

Brotherhood in the aid service. The “Warrior Project” as a new form of development and support provided by soldiers to soldiers

Braterstwo w służbie pomocy. „Projekt Wojownik” jako nowa forma rozwoju i wsparcia prowadzona przez żołnierzy dla żołnierzy

DOI 10.25951/11156

Introduction

When looking for a universal definition of aid that would combine the components of support, counselling, therapy, we usually turn to defining a specific relationship which connects two or more people and serves to achieve greater maturity, independence, and strength by them (Murgatroyd 2000).

The scientifically defined aid has a structured course, defined by the framework (Murgatroyd 2000), it is professional and intentional. This purposefulness is sometimes determined by the needs of an individual, specific conditions of their existence implying difficulties in the functioning or experiences that had an impact on the quality of life.

Among the beneficiaries of the actions concerned, there is a special group of people whose life experiences may be an obstacle or a difficulty in adapting to full functioning, namely veteran soldiers of foreign missions, for whom the service in such difficult conditions was often a type of “school of life”, an experience being, if not a turning point in the functioning so far, then a serious determinant of changes in the perception of oneself, one’s own reality, future plans, relationships with others. When relating to the issue of aid addressed to that group of recipients, it should however be pinpointed that this group is not a monolith. It consists of people with similar experiences, although different in terms of many aspects: age, life circumstances, decisions on the participation in a mission, duration of stay, events experienced, and personality traits. Therefore, this difference, which is to constitute an exemplification of the issue described, should be respected.

Prospects for support

The statement that the experience of trauma disturbs the order of functioning and, from the point of view of the need for security, it is a shock to the individual, is *the cliché*. Ronnie Janoff-Bulmann believes that we use some basic cognitive schemas, providing us with a sense of security in the world. These are the patterns of thinking that the world is a relatively safe place to live, it is predictable, understandable, and orderly, and every man has their basic value as a person and therefore nothing bad may happen to a noble, good person. These cognitive patterns allow us to plan, predict, explain and thus they create a sense of continuity of oneself, own self, and life (Badura-Madej 2005). In the situation described, this sense of continuity is sometimes disturbed, which also translates into the fact that the individual experienced in this way has difficulty in returning to functioning according to the previously practiced patterns.

Aid activities may be of a different nature and are usually determined in terms of both procedures and planning, namely intervention operations, but also counselling and short and long-term support.

Among the proposed forms of aid, the following are distinguished:

- psychotherapeutic intervention,
- cognitive-behavioral psychotherapy,
- stress taming training,
- short-term dynamic psychotherapy.

The selection of the form of granting aid is based on its adjustment to the individual conditions of a disorder, the strength and duration of the trauma, the characteristics, and resources of an individual and the possibility of providing real support. The objective of this article is a brief presentation of an innovative Polish project to grant aid to veterans – the “Warrior Project”. The presented information is the result of the research conducted among the participants of the project, a small part of which will be presented in the form of the quoted statements by the project beneficiaries.

The “Warrior Project”

The “Warrior Project” is an innovative form of activity, the innovative nature of which is expressed in both the method of providing support, not limiting operations exclusively to a group of veterans, and in locating the methods of achieving the assumed objectives through community in action.

Table 1. The expected effects of actions taken in the course of the "Warrior Project"

Dimension		
individual	social	professional
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – improving physical fitness – support for self-sustaining and development of physical activity by participants (also in terms of rehabilitation through sport) – supporting self-image reconstruction or enhancing a sense of coherence – getting rid of mechanisms of pathological coping with stress, reduction in irritability and conflict-proneness – introducing to self-discipline – increasing activity in terms of building the community – creating healthy habits in terms of mental hygiene, avoiding withdrawal, loneliness – building a sense of satisfaction and creating situations enabling an improvement in self-esteem and achieving satisfaction (a sense of experiencing courage, strength, activity in self-improvement, increasing resistance to stress, coping with a difficult situation, positive self-esteem) – preventing the feeling of loneliness, avoiding loneliness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – maintaining (re)building a sense of community – continuity of participation in the military environment (specificity of norms, principles, working formula) – maintaining relationships, establishing new friendships, creating target groups (in the context of editing and sessions) – continuity of belonging to a social group – creating conditions for experiencing the continuity of participation, not being "an outcast" – integration through competition (similarity of experiences, which allows the understanding of reactions) – a sense of cooperation, being a useful part of the group; maintaining and establishing friendships and fellowships – integrating the environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – continuation of the tradition of the bond between the army and physical prowess (identified with sport here) – maintaining the relationship with the military service, a sense of continuation of participation in the structure (relationship with institutions and individuals) – here: organizing sessions on the premises of military units, coordination and guidance by people connected with the institution) – continuation and maintenance of personal identification with the army as an institution but also a lifestyle – supporting a sense of continuation – supporting the warrior's ethos (direct link: activity; physical fitness; an increase in self-esteem and assessment of the social group)

Source: own study.

