

Psychological Briefing, Prevention Or Priming?

or,

How many psychiatrists does it take to change a mind?

I Palmer

This paper is a corollary of the recent Class Action against the MoD 2003 (1) and should be read in conjunction with Palmer 2003 (2). As fear is a prerequisite for the diagnosis of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) it was examined in some detail during this case. This paper serves to amplify those deliberations.

Fear

Fear is a prerequisite for the diagnosis of PTSD, no fear, no diagnosis. The word fear derives from the Old English to lie in wait or ambush. It describes an unpleasant, often strong, emotion caused by anticipation or awareness of danger. Synonyms include dread, which adds the idea of intense reluctance to face or meet a person or situation and suggests aversion as well as anxiety. Fright implies the shock of sudden, startling fear. Alarm suggests a sudden and intense awareness of immediate danger. Panic implies unreasoning and overmastering fear causing hysterical activity. Terror implies the most extreme degree of fear. Trepidation adds to dread the implications of timidity, trembling, and hesitation.

For those in good mental health, fear is a transitory emotion. There are many theories of emotions. Cannon 1929 (3) proposed the fight or flight (or freeze) paradigm seeing the experience of emotion as entirely separate from its physiological form and arguing that both emotions and physical reactions take place independently. Schachter and Singer 1964 (4) suggested that emotions were all to do with attributions made about what was happening. In their theory, the social setting determined the type of emotion experienced and the physiological response determined the strength of that reaction. Lazarus and McCleary 1951 (5) suggested that emotion occurs when a situation is deemed relevant to a person's central life concerns. This involved appraisal of threat followed by coping responses, which may be either or both cognitive or physiological, conscious or unconscious (denial or rationalisation) and result in freeze, flight or fight; the threat is then reappraised and a feedback loop initiated. Weiner 1985 (6) stressed the importance of attribution about a situation, threat / non-threat, good/bad, pleasant/unpleasant etc., and suggested that

causality is sought in order to check attributions.

Averill 1980 (7) proposed his Social Construction Theory in which an individual's genetic and physiological make-up form the physical basis of an appraisal made in terms of social norms and roles. This theory allows a range of social actions to take place within a context that is socially agreed and understood; such actions however, will only be transitory as emotion is not a permanent state of affairs. He suggested that emotions are, to a degree at least, controllable (despite many believing the contrary); for example, in some societies, bereavement requires a display of high emotion whereas others require emotional continence. This is a useful way of considering fear in the context of military culture where the expression of fear is discouraged, whilst its omnipresence is tacitly acknowledged as 'part of the job'.

Most research and debate on emotions relate to negative emotions, however, there are positive emotions. Argyll and Crosland 1987 (8) studied positive emotions and identified four dimensions namely: absorption (either intra- or interpersonal and social), potency (the feeling of being capable and active at sport, work, or more intimate pleasures), altruism and spiritual (personally meaningful experiences). Military training aims to inculcate such positive emotions.

Soldier's welfare

Military commanders are charged, in law, with the responsibility for the welfare of those they command. For British Army (BA) Officers and NCOs at least, the judgement accepted that they had a particular self-interest and expertise in the contemplation of, and attendance to, soldier's welfare. This trial highlighted the different paradigms used by commanders and mental health professionals, both civilian and military.

The claimant's brief proposed that, with adequate education from mental health experts about fear, their clients would either:

- (a) Not have developed mental health problems
- (b) Have been less likely to develop mental health problems and/or
- (c) Have had their problems recognised and treated earlier, with supposed better outcome, as such education would have changed the British Army's attitude to mental illness.

The British Army has hundreds of years experience in preparing men for combat. Preparing for war requires affording the highest priority to issues of direct relevance to survival. To this end attention is directed to over-learning drills and field-craft for, in the fog of war, contemplation of future is suspended, the immediacy of existence is revealed and to succumb to fear may result in death. The evidence base for combat is retrospective audit, for example, historical and experiential. Could psychological education through briefings (or debriefings) prevent the development of post combat mental illness? Could a focus of attention on fear and post combat mental ill health prior to combat interfere with psychological defence mechanisms and prime soldiers for breakdown, as is believed in many military quarters?

