some specific environment changes occurred regarding where the operations take place (Zacaro, 2014), it is time to reexamine the requirements of officer work performance (Rumsey, 2014), with one specific issue concerning adaptability (Zacaro, 2014).

The problem of adaptation in war surroundings presents one of the most significant, but at the same time insufficiently examined challenges that the armed forces are facing (Murray, 2011). In recent years, particularly after the long-lasting wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the issue of adaptation has become the subject of growing interest of certain researchers, which is confirmed by the publication *Adaptation in war activities – the way changes occur within military organisation at the state of war*. The authors of this publication emphasise that the topic of adaptation should be approached thoroughly and seriously because although armed forces are constantly directed at planning and predicting war conflicts, they still are not able to predict future events (Barno & Bensahel, 2020). Contemporary security environment has become more and more complex and its operative context is in the constant process of changing, which makes it unpredictable and volatile, therefore the ability to adapt successfully to such conditions presents one of key prerequisites for the success of armed forces. (Barno & Bensahel, 2020).

Future research ought to seek models and determinants of adaptive performance so as to create the foundation for the development of a more efficient system of selection and classification of armed forces. (Zacaro, 2014). The key significance of contemplating adaptive performance lies in the tendency to understand individual functioning in high-risk missions including numerous unknown and uncontrolled factors. One of the most prominent examples of such missions can be combat activities in war circumstances.

Adaptive performance: definitions, models and military perspectives

In psychological bibliography, the concept of adaptive performance, as one of the dimensions of work performance, has become the subject of research interest at the end of the 20th century and in the early 21st century (Allwart & Hesketh, 1999; Griffin & Hesketh, 2003). However, endeavouring to conceptualise this construct more precisely has led to the emergence of a large number of diverse terms and meanings (Sonnentag, Volmer, & Spychala, 2008; Campbell & Wiernik, 2015; Jundt, Shoss, & Huang, 2015), which has created difficulties in establishing a clear and homogenous definition (Baard, Rench, & Kozlowski, 2014; Jundt et al., 2015). In accordance with that, certain authors have tried to systematise the existing approaches and to identify

more different definitions of adaptive performance. (Pulakos, Mueller-Hanson, & Nelson, 2012):

- "effective change as a response to the altered situation" (White et al., 2005, according to Pulakos et al., 2012: 596);
- "functional alteration (cognitive, behavioural, and/or affective) as a response to the altered circumstances in the environment" (Banks et al., 2002, according to Pulakos et al., 2012: 596);
- "process by which an individual reaches certain degree of agreeing one's own behaviour and the demands of the new work environment, created by the new and undefined problems, resulting in alterations and ambiguity of the work environment (Chan, 2000, according to Pulakos et al., 2012: 596);
- "modification of personal behavior to fulfil the demands of the new situation and events, or the change in the environment" (Pulakos et al., 2000, according to Pulakos et al., 2012: 597);
- "effective change and development as the response to current and anticipated changes in the environment or for the better understanding of the environment" (Muller-Hanson et al., 2009, according to Pulakos et al., 2012: 597).

Although in this field there has been quite a lot of research, we have a dominant attitude in bibliography that the only comprehensive study was conducted by the group of authors led by Elain Pulakos (Baard et al., 2014). Pulakos and her co-authors (Pulakos, Arad, Donovan, & Plamondon, 2000; Pulakos, Schmitt, Dorsey, Arad, Borman, & Hedge, 2002) identified more subdimensions of adaptive performance: creative resolution of problems, coping in undefined and unpredictable situations, professional development in the area of work tasks, technology and procedure, demonstrating interpersonal adaptability, demonstrating cultural adaptability, demonstrating adaptability to physical external factors (e.g. climate conditions), managing urgent or crisis situations and managing stressful situations (see Table 1).

Table 1. *Overview of latent structure of adaptive performance according to Pulakos and co-authors (Pulakos et al., 2000)*

Subdimension of adaptive performance	Description
Management of urgent and crisis situations	Reacting with appropriate degree of urgency to dangerous and emergency situations; quick analysis of options for facing danger; reaching quick decisions based on clear and focused thinking; maintaining emotional control and objectivity while focusing on the situation; accelerated action-taking and danger management.
Work stress management	Staying collected and calm in the situations of facing difficult circumstances; unexaggerated reacting to the unexpected news and situations; managing frustrations by directing to constructive solutions rather than blame shifting; demonstrating resilience and high degree of professionalism under stressful circumstances.