As we read on the website of the Ministry of National Defense: "The 'Warrior Project' consists in organizing educational and sports activities once

a month for veteran soldiers of missions abroad, wounded veterans, physical education instructors of military units of all types of armed forces”¹. Therefore, the lineage of the “Warrior” can be located in a traditional combination of martial arts with the army. Periodic meetings are held once a month and include mixed martial arts training (the so-called Mixed Martial Arts, MMA), but also lectures on various topics (in the field of sports psychology and healthy eating). Sport is therefore a matrix that provides an opportunity to meet, spend time actively, support, exchange experiences. 588 people have taken part in the project since May 2018, of whom the vast majority were veterans (400 people) and representatives of their families, as well as soldiers on active service – the project is an open initiative. Representatives of the world of sport, advisers, and specialists in the field of health protection are also invited to cooperate.

The project is based on the assumption, accurately defined by its initiator, LtCol Szczepan Głuszczyk – “no one will understand a warrior as well as another warrior” (Kowalska-Sendek 2019). Therefore, it seems that the aid element in a group of people with similar experiences, who share not only the common place but also the specificity of the environment, is a good field for building a space of mutual aid. Therefore, the support received by the participants has the value of credibility and empathy, difficult to achieve in the conditions of clinical assistance. Veterans help each other (and not only themselves), thus the advantage of the project is the extraordinary “naturalness” of a possible aid situation. The participation in the project is free, voluntary, and does not oblige to continue. This implies quite comfortable conditions for beneficiaries, in which the accession to the project does not amount to the declaration of long-term cooperation with the leaders and other participants. However, it should be underlined that many people maintain these relationships using social media, tracking the progress of the project, supporting the organizers.

The “Warrior Project” is a way of strengthening veterans, or more broadly, also a method of strengthening their environment and its functioning. It bridges a gap between what is called professional help (psychological, therapeutic) and what is the essence of brotherhood and a sense of responsibility for brothers in arms. The primary objective of the project is, above all, to integrate the community of veteran soldiers – participants of missions abroad, as well as arousing an interest in martial arts as a utilitarian discipline, particularly for

¹ Website of the Ministry of National Defense, <https://www.gov.pl/web/obrona-narodowa/cel-projektu-wojownik> (accessed: 11 March 2019).

military personnel². Therefore, it is difficult to locate the activities undertaken in its scope as strictly therapeutic or aid operations. However, when considering the continuously expanding range of activities, it was decided to present the project through the prism of the detailed effects achieved in its course.

In the case of the "Warrior Project", the expected effects can be classified according to the three groups of objectives implied by adopting the optics of the dimension of individuality, community and specificity of behavior resulting from the profession.

Three main directions of operations

When attempting to systematize the directions of actions taken in the project, a certain threefold nature can be noticed.

The intention of the project originators was the combination of three components: sport, community, and aid. In the above triad, sport is the matrix which, on the one hand, defines the assumption that hand-to-hand combat is a utilitarian part of the soldier's workshop, on the other, allows for self-development and supports self-improvement, provides impulses for self-development, and strongly integrates the group. The choice of martial arts in this context is not accidental. Already the subtitle of the project itself – "we have a fight in our blood" suggests the message, which is the consolidation of people with similar experiences, people professionally related to combat, around joint actions. Such an assumption seems to touch a rather important issue of the collective identity on active service and soldier veterans. According to Stanisław Jarmoszko, such a collective identity arises on the basis of a certain degree of psychosocial cohesion of social communities (solidarity, sympathy, positive feelings around coexistence and cooperation in a group, concern for collective interest) and manifests itself in the process of interaction with other entities, in particular in competition or broadly understood confrontation, fight (Jarmoszko 2009).

In this case, the project is a part of the process of maintaining the cohesion of this identity, moreover, it is based on the ethos of a soldier, for whom fighting is a daily bread. James Burk defines it aptly when writing: "the military culture is based on the expertise and control over the means of violence, and the

² Website of the Ministry of National Defense, <https://www.gov.pl/web/obronanarodo-wa/projekt-wojownik> (accessed: 12 March 2019).

expertise and control are developed in the service of the State, in accordance with a relatively clear code of conduct" (Burk 1999).

