

Original article

Moral dilemmas of defence decisions in situations of threats of physical aggression – comparative analysis between 1999 and 2018

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the author interprets the results of research on moral dilemmas of making decisions as to how to defend oneself against physical aggression. In one instance, aggression is directed against the respondent with the intent to kill, in the other, against a bystander with no clear intent. Research conducted by the author both in 1999 and in 2018 involved 1st year military school students (basic training period). The conducted comparative analysis of empirical data allows the author to conclude that the morality of decisions concerning defensive actions in situations of threats of physical aggression depends primarily on the person against whom the aggression is directed (respondent, bystander) and the intensity of aggression. The analysis also gives grounds for postulating a thesis that between 1999 and 2018, there has been a positive change in the moral awareness of candidates for the Officer Corps of the Polish Armed Forces.

KEYWORDS

morality, decisions, threats, physical aggression, honour



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Introduction

The empirical data analysed in this article is a part of research conducted by the author within the military student community, at the Higher Officers' School of Land Forces in 1999 and at the Military University of Land Forces in 2018¹. In both cases it therefore involves adepts who aspire to become professional soldiers. Service, as that is the customary term used to refer to the work performed by groups responsible for national security, including soldiers of the Polish Armed Forces, requires them to be, among others, disciplined, loyal and ready to sacrifice themselves for their country, for the cause, for the good of others. Such determinants of service can be found in, among others, the text of the Military Oath, the text of the Officers' Oath, the Code of Honour of the Professional Soldier of the Polish Armed Forces

¹ The Higher Officers' School of Land Forces obtained the status of academic university in 2017.

and in many other normative documents. The word “sacrifice”, which is the foundation of the essential virtues and obligations of a soldier (such as: bravery, dedication, responsibility, dignity, courage, prudence), was adopted as the semantic key for the analysis of research results conducted herein.

Treating these records, as well as the moral and ethical principles stemming from them, as the cultural canon of an organisation that is total in nature, relatively closed, formalised and hierarchised, it was assumed that moral behaviours in this respondent group are characterised by a clearer descriptive relationship compared to other, non-uniformised social groups. Another assumption made for the purposes of the conducted analysis was that students of that university who are undergoing basic training (approx. one month service) are characterised by a different set of values than higher-year cadets². In practice, this means that the analysed empirical data related to students of the Higher Officers’ School of Land Forces and students of the Military University of Land Forces concerns the tendency towards defensive actions (behaviours) shaped under the influence of the civilian environment. This is the environment which formed their competences and moral values as part of primary and secondary socialisation, including through the influence of family, school and social organisations [1].

Moral dilemmas of defence decisions [...], as the empirical part of the article is devoted to analysis of the answers of respondents to questions which describe specific threat situations. These questions are phrased in a way which requires the respondents to put themselves in the situation and carefully consider the correct answer. The choice concerns one of the indicated courses of action in a specific situation of threat of physical aggression, including threat to life. The simulated circumstances provoke the question of what makes the respondent choose this particular course of action, what are the motives, reasons or incentives for making a particular decision? Under such circumstances, the choice of a specific course of action may stem from some established reasons or intents. It may also be inspired by anger or desire, which make the respondent lose control over the decision to choose a particular course of action. Nevertheless, every person has some (larger or smaller) set of moral values, of assimilated ethical standards applicable within a given society. These include universal values and principles, human instincts, reactions, feelings and moral attitudes as well as the predispositions which stem from them. These predispositions are deeply rooted in the mental structure of every “normal” person [2].

The goal of the analysis conducted herein is to gain knowledge on the mental predispositions of young people to counteract physical aggression. This aggression is directed, in one instance, against the respondent with the intent to kill, and in the other, against a bystander (a person unknown to the respondent) with no clear intent. Another goal is to gain knowledge on the direction of changes in the moral awareness of candidates for the Officer Corps of the Polish Armed Forces.

Methodological basis

The analysis conducted herein is supported by results of own research carried out at a military school among 1st year students undergoing basic training. The empirical assessment conducted in 1999 involved 113 people, randomly selected from a population of 180 students. From that sample, 110 duly completed questionnaires were qualified for analysis. The assessment carried out in 2018 involved 136 people, also randomly selected from a population

² The name used to refer to military university students.

of 320 students. 132 properly completed questionnaires were qualified. Characteristics of respondents are presented in Table 1.