Subdimension of adaptive performance	Description
Coping in undefined and unpredictable work situations	Undertaking effective action when necessary without the need to create the total picture or to have all the facts "in hand"; ready and mild change of reaction speed to unpredictable and unexpected circumstances; efficient adjustment of plans, aims, actions and priorities in the context of reacting to the changeable situation; not thinking in "black and white" terms; overcoming the paralysis stemming from uncertainty or ambiguity.
Creative ways of problem solution	Use of unique ways of analysing and creating new, innovative ideas; observing the problem from different angles to find a new approach; connecting seemingly disconnected facts and forming creative solutions; openness to different possibilities that others may miss; thinking outside the given parameters to reach a more efficient approach; development of innovative methods of obtaining and using resources when available resources are not sufficient for completing tasks.
Development in work, technologies and procedures	Showing enthusiasm for learning new approaches and technologies in carrying out work; directing work to what is necessary to maintain the existing knowledge and skills; quick and adroit adoption of new methods or ways to execute primarily unknown tasks; adjustment to new work processes and procedures; anticipation of changes in work demands and searching for participation and participation in allocating tasks or in the training that would prepare the individual for changes; taking actions to deter flaws in work performance.
Demonstrating interpersonal adaptability	Flexibility and openness in the contact with others; listening and taking into consideration other people's views and opinions and changing one's own opinion when necessary; openness and acceptance of negative and other comments with developmental effect on executing job requirements; development of efficient relations with different personality types; demonstrating a clear insight in the behaviour of others and building one's own behaviour for the needs of persuasion, influence and efficient co-operation.
Demonstration of cultural adaptability	Undertaking activities to learn and comprehend the climate, orientation, needs and group values, organisations or cultures; solid integration and being ok with various values, customs and cultures; willing adjustment of behaviour as a necessity in complying with others' values and customs or showing respect for those values; understanding the implications of personal activities and adjustment to maintain a positive relation with groups, organisations and cultures.
Demonstration of adaptibility to physical (external) factors	Adjustment to the requirements of physical environment, such as extreme air temperatures, air humidity or dust and dirt; frequent setting demands towards oneself in order to physically complete demanding tasks. Adjusting body weight and muscle strength to job requirements or becoming trained to execute physical tasks necessary for the job.

Albeit primary examination of adaptive performance was linked with the field of organisational/industrial psychology (Bartone, 2017), there are multiple examples in which adaptive performance and adaptability are regarded in the context of military disciplines. How topical the theme of adaptive performance in military disciplines is can be testified with many projects of the US armed forces, but also with other strategic documents and reports.

Dickerson (2003) points out that apart from nine traditional war principles, one more should be enlisted – adaptability. According to Dickerson (2003), adaptability in the past was not recognised as an integral element of military efficiency, but in the future it will become the crucial factor in conducting military operations. Similar to that, the report of National Board of Defence (Defence Science Board, 2011) titled *Improving adaptability of the US armed forces* suggests the key elements of strategy for the promotion of adaptability of the system of defence, which include: agreeing all the functions of defence system so as to support the outcomes of all missions, reduction of uncertainties through strengthening global awareness, preparation for all forms of extreme situations, developing adaptability of the entire work force (human potential) and the alteration of organisational culture.

On the practical level, in the context of developing individual and group adaptability, the US armed forces launched a course named *Adaptive Leadership in Asymmetrical Warfare* (Straus, Shanley, Sims, Hallmark, Rosefsky, Saavedra, Trent, & Duggan, 2014). The aim of that course is to reinforce leadership staff adaptability to create trainings that stimulate adaptability with the trainees. (Straus et al., 2014). The theoretical base for the course was eight-factor taxonomy of Pulakos and co-authors (Pulakos et al., 2002), adjusted so that the four dimensions of adaptive performance are considered crucial: managing crises and emergency situations, creative thinking, stress management and facing changeable and inconsistent (ambiguous) situations (Straus et al., 2014). Tucker and Gunther (2009) also give their recommendations on how to improve the trainings of adaptive performance. Namely, leaders must learn how to think as their enemies, to view the battlefield from a wider perspective, to visualise the dynamic environment and to understand the undesirable consequences of their activities (Tucker & Gunther, 2009).