Firstly however, what do we mean by education? A narrow definition of education is the act or process of educating or being educated by systemic instruction, and this is what was examined in Court. However, a broader view, favoured by the Judge, is the development of character or mental powers, an altogether more complex concept, like learning. The provision of information alone is neither education nor learning. Learning is the acquisition of knowledge through study and requires intention, application, effort and endeavour. In addition, what information should be given, who decides this and why? What is the knowledge base, opinions and prejudices of the target audience? And who will deliver such information? See Mehta And Farina 1997 (9) Townsend 1979 (10) Link 1987 (11) Gilman 1982 (12) Devine 1989 (13).

I hope to illuminate why the Judgement found for the Army (MoD) and how psycho-educational briefings are not as straightforward as would appear at first glance.

Social Psychology

Social psychology proffers an understanding of the social processes of enlistment. It furthers our understanding of organisations, learning, meaning, attribution, affiliation, stigma, obedience, conformity, interpersonal and inter-group relationships and the like. In essence, it operationalizes what military commanders have learnt over hundreds of years and accordingly, unlike its clinical counterparts, has the 'ear' of the military when it comes to psychological matters. Clinicians do not have to consider social paradigms in their practice as their practice generally reflects more 'individual' psychological paradigms. However, without consideration of social psychology in matters of health education and changing attitudes, a clinically based approach is unlikely to succeed. The link between attitude and behaviour is complicated and attitudes, as

inferred from human actions, are frequently inconsistent with the attitudes expressed by those same individuals. Nevertheless, it is often incorrectly assumed that changing attitudes will change behaviours (14,15).

Groups ~ Enlistment & Acculturation

Affiliation is inherent in the process of enlistment and acculturation. Affiliation diminishes anxiety by allowing normalising appraisal through social comparison with other members of the group, for example, 'am I normal'; the provision of information from important others (officers NCOs ~ 'parents') and obtaining help and assistance. Where shame and/or anxiety are present, affiliation is reduced (16, 17).

Civilians are turned into soldiers by social processes in which individual judgements and attitudes are affected by opinions of those around them (19). Conformity, compliance, identification and internalisation of group influences and norms are fundamental. Conformity and compliance are behaviours motivated by a desire to gain reward or to avoid shame and/or punishment (20, 21). Identification is based upon a modelling process where behaviour is motivated by a desire to emulate a person or a group and is not specifically tied to rewards or punishment. Internalisation is the final step in the response to social influence and involves the acceptance of group values and beliefs as one's own. At this stage, the transition from civilian to military culture has successfully occurred and the motivation for subsequent behaviour becomes the intrinsic reward of acting in accord with one's own (military) values.

The natural tendency to conform within groups is enhanced in military culture through shared goals and the organisation's hierarchical nature. There is, however, reciprocity of influence within any group that relates to trust but also an aversion to being disliked by social equals and superiors. Trust is vital within the Army given the mutual interdependence required to undertake allotted tasks (22).

Group membership requires the development and acceptance of group norms. These are either explicit or implicit rules that develop between group members over time and, in the case of the military, have become enshrined in military culture, discipline and rituals. Group members who do not conform to these norms will be excluded from, or ridiculed by, the group; both are powerful social sanctions. Norms are highly resistant to change, especially as they aid the accomplishment of goals, maintain group structure, create and maintain commonly held frames of references and define relationships, within and outside the various groups. Change may

be possible through consultation, negotiation and collaboration but this will generally be slow as Armies are mission-led and have a duty to carry out orders without discussion.