The choice of respondents for research was both deliberate and random: first, the population of young people who are beginning their education at a military school was selected deliberately, and then appropriate respondent samples were selected from among this population at random. In view of this technique for selecting respondents for research, the author does not claim that results of said research can be generalised to the overall population of young people in Poland, but only that they can be generalised to military school students – candidates for service in the Officer Corps of the Polish Armed Forces.

The primary research problem, which constitutes the basis for the conducted analysis, was expressed in the form of a general question: To what extent do moral dilemmas of respondents affect decisions to take defensive actions in cases of physical aggression, in one instance directed against the assessed person with the intent to kill, and in another instance directed against a stranger to that person with no clear intent? Within the conducted analysis of empirical data, the author seeks answers to two specific questions (Table 2), while on the basis of selected variables, he intends to verify the accepted research hypotheses (Table 3).

With a view to maintaining the impartiality and anonymity of the conducted research, under comparable conditions, and not exerting any pressure on the respondents, the verbal simulation technique was employed. This was done in the belief that simulation techniques guarantee a high probability of predicting, i.e. representing the decisions taken by humans with respect to real-world actions in difficult and extreme situations. Measuring valour, or honourable and dishonourable defence, using experimental methods with fulfilment of scientific requirements (ensuring repeatability of the base circumstances under which the measurement is taken) is practically impossible. This is because it is difficult to reproduce an attack by an aggressive assailant and assess the effectiveness and ethical qualities of defenders (valour, honourability, dishonourability) by repeating a specific situation for every participant. For this reason, simulation techniques were deemed optimal for estimating the listed referents in terms of effectiveness and ethics, and in the broader context, for the qualitative assessment of decision-making, i.e. the courses of action taken by the particular person or persons in specific threat situations.

To collect empirical data, two anonymous questionnaires were used: K-K'98 (research conducted in 1999) and its modified version K-K'017 (research conducted in 2018). Much like

Table 1. Characteristics of military school students included in the research

Respondent group	Sex		Mean age	Social activity	
	F	M		Yes	No
Students of the Higher Officers' School of Land Forces (n=110)	–	110	20.1	49	61
Students of the Military University of Land Forces (n=132)	23	109	20.2	35	97
Total (n=242)	23	219	20.2	84	158

Source: Own study.

Table 2. Specific research questions

1	What would you do if you were deeply convinced that the aim of another person's aggression is to kill you?
A	I would try to kill the aggressor first.
B	I would anticipate the development of the situation without taking any other countermeasures.
C	I would ask the aggressor to stop, and if this proved ineffective, I would employ mild forms of defence.
D	I am deeply convinced that I am capable of defending myself in a manner which mainly involves restraining the aggressor's movements, and if this proves ineffective, first destroying the aggressor's weapons, then maiming the aggressor, and possibly even killing the aggressor as a last resort, but with no anger.
2	What would you do if you witnessed physical aggression against another person (unknown to you)?
A	I would try to defend that person in a manner consistent with the criteria of valour.
B	I would initiate a fierce counter-attack using any means available.
C	I would always sacrifice myself to defend that person to the best of my ability, while respecting the rules of honourable fighting.
D	I would not defend that person.

Source: Own study.

before modification, the questionnaire consists of two parts. The first part, which serves essential purposes related to assessment, contains twelve questions (statements), distributed randomly in the questionnaire. The questions (statements) contained in the questionnaire simulate, in a descriptive manner, various real-life situations which any given person either has experienced or could experience. In this study, analysis concerned only the empirical data which covers the courses of action taken by respondents in two descriptively simulated situations of threat of physical aggression (Table 2). The second part of the questionnaire contained eight questions pertaining to characteristics of respondents; these questions took into account independent variables, including those listed in Table 3.

It should be added that each of the twelve descriptively simulated situations (circumstances) was assigned four alternative courses of action (behaviours), of which the respondent is meant to choose one. The respondent is supposed to mark the course of action which corresponds to the course of action the respondent would take in the described situations or which is the closest to the course of action the respondent would be liable to take. The conditions created for conducting the assessment guaranteed independence of decision concerning the declared course of action; this decision was preceded by reflection with a sense of responsibility for one's own fate and for the fate of a random bystander. The author believes that, by making a choice with respect to a specific option for defence, the respondent also made a moral choice, a choice between good and evil. Furthermore, it can be assumed, with a high probability, that the declared courses of action in hypothetical threat situations are an indicator of potential reactions of the respondent in real-life events [3, p. 142; 4].