The study of the armed forces from our region did not directly deal with the matter of conceptualisation of adaptive performance in war circumstances, apart from the authorial work by Petar Kostić (2000) *Psychology of Battle Units*¸which in an implicit and indirect way treats the problems of soldier adaptation in combat activities via an analysis of motivation and soldiers' mental preparation.

War environment – a collection of crisis situations

War circumstances present exceptionally dramatic social and psychological contexts which essentially alter the usual streams of life and demand quick and efficient adaptation from the individual and the collective to the newly formed conditions (Sar-

chiapone, Temnik, Limongi, & Carli, 2009). For the armed forces, war activities may be defined as high-risk missions characterised by the presence of a great number of unknown and uncontrolled factors. High-risk missions imply the operations including non-standard and unconventional requirements of functioning in the rejecting and hostile environment (Picano, Williams, & Roland, 2006). Starting from there, war circumstances may conceptually be defined as a complex set of crisis situations.

Following the crisis model formulated by Fink (1986), every situation of crisis is developed through four interconnected phases: prodromal, acute, chronic and final. Prodromal phase represents the pre-crisis situation in which the incoming phase is difficult to discern, but certain warning signs can already be identified. Acute phase is characterised by sudden eruptiveness, rapid development of events and irreversible loss of previous balance. Chronic phase covers the process reexamining, analysis and tendency to recover after the crisis. Final phase is marked by calming down and crisis situation resolution, i.e. the return to the new state of stability (Fink, 1986).

Similar to Fink's model, Hannah and co-authors (Hannah, Uhl-Bien, Avolio, & Cavarretta, 2009) emphasise that war situation should be observed as an extreme event happening through a specific timeline, or three phases: preparatory phase, phase of extreme event duration and the phase following its completion.

Starting from the presented model, for the requirements of this research we identified four specific phases of crisis situations in war conditions. The first, preparatory phase, concerns relatively peaceful functioning of the individual and the unit, with the combat activities not having started yet, although there are certain warnings or expectations of their emergence. The second phase of sudden combat is characterised by abrupt event development dynamics. The third phase of combat activity constancy is signified by ceasing the elements of surprise and establishment of certain stability in the character of combats occurring continuously. The final phase of temporary or final peace, refers to the period in which combat activities have been temporarily interrupted or completely finished, which ends one in the line of crisis situations.

Methodology

Research aim

Adaptive performance construct, as presented by Pulakos and her co-authors, presents a broad and comprehensive frame, but in practice there are specific aspects of adaptive performance that could have special significance in certain situations (Bednall & Henricks, 2021). For those reasons exactly, this research is directed at studying specific adaptive forms of behaviour within war circumstances. The need for such a research is also confirmed by the fact that there are only a few researches examining the factors affecting adaptive performance in the continuous changeable environment (Krijgsheld, Tummers, & Scheepers, 2022; Weerasinghe, 2024).

The aim of this research was to generate the hypotheses on the concept of individual adaptive performance in war environment. Unlike the majority of hitherto published studies defining adaptive performance as a set of skills, in this research the focus was on the identification of concrete forms of behaviour, which reflect adaptive per-

formance in war conditions. Adaptive performance has been treated as a construct of success in work, implying that two key conditions must be fulfilled: the behaviour has to be concrete, not only the skill or ability, and it must be connected to the realisation of organisational goals (Motowidlo, 2003). Hence, the main aim of this research was the extraction of specific adaptive behavioural forms in war circumstances.

Research design

The research is of qualitative character and was conducted within the approach known as *grounded theory* (Creswell & Poth, 2025). Dissimilar to narrative and phenomenological studies, the aim of grounded theory research is not only the description, but the development and discovery of theoretical explanations (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). These theoretical explanations are based upon the data collected from the examinees who experienced the process that is the subject of this research (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Since the data were collected without some in advance postulated theory, the research is categorised as a hypothetical-inductive type (so-called common sense model) (Wengraf, 2001).

Sample

Twenty participants took part in the research, from age 50 to 65, all of which during the 1990s were directly involved in the battle activities in former Yugoslavia. All examinees were male. Sixteen examinees had the status of professional Serbian Armed Forces members (12 commission officers and 4 non-commission officers), 2 examinees were recruited, one served as a conscript and one was a volunteer. The sample is of an appropriate character.

