

Research Brief

Military Training and Personality Trait Development: Does the Military Make the Man, or Does the Man Make the Military?

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Research Highlights:

- Male high school students out of Germany were assessed using the Big Five Personality Traits at four different times over a six year time span to determine if A.) a difference in personality traits exists between students who choose to join the military and students who choose to do community service instead and B.) if military service leads to changes in personality.
- Personality traits influenced the decision to join the military. Individuals low on agreeableness (the tendency to be warm and caring), neuroticism (anxious, worrisome) and open to experience (enjoys novel and aesthetic experiences) are more likely to enter military service.
- Military service was associated with changes in personality. Service members had a significantly lower level of agreeableness (compared to civilians) both after service was completed and after service members went to college or entered the labor force. Lower levels of agreeableness are likely beneficial in a military context, but could be considered detrimental to interpersonal relationships.

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Abstract:

“Military experience is an important turning point in a person’s life and, consequently, is associated with important life outcomes. Using a large longitudinal sample of German males, we examined whether personality traits played a role during this period. Results indicated that personality traits prospectively predicted the decision to enter the military. People lower in agreeableness, neuroticism, and openness to experience during high school were more likely to enter the military after graduation. In addition, military training was associated with changes in personality. Compared with a control group, military recruits had lower levels of agreeableness after training. These levels persisted 5 years after training, even after participants entered college or the labor market. This study is one of the first to identify life experiences associated with changes in personality traits. Moreover, our results suggest that military experiences may have a long-lasting influence on individual-level characteristics”

Implications

For Practice

Personality traits are associated with social experience and influence important life outcomes, like divorce, health and longevity and job success. Thus, it is important to understand what experiences lead to changes in personality traits. The current study examined what personality traits were associated with the choice to enter into the military and whether or not military experience changed one's personality. Individuals low on agreeableness, neuroticism, and openness to experience are more likely to enter military service. Moreover, military training was associated with changes in agreeableness. Military training is explicitly set up to change a recruit's pattern of behavior, which can ultimately cause a change in personality traits to occur by combining a number of socialization processes. These changes in behavior patterns are likely achieved through specific expectations for military-related behaviors and norms, and through extensive boot-camp training used to breakdown one's civilian status and build up a new military identity. These behaviors are reinforced by an incentive structure that rewards those that fulfill the expectations of military culture and punishes those that do not. Likely, these changes in daily behavior ultimately lead to changes in personality traits. The study also suggests that the changes in personality due to military service continue to exist even after military service is complete and recruits join the workforce or attend college. These findings have practical implications about the consequences of military training, boot-camp experiences in particular.

In exploring the relationship between how military training affects the development of personality traits, senior high school students out of Germany were assessed using the Big Five Personality Traits at four different times over a six-year time span. In terms of normal personality trait development expected in young adults, students choosing to join the military, compared with those choosing to participate in community service, or neither, all exhibited an increased level of conscientiousness, a decrease in neuroticism, and an increase in agreeableness. However, military recruits were shown to have a significantly lower level of agreeableness than civilians choosing to participate in community service post- and long after, high school graduation. A lower level of agreeableness is likely beneficial in a military context, but can be detrimental to an individual's life outcomes. Commonly associated with low levels of agreeableness, aggression is a valued trait when used to acquire aggression-related military skills, or when it supports faster response time during life-or-death situations. In contrast, low levels of agreeableness may also indicate a greater level of conflict in romantic relationships, difficulties in getting along with friends, and general aggression tendencies. Thus, military training may hinder or impair success in these important life outcomes, even if they never engage in combat.

For Policy

A major problem with military service is that extreme combat situations can leave long lasting effects on service members through posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The current study suggests that military service may also impart long-term effects without entering into combat. While changes in agreeableness can be beneficial in certain domains, such as business, it can be detrimental to close relationships and possibly overall health. As such, it is necessary to take into consideration the effects that military training and membership has on the long-term well-being and health of its members.

For Future Research

It is not known what specific components of military experience influence the development of agreeableness. Changes in agreeableness may be attributable to specific experiences within the military (such as combat techniques) or an absence of important developmental experiences that members do not experience while serving in the military, but do experience in other domains. Future research will need to examine whether personality influences the decision to enter the military in different counties given a difference in laws governing the conscription of male citizens. Moreover, future research will need to examine the effect of military service on women.

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