

# Posttrauma Support from a Leadership Perspective: Swedish Peacekeeping Experiences

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## Introduction

Military personnel in most industrial countries are nowadays being asked to be prepared for a wide variety of missions encompassing peace-support operations as well as traditional war fighting. Sweden has been one of the most frequently employed nations in United Nations (UN) operations and may therefore claim long experience of different UN commitments. The purpose of this study is to summarize, from a leadership perspective, Swedish experience of posttrauma support during peacekeeping missions.

## Stressors for Peacekeepers

In a recent study of Swedish peacekeeping forces in former Yugoslavia, several classes of stressors were identified.<sup>1</sup> The service environment, the media, and the private social network were labeled *external influencing factors*. A typical comment regarding the service environment was given by a soldier: "Be mentally prepared for uninterrupted frustration because of the parties' irrational behavior." Frustrations related to the recruitment principles of the forces, mismatches between preservice training and actual demands during missions, and leadership deficiencies were grouped together under the heading *internal peacekeeping force factors*. The interaction between these external and internal factors caused an accumulated stress reaction over time in many soldiers. Reactions to acute, traumatic events should be understood against this background.

Common traumatic events for Swedish peacekeepers taking part in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's so-called implementation force (IFOR) in Bosnia were threats with weapons, firing very close, being taken prisoner or hostage, seeing wounded and maimed people, and being involved in serious accidents—driving onto mines, for instance. Commanders and soldiers who had faced these kinds of highly stressful situations were offered various types of posttrauma support as described in this section.

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## Various Types of Posttrauma Support

Psychological debriefings following traumatic events have a long history in military settings.<sup>2</sup> In the last decade, they have also become quite common in civilian contexts. Debriefings have been used after major disasters but also following minor traumatic events faced by, for instance, firefighters, hospital staff, police officers, and social workers.<sup>3</sup> A common outcome is that most participants perceive debriefings positively. For example, in a follow-up of approximately 1,000 psychological debriefings in Sweden, Larsson and Österdahl reported a mean rating of 4.5 on a scale ranging from 1 (of no value) to 5 (very valuable).<sup>4</sup>

Some critics have argued that there is a lack of systematic knowledge about how a debriefing functions and whether it makes an impact on persons who have experienced stressful or traumatic events. On a general level, it has been noted that concepts need to be clarified, potential favorable mechanisms need to be analyzed, and short- and long-term effects need to be studied further.<sup>5</sup>

## Psychological Debriefings

In order to differentiate debriefings from other kinds of psychological support, the following definitions will be used:

- Peer support = A friend helps you by sitting down and talking to you in connection with the event;
- A ventilation session = Your ordinary group leader gathers your group on the same day the event occurred and leads you through what happened while you are being given opportunities to express your feelings; and
- A group debriefing session led by an external counselor with the aim of providing an opportunity to work through the event with regard to facts, thoughts, and emotions is conducted 1–3 days after the event. The external counselor has a behavioral sciences academic education (e.g., psychologist) plus a shorter period of special training (usually around one week) on how to lead debriefings.<sup>6</sup>

## Effectiveness of Posttrauma Support

Recently two studies on posttrauma support for Swedish peacekeepers were completed. One was prospective and focused on an evaluation of different forms of support on postservice mental health.<sup>7</sup> The other study was qualitative

and sought to develop a theoretical understanding of conditions and mechanisms affecting experiences of the quality of debriefing sessions.<sup>8</sup> Key points from these two studies are summarized in the following discussion.

### The Study Design

The sample consisted of the Swedish battalion that was part of IFOR in Bosnia from March to October 1996. Assessments of personality characteristics and mental health were done before and after service as shown in figure 24.

The response rate was 84 percent on the preservice assessment (T1 in figure 25) and 92 percent on the postservice assessment (T2). Complete responses on both measurement occasions were obtained from 510 individuals (70.4 percent response rate).

Occurrence of traumatic events was reported by 181 soldiers. Among these individuals, four kinds of support were noted after the event. One subgroup (n = 56) did not get any support at all. A second subgroup (n = 29) received peer support only. A third subgroup (n = 60) received peer support plus a ventilation session. A final subgroup (n = 36) received peer support plus a ventilation session plus a debriefing session.