Procedure of conducting the research and data collection

In the first research phase, we had the preparation for interviewing our examinees. The preparation encompassed the development of semi-structured interview and was based on several initial presumptions:

- Examining adaptive behaviours had to be in accordance with the supposed phases of the situation of crisis under the war circumstances (preparatory phase, sudden battle phase, constant battle activities phase and the phase of temporary or final peace);
- Examinees were supposed to be provided with the freedom during the interview to fully express their war experiences, so that interview structure would not influence their motivation;
- Interviews had to be conducted in the way that minimises the potential retraumatisation of the examinees.

In research phase 2, the interviews with the examinees were iteratively borne out. After every interview, we performed the analysis of the collected data, based on which the interview structure was subsequently partly modified (some topics and questions were added, while the relevance of the others was reduced). The interview over time

became an in-depth one, lasting minimally for 60 minutes, and the longest one lasted 120 minutes. With some examinees, following the basic one, an additional interview was conducted to clarify and verify the conclusions from the previous conversation. During the interview, the notes were being taken only to be subjected to further analysing and comparisons later on.

In order to avoid the susceptibility of the examinees idealising their own adaptive conduct, the questions were conceived in such a manner for the examinees to describe even the behaviour of their combat companions in war circumstances for which, in their opinion, they were (un)successfully adapted. Certain questions during the interviews involved: describe from your personal experience a successfully adapted or maladapted fellow soldier and compare their reactions related to certain combat situations, in which war situation there were most human and material losses, and which were provoked by individual responsibility, which factors influenced the decline in combat efficacy, how the fighters maintained their mental stability during the war etc.

Data processing procedure

The grounded theory uses systemic coding to achieve validity and reliability in data analysis (Babbie, 2020). Connected with this, after every interview the notes were sorted, then openly coded alongside comparing and grouping the data acquired during the interview into the categories (Jeđud, 2007). Grouping into categories enabled the identification of adaptive behaviour forms in every war situation phase.

Having performed open coding, the axial coding was done (Jeđud, 2007), which implied the establishment of relations inside every category and a clearer definition of adaptive behavior within categories. In the end, selective coding was performed (Jeđud, 2007), thus establishing the categories integrated in cohesive theoretical presumption, i.e. a conceptual model describing adaptive performance in war environment was formulated.

Results

Following the interviews, it was concluded that the majority of examinees offered similar statements regarding war environment. Our examinees mentioned these phenomena and patterns of behaviour:

- The greatest human and material losses, just like the decline in combat efficacy, were the consequence of individual “easy-going” attitude towards war events. The majority of examinees emphasised that some war participants, especially those without previous war experience or those who participated in more war areas of former Yugoslavia, behaved according to the principle “this will not happen to me“. They refused to dig a shelter, and/or according to their own will, they abandoned the unit, but not to desert, but thinking “they were immune to war circumstances“, they disobeyed the orders coming from their superior officers.

- Examinees pointed out that fear and panic presented the significant factor influencing combat efficacy and mental functioning. Behaviour problems of fellow warriors who were overcome with fear had the impact on the entire combat unit.
- For maintaining mental stability, some warriors used the pauses between war activities to have different kinds of relaxation. For example, they played cards, chatted, laughed and got engaged in the activities that would temporarily distract them from stressful situations (e.g. one of them was a car mechanic who repaired the car parts found at the front). Moreover, they said their mood and operability during those "breaks" between combat activities were affected by individual susceptibility to consume alcohol excessively and conversations with those who expressed catastrophic expectations (worries) concerning the war ending, as if following the principle: "what if something happened to us tomorrow".

On the basis of provided examinee statements, other conclusions received during the interviews and consulting adequate bibliography, we generated preliminary conclusions serving as the foundation for formulating the general hypothesis on latent structure of adaptive performance in war environment. In line with the presumption on war situation time phases, we identified four basic forms of adaptive behaviour. In preparatory phase, behaviours were characterised by caution, understanding the seriousness of the situation and moving towards the challenges, so such forms of activities were named *anticipative behaviour*. In the phase of sudden combat, examinees accentuated decisiveness, speed of reaction, skillfulness and the ability to continue the actions in spite of unfavourable circumstances, which was defined as *transformational behaviour*. During the phase of constant combat activities, adaptive behavioural forms were marked by peacefulness, calmness, collectedness, focus, patience and control of impulses, so this form of behaviour is declared as *combat-situational behaviour*. Finally, in the phase of temporary or final peace, *adaptive behaviours* featured optimism, hope, susceptibility to humour and ability to relax occasionally in the situations permitting that, so this form of behaviour is considered *relaxation behaviour*.