Groups ~ Reference Groups (RG)

RGs are groups to which individuals aspire to belong as they include other individuals whose opinions influence them, to which they relate, and who espouse shared goals (23). These groups are especially important for adolescents as they establish patterns of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour to which individuals must either conform or risk being excluded. RGs are of particular relevance to the psychological integration of individuals within a unit

The process of becoming a soldier is therefore primarily related to an individual's response to three classes of social influence, namely: compliance, identification, and internalisation involving horizontal cohesion (social bonding amongst peers who share tasks and collective activities) (24). Such cohesion is facilitated during training by the confusion of the unfamiliar and the imposition of taxing organisational tasks and demands during basic and subsequent training. Soldiers need each other's assistance to do what is expected of them and to avoid punishment; a process which develops trust and mutual interdependence and becomes a function of the importance individuals attach to the opinions of their RG peers.

Vertical cohesion describes the increased trust and social bonding between leaders and subordinates. The acceptance by leaders of their obligations and responsibilities with regard to their subordinate's welfare matters are of pivotal importance in allowing their charges to identify with them, which in turn fosters an acceptance of the organisational goals, standards and values those leaders represent. With time, this leads to a growing commitment to military norms and values and to their internalisation (25).

This process is further enhanced by the isolation of the military training environment from existing social networks and from the close, daily contact with fellow recruits. The shared pursuit of challenging objectives generates a climate in which individuals feel sufficiently secure to make themselves vulnerable by confiding, asking for help, and accepting other's weaknesses. This bonding crystallises with time and is reinforced by the anticipation of facing combat together.

Vertical cohesion is the process of identification with leaders who act as guides, teachers, critics and representatives of the hierarchy, it is a two-way process. Leaders become attached to the soldiers as they witness the positive results of their teaching and training. This is a process of mutual social bonding in which recruits come to see their leaders as dedicated to their success and

welfare; in turn they come to model themselves on their leaders. Within these small groups, there is a shared sense of ownership over the unit and its mission, because all members are vital to its success. With time, recruits bring not only their time and strength to the unit, but also their creative and intellectual faculties to the organisational goals represented and espoused by the leaders.

For this process to work, leaders at all levels must possess ability, status, competence and a willingness to make their soldiers' welfare a fundamental responsibility and priority. Where obedience is concerned, status is important in influencing individuals and groups and this holds true across cultures. However, effective leadership can only happen if leaders treat soldiers with respect. The most effective leaders capitalise on the processes of social influence.

Groups ~ Primary Groups (PrG)

These groups are characterised by intimate face-to-face association and co-operation. They are primary in several senses, but chiefly because they are fundamental in forming the social nature and ideals of their members. They are the product of intimate psychosocial association in which there is a certain 'fusion' of individualities into a common whole. In this state the common life and purpose of the group becomes one's own life and purpose; 'I' becomes 'we' and involves the sort of sympathy and mutual identification for which 'we' is the natural expression (26).

PrGs are particularly influential in shaping their members' attitudes and behaviours. They are distinguished from other forms of group association because they are emotional centres for the individual where interpersonal relationships replicate, in varying degree, those of a family. Membership of a PrG usually requires some form of renunciation or separation of members from other commitments and relationships and formal membership requirements (basic physical and mental health and educational status) and initiation rites (e.g. physical stressors hardships and stern discipline) as well as an ideology or cause to which the group is committed. These groups are powerful forces in their members' lives as they tap into formative emotional and psychosocial structures that constitute the bases of an individual's personality (or self) and, as such, profoundly affect their emotional life, beliefs, attitudes and actions.

Primary groups are of particular relevance in the Army, especially during combat. They begin to develop in basic training and this process may be conceptualised as a change from civilian to military family. In the new,

military family, commanding officers are seen as paternal figures, especially during crisis when everyone wants to turn to a reliable, trustworthy and stolid 'other' when scared – classically the role of the father. Freud talks about 'artificial' groups such as the church and suggests that the military, in a similar way, need good leaders who love them all individually and equally – this individual is the Commander, at whatever level.