**Results of the Study.** The four groups receiving different kinds of support following a traumatic event did not differ

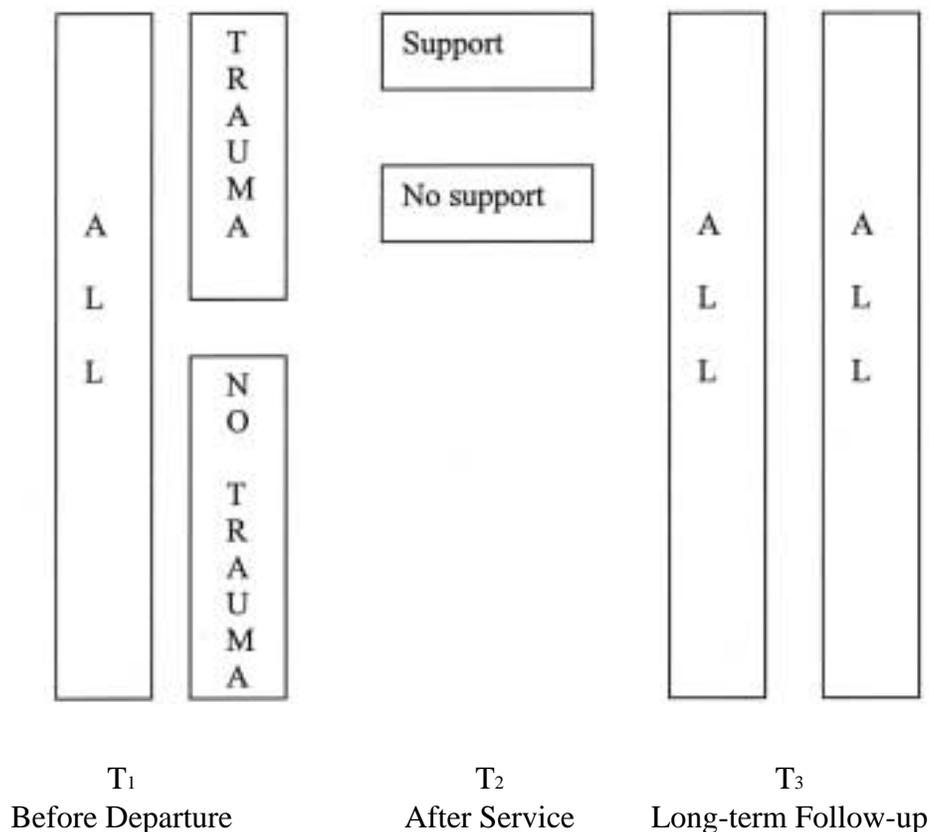
significantly from each other in any preservice measurement. The postservice assessment showed that peer support followed by a ventilation session had a positive effect on postservice mental health. This, however, did not apply to the individual with the worst preservice mental health. The value of debriefing sessions could not be evaluated due to insufficient data. The study also showed that poor mental health after service was more related to preservice mental health than to trauma exposure and posttrauma support. Conclusions from the study are presented from a leadership perspective in the final section.

### Effectiveness of Psychological Debriefings

A study designed by Glaser and Strauss was administered to determine whether psychological debriefings are helpful in dealing with posttraumatic stress and, if so, to learn how they accomplish this desired outcome.