The grounds for the decision to modify the questionnaire were reflections and conclusions from previous research. These include conclusions from the comparative analysis of the bravery of Polish police officers, based on research employing the KK'98 questionnaire (created

Table 3. Research hypotheses and variables

Research hypotheses	
1.	The moral construct of decisions concerning the manner of defence in situations of threat of physical aggression depends, to a significant extent, on the direction of that aggression (respondent ÷ bystander) and on its purpose.
2.	Military school students, despite generational change (1999-2018), prefer, in terms of morality, comparable decisions concerning the manner of defence in situations of threat of physical aggression.
3.	The experience of respondents stemming from social activity differentiates them, to a significant extent, in terms of morality of decisions concerning defensive actions.
Variables	
A	<i>Dependent variables:</i> the course of action declared by the respondent in simulated situations of threats of physical aggression – moral fluctuation of decisions related to defending oneself vs defending an unknown person.
B	<i>Independent variables:</i> students 1999÷2018, direction of aggression (respondent ÷ bystander), aim of aggression (killing ÷ unspecified), social activity ÷ social passivity.

Source: Own study.

by Kalina and Kałużny) conducted by Kałużny in 1999 [5] and the assessment of that characteristic conducted by Kałużny and Płaczek [6]. A more detailed description of the structure of the questionnaire can be found in publications [7; 8]. Transformation of statements (questions) used for assessment from the K-K'98 questionnaire and evaluation of adequacy of new statements were performed, using the Delphi method, by three competent judges. The judges confirmed that these criteria were met with respect to the descriptively simulated situations. The essence of modification was a shift from a five-point scale (0;1;2;3;4) to a four-point scale (0;1;2;3) based on criteria of mixed assessments – praxeological and ethical. After the modified K-K'017 questionnaire was assessed by competent judges, it was subjected to validation to confirm its qualities of reliability [9; 10]. The positive recommendation of the research tool by competent judges, confirmed through validation, enables comparative analysis of the collected material. It should be added that reconstruction did not cover the questions which are the subject matter of the analysis.

The author believes that the respondents' choice of actions categorised in this manner is understandable for researchers familiar with the mixed assessments methodology. This is because the declared actions are differentiated in accordance with the following assessment criteria: "effective – ethical (*honourable*)"; "ineffective – ethical (*honourable*)"; "effective – unethical (*dishonourable*)"; "ineffective – unethical (*dishonourable*)" [11]. The main rationale for the need to base the study on this category of activities, on mixed (praxeological and ethical) assessments rather than just praxeological assessments, is the pervasive brutalisation of interdisciplinary relationships. It is worth noting that mixed assessments in human activities were pioneered by Tadeusz Kotarbiński, the creator of modern praxeology. He believed that the highest value should be ascribed to those actions which are not only effective, but also consistent with the universal criteria of humanistic values. He formulated the concept of "courage", filling it with a description whose content is saturated with qualities related to effectiveness and ethics [12].

To simplify statistical analysis, each criterion for assessment of actions was assigned a corresponding numerical indicator (3;2;1;0). The scores assigned to the declared courses of action

should be interpreted as follows: 3 – actions that are both effective and ethical; 2 – actions that are ineffective, but ethical; 1 – actions that are effective, but unethical; 0 – actions that are both ineffective and unethical. A score of zero thus indicates passivity, i.e. no reaction to the threat. Failure to take any action in the analysed cases of threat is deemed as utterly reprehensible both in terms of effectiveness and in terms of ethics [13]. A score of three was assigned to actions which are characterised by outstanding moral qualities and at the same time promise high effectiveness. The conversion of actions declared by the respondents into scores was done using a prepared codification key.