The military have overarching super-ordinate goals that potentiate cohesion, only infrequently are these the primary motivation for enlistment. Civilians seldom have such overt goals and most undertake work for external rewards alone; such work has been described as 'instrumental' in nature. Only in time of crisis do civilians identify their needs with those of an organisation; indeed, if sickness absence represents a measure of alienation at work, the rates are uniformly greater in civilian work where full fitness may not be a pre-requisite to employment (27).

Groups ~ Power Groups PG

The British Army may be conceptualised as a 'Power Group' since it is a (sub-) culture that draws on a central power source and requires trust, empathy, understanding and commitment for effectiveness and interpersonal conversation for communication (28). Members of PGs are trained to think in a similar way, which devolves power to them. PGs are proud and strong, have the ability to move quickly and react well to threat or danger.

In order to function optimally, the quality of the constituent individuals is of paramount import; requiring careful selection, observation and training. Individuals who prosper in these groups are ambitious, able to take risks and rate security as a minor element in their relationship with the group. Such cultures put great faith in individuals who, in turn, are judged by their results. Whilst PGs perform better on complex tasks than less centralised networks, they may affect individual satisfaction related to the degree of autonomy and power that individual has within the PG.

Self-esteem is tied up with belonging to a group such as the Army and relates to collectivist (group) orientation involving intra-group co-operation and achievement and relational comparisons with other groups. Social identity and group strength (unlike civilian society) is also related to super-ordinate goals where even antagonism and interpersonal problems can be tolerated to get the job done.

Any tendency to specialisation is deprecated in these groups as it engenders limitation and inflexibility. This is of particular relevance to the Army whose members frequently have to overcome many, often unforeseen, obstacles in hostile

environments with minimal resources. Such generalism is counter to the prevailing cultural processes of specialisation within society.

Groups ~ In Combat

The exceptional fighting prowess of the German Army in WWII has been the subject of much study (29). From a sociological point of view their excellent performance was related to 'unit cohesion', for example, maintenance of ability to continue to fight when out-numbered. Such units provided for their member's physical and psychosocial needs while their leaders provided purpose, competence and caring. This cohesion enables combat units to resist disintegration and to fight effectively. This has long been recognised within the British Army and forms the basis of all officer and NCO training.

The sociological concept of the 'primary group' describes perfectly the basis for success in combat. Unit cohesion is related to confidence in self, peers and leaders and to a belief in their commander's professional abilities as well as his attention to the welfare of the group members. Unity of purpose, distinctiveness from other groups (real and imagined), mutual interdependence and trust are all characteristics of particularly effective groups.

The ultimate standard for all combatants is successful performance in combat. Unfortunately, there is little, if any, agreement on what constitutes a reasonable predictor of combat success. Units may be well prepared by traditional standards but fail miserably on the battlefield, and vice-versa. Israeli Defence Force (IDF) units with high levels of cohesion, esprit de corps and morale, perform best. These units have strong vertical and horizontal cohesion with which group members identify, and are committed to. It is also of importance in the IDF that officers are drawn from the ranks because they have first-hand experience and, therefore, credibility. Influencing individuals is not straightforward as it depends on the credibility of the message and presenter (30).

Social Representation Theory ~ Soldiers And Learning

Durkheim 1898 (31) proposed that 'social life' involved the collective interpretations of reality, and developed within a social group or society that was shared and taken as the truth by those participating in it. Moscovici 1984 (32) suggested that these shared social representations held by a group allow individuals to communicate effectively and to come to an agreed view about reality. Both theories imply that social action links individuals and communities with social ideology, for example, our beliefs influence how we act.

Social representation theory is firmly rooted in everyday life and not derived from study in the laboratory (31, 32). It is directly concerned with what people do, think and say and, therefore, concerned with 'traditional' knowledge passed on through the social group, institution and the wider culture or sub-culture. Outside information may become fitted into social representations but may become distorted in the process of negotiation and adaption by the individual and group. This negotiation occurs through conversation and means that social representations will not be identical although they may share much in common; such consensual representations will be shared by a group, particularly a primary group.