According to the aforementioned behaviour description, we have derived the definitions of four forms of adaptive behaviour that make up adaptive performance in war environment:

- *Anticipative behaviour* – in war environment refers to the behaviour reflecting the attitude that it is necessary to go towards the situation which is likely to happen in the future;
- *Transformational behaviour* – includes a set of behaviours directed at rapid and adequate reacting in unexpected, unpredictable situations;
- *Combat-situational behaviour* – presents a behaviour set that displays efficient functioning despite the factors that could disturb action during combat activities;
- *Relaxation behaviour* – is a set of behaviours with preventing character regarding functioning in war environment.

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to grasp the structure of individual adaptive performance in war environment. We sought for specific forms of behaviour enabling individuals to function efficiently in war conditions, characterised by extreme uncertainty, stress and multiple situations of crisis. Based on semi-structured interviews with twenty examinees who participated in the 1990s war activities in former Yugoslavia, we generated four key forms of adaptive behaviour: anticipative, transformational, combat-situational and relaxation behaviour.

Anticipative behaviour has the crucial role in the preparatory phase of war situations. Under the conditions when the war participant has no previous experience in combat activities, the most suitable forms of adaptive behaviour concern the ability for an individual to predict possible event developments, to get adequately prepared for the unpredictable situations, to obey consistently the orders from their commanders and to maintain the high level of discipline. Contrary to that, "easy-going" behaviour, including denial of potential threat or demonstrative display of "heroism", may lead to serious negative consequences for the unit.

In the phase of sudden combat, transformational behaviour bears the vital role. It is essential that the individual should react promptly, provide a shelter and, if possible, respond appropriately to the enemy attack. In such critical situations, due to that sudden attack, individuals often happen to experience a shock and get paralysed temporarily, which disables efficient movement or adequate response.

Combat-situational behaviour, characterised by calmness, focus and continuous efficient functioning despite the disturbing factors during combat activities, presents the base for constant combat activity phase. Under these conditions, beside physical and mental exhaustion, fear and panic may significantly affect the maintenance of mental stability and combat efficacy.

In the phase of temporary or final peace, the key role is played by relaxation behaviour, which enables the individual to regulate stress and renew mental and physical resources after intensive combat activities. This form of adaptive behaviour entails the development of an optimistic attitude, preservation of hope, susceptibility to humour and active search of opportunities for relaxation in the situations when it is safe and possible. Relaxation behaviour acts preventively, decreasing the risk of chronic stress and enabling the preparation for possible future crises or combat situations.

Research results show that adaptive performance is not a universal construct, but its emergence is conditioned by a specific context and phases of the crisis situation. Time phases of war circumstances (preparatory phase, sudden combat phase, constant combat activity phase and the phase of temporary or final peace) have proved to be an important frame for the observation and analysis of adaptive forms of behaviour. This structural perspective enables a deeper understanding of individual adaptation and simultaneously offers the foundation for the identification of critical factors affecting the maintenance of functionality and combat efficacy in extreme conditions.

Theoretically, research results contribute to the development of the construct of adaptive performance as a component of work success in high-risk environment, offering the foundation for future research that could integrate different contexts. Prac-

tically, our research conclusions can be applied in the creation of training for military personnel, as well as for the training of civil professionals who are in extreme or crisis situations, emphasising the significance of the development of specific adaptive abilities, preventive mechanisms and strategies of mental regulations.

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S u m m a r y

Individual adaptive performance as a psychological phenomenon has attracted scientific attention for more than two decades. Despite numerous studies, there is still no universally accepted operationalisation of this concept. Over the past quarter-century, the security environment of many states has become increasingly complex and unpredictable, prompting certain armed forces to study and implement adaptive skills for conducting a wide range of combat operations. The examination of individual adaptive performance in wartime conditions was conducted with the aim of more clearly defining its structure. The research was qualitative in nature and based on grounded theory. To identify a model of individual adaptive performance, interviews were conducted with twenty participants of military operations in the territory of former Yugoslavia. Based on collected data, it was determined that the structure of individual adaptive performance in a wartime environment consists of four forms of adaptive behaviour: anticipative, transformational, combat-situational, and relaxation behaviour. Further research requires quantitative validation of the proposed model of adaptive performance in wartime environment.

Keywords: *individual adaptive performance, wartime environment, crisis situation, anticipative behavior, transformational behavior, combat-situational behavior, relaxation behavior.*