Analysis of empirical data, in addition to distribution of mixed assessments, took into account the phenomenon of stability of declared actions – fulfilment (in this case) of identical criteria in two descriptively simulated situations. And so, declarations of “effective – ethical” actions were considered an empirical indicator of “valour” (a specific form of courage). This is because the primary criterion defining the actions of valorous persons is that they make no provocation on their part, give the aggressor the opportunity to strike first and use countermeasures adequate with respect to the threat [14]. On the other hand, declarations of ethical actions in the analysed situations of threat of physical aggression (regardless of their expected effectiveness) were assumed to be an empirical indicator of “honourable defence”. This is because intervening, with no obligation to do so due to occupational role, means that the intervenor is a good, helpful and kind person, regardless of the effectiveness of the intervention [15]. On the other hand, unethical actions in the analysed cases of threat (regardless of their effectiveness) were deemed an indicator of “dishonourability”. Dishonourability is equated with a conduct unworthy of a person who meets the minimum standard of moral recognition [16].

In this article, the accepted categories of actions – “valour”, “honourable defence” and “dishonourability” – are considered with respect to the overall population of participating military school students, the samples from 1999 and from 2018, and respondents taking into account their social activity or passivity³. No separate samples (males and females) were distinguished in the analysis of declared actions due to the fact that in 1999, the percentage of women among military school students was so low that no women were drawn into the studied sample. In addition, the formal requirements for military service for men and women are comparable. The analysis of empirical data makes use of percentages and significance of differences – in confidence intervals (0.05÷0.001) – based on percentage indexes between independent samples.

Results

In a simulated situation of threat of physical aggression against the respondent with intent to kill, countermeasures classified as “honourable” were declared by 68.2% of participants. Within this percentage, 57% of actions were both effective and ethical, while 11.2% of actions were ineffective, but ethical. On the other hand, in case of simulated aggression against another person unknown to the respondent, with no clear intent, countermeasures characterised by “honourable” traits were declared by 45.4% participants. This includes 13.2% of actions that are both effective and ethical and 32.2% of actions that are ethical, but ineffective (Table 4). Inverted percentages – which is a logical consequence – were observed for

³ The forms of activity disclosed by the respondents in the part of the questionnaire which pertained to their characteristics.

declarations of actions classified as “dishonourable”: 31.8% in case of physical aggression directed against the respondent with the intent to kill and 54.6% in case of physical aggression against another person unknown to the respondent, with no clear intent.

For the analysed situations of threats of physical aggression, significant differences in declared defensive actions were identified. In case of physical aggression against the respondent carrying the threat of death, actions characterised by traits classified as “honourable” are much more common than actions characterised by traits classified as “dishonourable”. On the other hand, in case of declared defence with respect to a threat of physical aggression against a bystander, with no clear intent, the majority of respondents preferred actions characterised by traits classified as “dishonourable” (Table 4).

Comparing the empirical data of students of the Higher Officers’ School of Land Forces and students of the Military University of Land Forces, it can be concluded that in case of a simulated attack against the respondent with intent to kill, there are significant differences between individual samples with respect to percentages of declared courses of action (Table 4).

Table 4. Percentage of students declaring a specific course of action in two simulated situations of threat of physical aggression

Mixed assessments		Students of the Higher Officers’ School of Land Forces (n=110)		Students of the Military University of Land Forces (n=132)		Difference between percentages	Total (N=242)	
		n/%	n/%	n/%	%		n/%	
“physical attack against the respondent with intent to kill”								
“effective – ethical”	honourable	54/49.1	70 63.7%	84/63.7	95 72.0%	14.6*	138/57.0	165 68.2%
“ineffective – ethical”		16/14.6		11/8.3		6.3	27/11.2	
“effective – unethical”	dishonourable	36/32.7	40 36.3%	23/17.4	37 28.0%	15.3*	59/24.4	77 31.8%
“ineffective – unethical”		4/3.6		14/10.6		7.0	18/7.4	
“physical aggression against another (unknown) person, with no clear intent”								
“effective – ethical”	honourable	7/6.4	28 25.5%	25/18.9	82 62.1%	12.5*	32/13.2	110 45.4%
“ineffective – ethical”		21/19.1		57/43.2		24.1***	78/32.2	
“effective – unethical”	dishonourable	79/71.8	82 74.5%	48/36.4	50 37.9%	35.4***	127/52.5	132 54.6%
“ineffective – unethical”		3/2.7		2/1.5		1.2	5/2.1	

* p<0.05; *** p<0.001

Source: Own study.

In this analysed case, the difference in percentages of effective and ethical actions is statistically significant at $p < 0.05$. A difference at the same confidence level was identified also for actions that are effective, but unethical. With respect to ethical assessment of defensive actions, but also with respect to their effectiveness, students of the Military University of Land Forces achieved more favourable results compared to students of the Higher Officers' School of Land Forces.