Individuals are extremely selective about the information they wish to adopt (33). Social representations are, therefore, shared beliefs held by social groups that serve to organise and direct social action (of that group). Social representations are closely linked to membership of social groups and within any society there are many different groups, cultures and subcultures; as a result there will be many different social representations in any given society and over time, they change as society changes and military societies change very slowly.

Whether or not we adopt a social representation depends largely on whether it fits not just with our personal beliefs but also with the beliefs and ideas of our social group. For example, we do not treat everyone's opinions in the same way and we consider the opinion of people who are like us as much more important than the view of outsiders. We therefore, have a strong tendency to favour the beliefs expressed by other members of our particular 'in-group'.

The social representations are intimately related to the growth of core social identity, particularly enhanced in primary groups through rigorous training that adds to a feeling of sharing a unique experience.

Understanding, Meaning & Attribution

In order to devise coping strategies meaning is required and this is related, among other things to attribution, which is an extremely complex phenomena.

Fundamental Attribution Error is the tendency to perceive our own actions as arising from situational factors while at the same time judging other people's actions as arising from dispositional (personal) causes (34). Such attribution is directly relevant to the ways that our social group (e.g. military) defines our realities (social representations) and may be specific or global (it's his fault, it's the Army's fault). Attributions are important in a primary group setting. In less tightly bound groups they may lead to rumour and gossip which are corrosive to

social fabric and group dynamics, especially as we are all bound by a self-serving bias.

Self-serving bias describes how we make attributions in order to portray ourselves in a favourable way, particularly when we are trying to explain why we have succeeded or failed at something; one of the aims of military training is to minimise this bias. External attribution is increased if the individual feels stigmatised or disadvantaged and requires validation from others if it is to be 'felt' valid. External attribution is most useful in dealing with failure and if associated with powerlessness may become a major liability

Motivation is important in attribution because it reflects people's need for structure, validity and conclusions that are workable. Individuals weigh information by the consistency of the source, the consensus of the group and the distinctiveness of the 'target' of the attribution (Covariance Theory); however, it appears that it really doesn't matter very much whether our beliefs are true or not as long as they serve our own purposes (35).

Lay Epistemology

Epistemology is the study of what counts as knowledge and how knowledge is formed. Lay epistemology relates to how people see knowledge and how their ideas can become fixed or unfrozen. It attempts to understand how ordinary people, as opposed to experts, formulate knowledge in their everyday lives (36). Most people, for example, take a lot of information for granted and do not think about things by forming hypotheses before they act. Only when faced with new experiences do most people develop hypotheses to explain them and, even in more unusual situations, they generally only develop one or two ideas usually settling (rapidly) on one particular hypothesis as an explanation, which becomes a 'frozen' explanation. As this process is intimately linked with emotion, it makes it hard subsequently to 'unfreeze' the explanation. Whether or not a specific belief becomes frozen, or not, depends on a person's intellectual capacity and motivation. It also relates to which hypothesis can be brought to mind at any given moment – and this is of direct relevance to combat.

Social Learning – Imitation And Identification

Social learning is based on the theories of Bandura (37) who argues that individuals may learn through imitation (thereby learning all units of behaviour without the need for trial and error) and identification (a method of generating entirely new behaviours consistent with social expectations).

There is evidence from developmental psychology that clearly shows that 'status envy' draws individuals towards high-status powerful role models who are then more likely to imitate these individuals. This is seen in role models of sportsmen and women, business leaders as well as the military (38). Indeed imitation and identification are two of the basic mechanisms of human development; they are, therefore, very powerful, imbedded (hard-wired) in our personalities from birth. For example, vicarious learning describes imitation of behaviours following their observation in others and whether these behaviours were approved or punished; in this way individuals may learn about the likely consequences of action and adjust their imitations accordingly.