### The Study Design

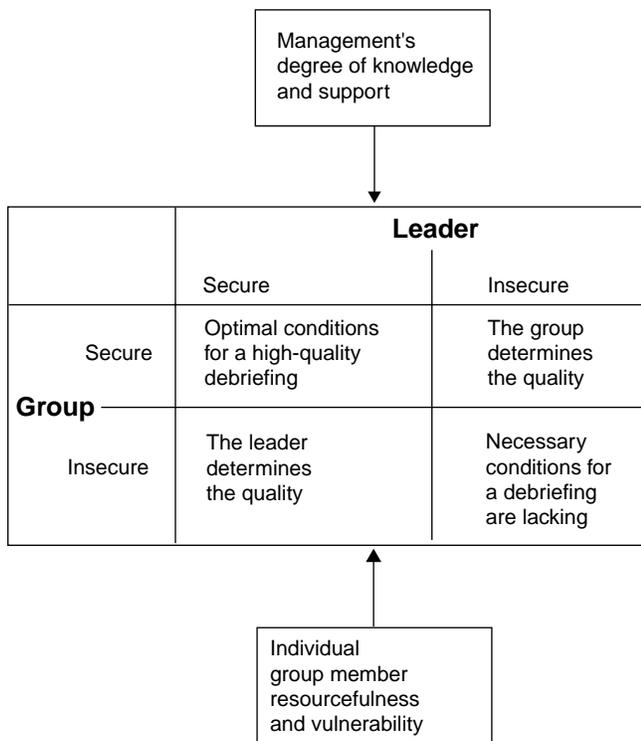
The qualitative study was conducted in accordance with the grounded theory tradition.<sup>9</sup> The study participants were selected from the Stockholm fire brigade and the Swedish armored UN battalions serving in Bosnia from the fall of 1993 up to and including the fall of 1996. Both organizations were selected because they are known to have exten-



**Figure 24. Prospective Design of a Study of Swedish Peacekeeping Soldiers**

sive experience of emotional debriefings following traumatic events. Ten persons recommended by their colleagues for their ability to communicate their experiences were selected within each of the two organizations. Data were collected by interviews consisting of open-ended questions and individually adapted follow-up questions. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. They were consecutively analyzed according to the constant comparative method.<sup>10</sup>

**Results of the Study.** The quality of emotional debriefings is formed by the dynamic interplay between group and debriefing leader characteristics. The key group and debriefing leader quality is security. Individual group member resourcefulness and vulnerability, as well as degree of knowledge and support from the management of the organization, also affect the outcome. A presentation of the model is given in figure 25.



**Figure 25. Conditions Affecting Experiences of Psychological Debriefings**

### Dynamic Interplay between Groups and Leaders

A number of possible mixtures of leader/group types was analyzed to attempt to find which combination would produce the best results. Descriptions and findings are presented below.

#### Secure Leader/Secure Group

These are the optimal conditions for a high-quality debriefing session. Both the leader and the group members enter the

session with reciprocal respect and with a belief that the session will help the group and the individual members.

#### Secure Leader/Insecure Group

A group may be insecure during a debriefing session for a number of reasons. Typical sources of group insecurity mentioned in the interviews included earlier conflicts in the group, group members who do not know each other but just happened to work together during the stressful event, a strong sense of guilt due to mistakes made during the episode, and lack of experience of emotional debriefings.

Facing an insecure group puts high demands on the debriefing leader, since he or she determines the quality of the debriefing. Personality characteristics (see below) and an ability to handle group dynamic processes appear to be more important than debriefing technical skills.

#### Insecure Leader/Secure Group

A debriefing leader may be perceived by the group members as insecure for various reasons. Common causes mentioned in the interviews were basic personality characteristics (see below), poor leadership traits, lack of experience of group processes and group dynamics, and lack of knowledge and skills related to stress management and debriefing.

The quality of this kind of debriefing session is determined by the group. A possible outcome is that the dialogue remains at a superficial level. If this is the case, group members will ascribe little value to the session. Another possibility is that the leadership is usurped by one of the group members. In these cases, the quality of the session will depend on the competence of the new informal leader.

#### Insecure Leader/Insecure Group

If the debriefing leader lacks the ability to handle the situation and the group lacks the security to take over the responsibility for the session, the necessary conditions for a meaningful debriefing are missing. Debriefings held under this kind of circumstance are likely to be characterized by mutual resistance or indifference.

### Ideal Characteristics of Secure Groups and Leaders

Following is a description of the main components of a secure debriefing leader in charge of a secure group. Such a combination would be ideal because it would produce the best results in alleviating posttraumatic stress.

#### Characteristics of a Secure Debriefing Leader

As security on the part of the debriefing leader is central in the model, it is important to present the main components of this core category. The qualitative analysis suggests three necessary components. One of these could be labeled *basic personality characteristics*. Codes underpinning this category

include calmness, flexibility, stress tolerance, and self-awareness. The latter includes an awareness of one's limitations.