In case of physical aggression against a person unknown to the respondent, with no clear intent, the declared defensive actions also exhibit differences between students of the Higher Officers' School of Land Forces and students of the Military University of Land Forces (Table 4). A statistically significant difference at a confidence level of $p < 0.05$ was identified for declarations of effective and ethical actions, while differences at a confidence level of $p < 0.001$ were observed for declarations of actions that are ineffective but ethical and actions that are effective but unethical. Also in this case, with respect to both ethics and effectiveness, students of the Military University of Land Forces achieved more favourable results compared to students of the Higher Officers' School of Land Forces.

Empirical data was also analysed taking into account the variable of "social activity and passivity of respondents" (Table 5). In this respect, in case of a physical attack against the respondent with intent to kill, actions characterised by traits classified as "honourable" were declared by a slightly higher percentage of socially passive students (69.0%) compared to socially active students (66.7%). Naturally, the percentages of actions classified as "honourable"

Table 5. Percentage of students who are socially active and passive declaring a specific course of action in two simulated situations of threat of physical aggression

Mixed assessments		Socially active (n=84)		Socially passive (n=158)		Difference between percentages	Total (N=242)	
		n/%	n/%	n/%	n/%		%	n/%
"physical attack against the respondent with intent to kill"								
"effective – ethical"	honourable	45/53.6	56 66.7%	93/58.9	109 69.0%	5.3	138/57.0	165 68.2%
"ineffective – ethical"		11/13.1		16/10.1			27/11.2	
"effective – unethical"	dishonourable	24/28.6	28 33.3%	35/22.1	49 31.0%	6.5	59/24.4	77 31.8%
"ineffective – unethical"		4/4.7		14/8.9			18/7.4	
"physical aggression against another (unknown) person, with no clear intent"								
"effective – ethical"	honourable	8/9.5	35 41.7%	24/15.2	82 62.1%	5.7	32/13.2	110 45.4%
"ineffective – ethical"		27/32.2		51/32.3			78/32.2	
"effective – unethical"	dishonourable	49/58.3	49 58.3%	78/49.4	50 37.9%	8.9	127/52.5	132 54.6%
"ineffective – unethical"		–/–		5/3.1			5/2.1	

Source: Own study.

correlate with “dishonourable” actions. Thus, a slightly higher percentage (2.3% more) of socially active respondents declared actions considered “dishonourable” compared to socially passive respondents. In case of a simulated physical aggression against another person unknown to the respondent, with no clear intent, actions aimed at defending that person classified as “honourable” were also declared by a higher percentage of socially passive respondents (47.5%) compared to socially active respondents (41.7%). Consequently, declarations of actions classified as “dishonourable” were characterised by inverted percentages, with 58.3% of socially active respondents and 52.5% of socially passive respondents. However, these differences are not statistically significant. What distinguishes socially active students is the fact that none of them declared an action that is both ineffective and unethical, i.e. passivity in the situation where another (unknown) person is threatened with physical aggression. On the other hand, in the sample of socially passive students, such actions were declared by 3.1% of respondents (Table 5).

Analysis of empirical data was also performed through stability of declared actions, i.e. determination whether actions were consistent in both cases of threat of physical aggression. On the basis of the accepted assessment criteria, it can be concluded that 12.1% of students of the Military University of Land Forces meet the conditions to be called “valorous”. This percentage is much higher compared to the sample of students of the Higher Officers’ School of Land Forces, in which the percentage of persons who consistently preferred actions that are both effective and ethical in both threat situations was only 3.6% (Table 6). These differences are not statistically significant. Differences at a confidence level of $p < 0.001$ were observed between comparable samples of students who declared actions characteristic for persons called “honourable defenders”, i.e. persons who in both threat situations declared ethical actions, regardless of their effectiveness. The percentage of such persons was 45.5% for the sample of students of the Military University of Land Forces and 28.8% for the sample of students of the Higher Officers’ School of Land Forces. A much higher percentage of persons who declared actions deemed “dishonourable”, i.e. unethical, was identified for

Table 6. Percentages of students whose actions indicate valour, honourability and dishonourability