The second element that consolidates all activities is a sense of community. It is worth noting that the term "warrior" itself has a certain sense of the common purpose, and even clanship in its definition. It raises the sense of purposefulness of training, creates an atmosphere conducive to openness and personal commitment of beneficiaries. Finally, the community becomes the objective – the integration of the environment which occurs naturally, through joint training, competition, effort, refers to the experience of being part of the soldier community, integrates veterans and soldiers in service. The participants come from the environment governed by its own rules, strictly hierarchical and structured, which no one understands as much as they do. The nature of the soldier profession includes task-orientation, efficiency, and purposefulness of activities. And this is what the "Warrior" is. Master Corporal Sebastian Kargul from 5. Lubuski Artillery Regiment recalls, "What was the most difficult and simultaneously the most important during the mission? To think positively above all. And have the team with you. If I turn around, he is behind me. If they turn around, I am behind them or ahead of them, but all the time with them" – he emphasizes. The "Warrior Project" allows for monthly meetings with mission comrades, chatting and relaxing. "We also open up to families of fallen soldiers, so that wives, mothers, children of those who stayed there for eternal rest and glory would be noticed. We show that the veteran who died has not been forgotten"³.

The third direction of the project operation, i.e., aid, arising very naturally (as mentioned above), includes mental support, the possibility of reacting and ventilating emotions, and consequently rebuilding a coherent image of oneself, and often the attitudes of self-confidence. This happens by combining the idea of hand-to-hand combat as a form of shaping the soldier's workshop with defining oneself through what sports provides. Courage, strength, steadfastness, persistence – are the characteristics that define a certain archetype of a warrior. The mutual relationship of these characteristics and the army as an organization (but also a life path) is obvious. "Propellers, wheels, others in the base. Everyone with their own history and experiences in Afghanistan or Iraq. No one is the best, no one is weak, everyone helps everyone. Instructors help vet-

³ *Projekt Wojownik. Tomasz Sarara, mistrz świata w kick-boxingu, prowadził trening dla żołnierzy w 5. Lubuskim Pułku Artylerii w Sulechowie*, „Gazeta Lubuska”, <https://gazetalubuska.pl/projekt-wojownik-tomasz-sarara-mistrz-swiata-w-kickboxingu-prowadzil-trening-dla-zolnierzy-w-5-lubuskim-pulku-artylirii-w/ar/13901432> (accessed: 12 March 2019).

erans with no martial arts experience on the mat, instead share their mission experiences in post-training conversations. This is the beauty of this project: uniting soldiers from different formations, with different ranks, with different views and experiences"⁴, says Warrant Officer Marcin Michalak "Ściema", the commander of machine gunners in PMC Afghanistan.

The meetings under the project have their unique dimension since they are not only the meetings for participants but also friends and even, as defined by the participants – family meetings. "When I come home, people ask me, 'Hey, Seba! Why are you doing this... Does the Warrior Project turn you on?', I say nothing. Why? Because they don't understand. They don't understand that this is about the Great Warrior Family. That's all that matters... it's already like a drug, addictive and you can't stop", says Sebastian Batan, a veteran of PMC Afghanistan⁵.

When asked to indicate what, according to him, is the most important in the "Warrior Project" (sport, community, or aid), LtCol Szczepan Głuszcza, its originator replies, "Aid, community and sport. In that order. (...) Sport was just an impulse. The need for help came first. Community turned out to be a strength already during the Project. The group itself is predisposed to build a community, to a certain clanship, a sense of shared responsibility. The fact that the 'Warrior' appeared in the media certainly helped as well, which made interpersonal relations even stronger". Therefore, the question arises whether it was the community that became an aid instrument in the assessment of the project creator? "Possibly", replies its originator, "But one must remember that the community is also an aid, perhaps it is also a tool. Initially, I didn't think that such a strong bond would be created between the participants. This totally came as a surprise to me".

The innovativeness of the "Warrior Project" is not limited to the fact that it is the first initiative of this type in Poland, which naturally and freely uses specific features of the soldier environment to undertake support measures. The actions taken for veterans can be primarily considered in terms of activities organized by soldiers for soldiers, however, one cannot ignore the value of continuation, both in the aforementioned individual dimension (in relation to veterans maintaining relationships with the army), and more broadly: the continuation of military traditions in general, a sense of continuity and unity in belonging to the army as a historically formed structure. The "Warrior Project", by employing civilian

⁴ The cited statements by the participants accessed on <https://www.instagram.com/p/BrwioK9BH1W/> (accessed: 2 April 2019).