A second category was called *basic knowledge*. The codes which add up to this category are a basic academic training in the behavioral sciences, knowledge of group dynamic processes, knowledge of crisis reactions, and an ability to identify persons with more complicated reactions so they can be referred to more qualified helpers. The debriefing leader also needs a thorough knowledge of debriefing methodology as well as of the working conditions of the affected group.

The third category could be called *emotional leadership*. Indicators brought together under this heading are having a good empathic ability and an ability to sense the needs of the individual group members as well as the group atmosphere. When practicing this type of leadership, one must show an honest interest in the group members and make them feel that the purpose of the debriefing session is to help them. Courage is another indicator; to have the fortitude to confront strong emotions. The leader should also have a sense for how much space he or she should occupy as the leader. This implies a balancing act in which you are close to other people's emotions, while at the same time having access to but control over your own.

### **Characteristics of a Secure Group**

Security in the group which is about to go through a debriefing session constitutes the second core category in the proposed model. However, this category was covered less intensively in the interviews. A typical expression was that "It is important with mutual faith and good comradeship in the group and these things are built up over a long period of time." In addition to a strong cohesion, tolerance was mentioned. It was emphasized that high-quality debriefings are characterized by an open climate where each individual can be himself or herself; nothing is right or wrong.

In a secure group, different members can also act as models for each other; for instance, when telling about difficult things, showing feelings, or demonstrating how to go on. In a secure group reactions are normalized as the participants' understanding of their reactions, as well as those of the others, increases. This was expressed in terms like "I'm not alone" and "It felt good to hear what the others were thinking."

### **Additional Core Components of Debriefings**

Another precondition for high-quality debriefings is knowledge and support from the management of the organization. This category was derived from interview indicators such as "Our management supports annual education in this area" and "Thanks to the support of the senior management we constantly have one debriefing leader on duty."

The category titled *individual group member characteristics* is designed to cover basic psychological conditions of each group member. These aspects were not focused in the interviews. However, recurrent remarks dealt with individual differences in resourcefulness and vulnerability.

### **Lessons Learned from a Leadership Perspective**

The favorable results of ventilation sessions led by the ordinary platoon commanders (or similar leaders) shown in the prospective study are promising from a practical point of view.<sup>11</sup> All officers had received a fairly structured training on how to lead a ventilation session before leaving for Bosnia. The results indicate that this kind of training is valuable although the multivariate analysis showed that no effects were found when looking at the subgroup with the worst preservice mental health. The results may also indicate that the lowest level of command plays an important role for the mental health of troops in a stressful context. This would be consistent with, for instance, findings from Israel.<sup>12</sup>

The desired leader characteristics identified in the qualitative study, have parallels to those commonly found in counseling, nursing care, and psychotherapy evaluations.<sup>13</sup> It has repeatedly been reported that successful caregivers, counselors, and therapists are perceived as secure, warm, and approachable. They also have a good capacity for tolerating anxiety in themselves as well as in their patients.<sup>14</sup> The desired debriefing leader also resembles so-called transformational leaders as described by Avolio and Bass.<sup>15</sup> If our model is valid, it means that the selection of debriefing leaders becomes crucial. This conclusion rests on a somewhat pessimistic outlook on the possibilities of developing skillful debriefing leaders through training alone. A secure inner base and a good empathic ability probably take a long time to develop.

The emphasis on the security and atmosphere in the debriefed group also carries a pessimistic touch. Mutual trust, comradeship, and respect in a working group commonly take some time to develop. The same can probably be said about the third key component of the model, namely the resourcefulness and vulnerability of the individual debriefing participant.

All key aspects of our model focus on conditions affecting the quality of debriefings rather than on more technical aspects such as how to move from one phase to another. This is not to say that the technical aspects are not important. The remarks on pessimism should not be overstated, but indicate that one should not expect too much from debriefings alone. This kind of psychological support should be considered as only one component in a broad array of stress management aspects.<sup>16</sup>

### **Notes**

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