Mixed assessments	Students of the Higher Officers’ School of Land Forces		Students of the Military University of Land Forces		Difference between percentages	Total (N=242)	
	n=110	%	n=132	%		n	%
“valour”							
“effective – ethical”	4	3.6	16	12.1	8.5	20	8.3
“honourable defence”							
“ethical – effective, ineffective”	24	21.8	60	45.5	23.7***	84	34.7
“dishonourability”							
“unethical – effective, ineffective”	36	32.7	17	12.9	19.8**	53	21.9

** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Source: Own study.

the sample of students of the Higher Officers' School of Land Forces (32.7%) compared to the sample of students of the Military University of Land Forces (12.9%). The differences between individual samples of students for this category of defensive actions are significant at a confidence level of $p < 0.01$.

Comparing the samples of socially active and passive respondents (Table 7) in terms of consistency of declared actions in the analysed threat situations, it can be concluded that a higher percentage of persons classified as "valorous" was identified for socially passive (8.9%) than socially active (7.1%) participants. The percentage of persons who meet the criteria to be called "honourable defenders" was also higher for the sample of socially passive respondents (35.4%) compared to the sample of socially active respondents (33.3%). On the other hand, the percentage of persons whose declared actions allow them to be called "dishonourable" was lower in the sample of socially active respondents (20.2%) and higher in the sample of socially passive respondents (22.8%). The differences identified in the analysed categories of actions are minimal, within the margin of error.

Table 7. Percentages of socially active and passive students whose actions indicate valour, honourability and dishonourability

Mixed assessments	Socially active		Socially passive		Difference between percentages	Total (N=242)	
	n=84	%	n=158	%		n	%
"valour"							
"effective – ethical"	6	7.1	14	8.9	1.8	20	8.3
"honourable defence"							
"ethical – effective, ineffective"	28	33.3	56	35.4	2.1	84	34.7
"dishonourability"							
"unethical – effective, ineffective"	17	20.2	36	22.8	2.6	53	21.9

Source: Own study.

Practical applications

The formulated goal of the analysis and the accepted hypotheses constitute the guiding thought for the discussion on results of the research in the context of practical applications. On the basis of empirical data, it can be concluded that in a situation of threat of physical aggression, the morality of decisions concerning the manner of defensive actions is determined by the direction of that aggression (respondent, another person) and its intent. When the threat is directed against the respondent and its intent is to kill, nearly 70% of participants declare counteractions that are not always effective, but are always ethical (honourable). Conversely, over 30% declare actions which, even under intuitive assessment, are unlikely to be considered moral. However, in a situation of threat where the intent of aggression is unknown and the aggression is directed against another person, with whom the respondent is not familiar, decisions concerning the countermeasures are considerably different. In this case, ethical qualities can be ascribed to decisions concerning defensive actions made by

a little over 45% of respondents. Nearly 55% of respondents declare actions that do not deserve social approval. Significant (confidence level $p < 0.001$) differences were identified between the percentages of honourable, i.e. ethical, actions declared by respondents in self-defence and in defence of another (unknown) person. It can therefore be concluded that the accepted hypothesis stating that the morality of decisions concerning the manner of defence depends on the direction of aggression (respondent ÷ another – unknown – person) and its intent is completely justified.

What, in turn, is revealed by the comparative analysis of actions taken by students of the Higher Officers' School of Land Forces (1999) and students of the Military University of Land Forces (2018)? The accepted hypothesis states that military school students, despite generational change (1999-2018), prefer morally comparable defensive decisions in circumstances of threat of physical aggression. Unfortunately, the hypothesis formulated in this manner was not fully confirmed. Significant differences were identified between percentages of honourable actions, i.e. defence based on moral principles, as well as percentages of dishonourable – contemptible, evil, vile – actions. Actions classified as “honourable” are preferred by a higher percentage of students of the Military University of Land Forces compared to students of the Higher Officers' School of Land Forces. This is true both for the situation where aggression is directed against the respondent with intent to kill and the situation where aggression is directed against another (unknown) person with no clear intent. It is, however, undeniable that at this stage of research, it is difficult to find a clear reason for the positive, statistically insignificant yet visible, changes in the mental attitudes of the 2018 officer candidates. It is the author's belief that these changes can be justifiably linked to the progressing process of humanisation of the young generation and the fact that it has grown up in an environment of broadly understood pluralism.