⁵ *Ibidem*.

players, also provides an opportunity to show support to soldiers from the broadly understood society, to build a specific relationship (civilians – military), which can be a way to show social respect for the soldier profession. It is also very important in the context of the relationship between the society and the army. In this sense, the “Warrior” not only consolidates the military environment but also brings the army closer to the society, allows for avoiding looking at them at a stereotypical manner, often harmful to veterans.

Conclusions

The presentation of the “Warrior Project” seems incomplete without asking how it is perceived by the creators and participants themselves. When analyzing the participants’ reports from subsequent meetings, it can be noticed that soldiers – Warriors (the program beneficiaries) primarily appreciate the community as a value that provides them with a sense of strength, but which they are also proud of. At the core of the project is aid understood as supporting the objective by the community (here: sport). When asked about the Genesis of the Warrior, LtCol Szczepan Głuszcak says, “I didn’t think about the purposefulness of social engineering treatments. I wanted to help and combine this aid with sport”. The statements of the soldiers participating in the project allow for the conclusion that the objective has been achieved. One of the program participants evaluates the project in a few matter-of-fact military words, “A man with PTSD, when he falls, tries to rise, is given a chance to practice martial arts, fight on a mat – it strengthens his self-confidence, he may continue to fight against all odds of fate, with results, thus I believe it is a successful idea” (Pvt 1st Class Łukasz Wojciechowski)⁶.

The veterans and soldiers participating in the project are people with various life experience, career development path, looking differently at the world, people with a whole range of individual characteristics, but it is difficult to perceive them exclusively in the category of the program beneficiaries. “Warriors” are people who consciously chose this path to build themselves, develop certain qualities, such as resistance, physical fitness, but also virtues, such as loyalty, faithfulness to the cause, or realism and resisting illusions. The fight they have in blood is part of their lives, and it also seems that their identity and, in this context, the “Warrior Project” provides something that professional assistance will not offer – a sense of understanding based on shared experiences.

⁶ The quoted statements by the participants accessed on <https://www.instagram.com/p/BrwioK9BH1W/> (accessed: 2 April 2019).

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SUMMARY

Among the needs of a particular type that fall within the spectrum of aid and therapeutic activities, there are those that result from the trauma or potentially traumatizing experiences related to participation in combat operations. The article is an attempt to concisely present an innovative aid project involving military veterans of foreign missions, introduced in Poland. What distinguishes the project is the fact that it is created by soldiers and addressed to soldiers, and thus it is a form of self-help in a rather specific environment. The “Warrior” project involves the use of three essential elements that make it possible to provide effective support: sport, aid, and a sense of community. Since these elements are inextricably linked to the military profession, they give hope for the high effectiveness of aid, so far confirmed in the statements by the participants.

KEYWORDS: army, aid, “Warrior”, trauma, community

STRESZCZENIE

Pośród potrzeb szczególnego typu, które mieszczą się w spectrum działań pomocowych i terapeutycznych zaznaczają się te, które wynikają z przebytej traumy lub doświadczeń potencjalnie traumatyzujących, związanych z uczestnictwem w działaniach bojowych. Artykuł jest próbą zwięzłego przedstawienia nowatorskiego projektu pomocowego, obejmującego żołnierzy-weteranów misji zagranicznych, wprowadzonego w Polsce. Tym, co ów projekt wyróżnia, jest fakt, że jest on tworzony przez żołnierzy i adresowany do żołnierzy, a więc stanowi formę swoistej samopomocy w dość specyficznym środowisku. „Projekt Wojownik” wykorzystuje trzy istotne elementy, które umożliwiają udzielenie skutecznego wsparcia: sportu, pomocy i poczucia wspólnoty. Jako że są to elementy nierozzerwalnie związane z profesją wojskowych, rodzą nadzieję na wysoką skuteczność pomocy, dotąd potwierdzoną w wypowiedziach uczestników.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: wojsko, pomoc, „Wojownik”, trauma, wspólnota

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Pedagogika / Pedagogy

Przysłano do redakcji / Received: 1.09.2022

Daty recenzji / Revised: 14.02.2023; 14.07.2023

Data akceptacji do publikacji / Accepted: 31.10.2023