There are no reliable predictive psychological tests in relation to issues such as courage and fear, endurance and ability in combat. Exposure to combat rather than its classroom contemplation is the only truly educational intervention; survival and judgement of peers are the only true yardsticks of achievement. This mirrors the only truly well validated psychological treatment in psychiatry namely, exposure therapy.

Learning

It is easier to learn by modelling and imitation of others; so easy that children use it. The Army is a power culture (28) and educates the next generation by a form of imposed modelling, by learning from direct experience and from a (respected) person or people through modelling.

Context is crucial and what is learned in one group may not be carried over into another because of changed social dynamics and interaction (39). Therefore, the 'learning group' should be the working group so that context and application are the same; this is the aim of Army training. However, for learning to work the individual must want to learn! Learning is a complicated process which, in order to be retained, must be contextualized. It should be noted that whilst it may be possible to evaluate what someone has learned in a classroom, it does not mean that such learning will be applied in practise.

Different people learn in different ways. Discovery learning tends to last as individuals find things out for themselves. However even this must be used, and found useful, in the near future in order to be reinforced and internalised. That which is not maintained is soon lost - especially information without perceived relevance in day-to-day working, for example, discussions about fear.

Human information processing does not work in the same rule governed, 'cold' information sifting and sorting fashion typical of computers. Emotion is involved and allows the sorting of the (personally)

important from unimportant and, at times, will utilize innate preferences. For a small group to function effectively there will be a similarity of attitudes aided by the process of acculturation into a military organisation.

Discussion

By all parameters, in the West at least, we have never been so fit, yet felt so unwell. Our society has become medicalised to the extent that individuals feel it necessary to seek 'specialist' advice for life's problems and their distress. The risks of creating dependency are legion as are the opportunities for projecting blame and seeking legal redress, the Class Action bears witness to this. The judgement however, revealed that civilian rather than military culture had failed ex-servicemen.

The Class Action saw a clash of paradigms between military commanders and mental health professionals, both civil (including ex-service and TA) and military. The judgement made clear the investment and expertise Army commanders have in the physical and mental welfare of their soldiers. Acknowledgement of this by mental health professionals should lead to greater synergy between all parties; that this may require a paradigm shift for both parties is however undisputed. The Defence Medical Services (DMS) are there to support the mission of the Army, not vice versa. It therefore behoves DMS personnel to be clear about their acculturation and to which norms and mores they are beholden. This is not as straightforward as it seems and is the military Medical Officer's prime moral and ethical dilemma.

Through its institutional memory, the the Army prepares soldiers to survive on a battlefield long enough to achieve the mission entrusted it by the Nation. Although increasingly demeaned in medicine, other areas of society such as the Army (and the Law) utilise precedent and experience as vital sources of evidence. Whilst time alone does not guarantee their verity, to neglect the lessons of history is to neglect vital evidence of how, and why, such social methods developed and were shaped by the human endeavour of combat.

As it is axiomatic that 'prevention is better than cure', laudably, mental health professionals have sought to prevent the development of mental ill health through educational interventions. Generally however, such provision has been uninformed by social psychology and may have added to the marginalization of the role and expertise of commanders (40). The judgement highlighted the specious nature of the argument that a lecture by a mental health professional would enable a soldier to either master their fear or prevent their succumbing to a fear (trauma) related mental illness or disorder (30).

Conclusion

The Class Action in London brought together many of the World's experts in the field of trauma (fear) based mental disorders to give evidence in person or writing. Based on this evidence the following may be stated:

1. It is not possible to fully prepare soldiers in peacetime for the many fear(s) they are likely to encounter in combat.
2. It is not possible to prevent post traumatic mental disorders through formal presentation to troops from a mental health professional prior to combat.
3. Commanders have a pivotal role and expertise in issues relating to the mental welfare of soldiers before, during and after combat.
4. DMS mental health professionals and commanders should work closely together in the interests of soldier's mental health as the NHS, not the Army, has failed ex-servicemen.

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