The analysis of empirical data also took into account independent variables “social activity ÷ social passivity” as those that co-determine the morality of decisions regarding the courses of action taken in situations of threat of physical aggression. In the analysed case, however, the accepted hypothesis that the experience of respondents related to social activity differentiates them in a significant manner in terms of morality of decisions concerning defensive actions was not confirmed. This is because empirical data indicates that a higher (albeit to a minimal extent) percentage of those who declared actions classified as “honourable” was observed for socially passive respondents, both in the situation where defence against a threat of physical aggression concerned the respondent personally, and in the situation where said defence concerned another person unknown to the respondent. Although in this case the experience of respondents related to their social activity does not directly translate to an increased number of declarations of manners of defence against an aggressive assailant classified as “honourable”, this does not mean that social activity has no positive effect on a person's behaviour⁴. It is the author's belief that social activity, helping others and experiences related thereto are an accurate predictor of actions that are both effective and ethical in situations of various threats, not only of threat of physical aggression [7; 8; 17, p. 116-8]. The positive effect of social activity on the internal transformation of a person stems, among

⁴ The fact that there are no visible differences in actions classified as “honourable” on the part of socially active respondents also stems from the fact that there are significant differences in this respect between the 1999 students and the 2018 students. In the analysed case, however, respondents were divided into active and passive regardless of the period when the assessment was conducted, while the percentage of socially active persons was 45% for the 1999 students and 26% for the 2018 students. This is likely the reason for the lack of clear difference in honourable actions on the part of socially active respondents.

others, from the fact that undertaken activities reveal the traits of a person's nature dependent on heredity and upbringing as well as the environment and culture in which the person grew up [1], while orientation towards a specific kind of activity, in this case social activity, reinforces, perfects and ennobles that person's inner predispositions.

The distinguished categories of stability of actions (valour, honourable defence, dishonourability) are an empirically accurate verifier of the morality of decisions concerning defensive actions in situations of threat of physical aggression, which are made under the pressure of the given situation and time, but also under the influence of established moral values. By choosing the specific course of action, consistent for all simulated threat situations, the respondent simultaneously makes a moral choice, a choice between good and evil. Good, not only in this case, is the most perfect motivator of moral action of any person, the realisation of virtues coded in that person to do noble, or even heroic, deeds. Analysis making use of the mechanism of stability of actions makes apparent the significance of two very important criteria distinguished in the definition of valour – effectiveness and morality. Fulfilling both these criteria simultaneously is a necessary condition to achieve the goals of defensive fight in an optimal manner. A good example of defensive fight – a “life and death” situation – which includes both physical and mental preparation is the story of the duel between David and the undefeated Goliath, found in the Old Testament [18: 17, 34-35]. In the face of a bone-chilling, dangerous and uncertain situation involving a great risk to him, but above all to all the people of Israel, he made a choice by standing on the side of good. Before the duel, David was confident in his physical abilities, but he was also well-prepared ethically, he did not seek revenge, he did not take pleasure in defeating Goliath, he took up the fight in the conviction of his responsibility for the fate of the people of Israel and other warriors.

Our respondents – officer candidates – are naturally not expected to display valour matching that of the biblical David. It can, however, be presumed that social expectations concerning their moral preferences are much higher than less than 35% of persons declaring actions which bear the hallmarks of honourable defence and nearly 22% preferring actions classified as dishonourable. One can take solace in the fact that the direction of changes is positive, as evidenced by the data from 2018 (Table 6). Actions bearing the hallmarks of honourable defence were declared by over 45% of students assessed in 2018, while actions classified as dishonourable were declared by less than 13%. The author believes that by performing an analysis of empirical data concerning military school students that takes into account praxeological and ethical issues, he is drawing attention to very important contemporary social issues: issues related to ethical preferences of candidates for service in the Officer Corps of the Polish Armed Forces. Considering only students of the Military University of Land Forces, 13% prefer actions classified as dishonourable. This begs the question: is it “only” 13% or “as many as” 13%? And another question: is it possible to re-profile (change) their mental preferences over the five-year training period? It can be assumed that data which would make it possible to answer these questions at least partially can be provided by further research, including panel studies.

To sum up the analysis of the cited empirical data, given the existence of press reports describing the not always professional conduct of members of uniformed services, perhaps it would be worthwhile to think about and consider paying more attention when selecting the candidates for these formations. To not focus only on physical fitness, intellectual development and mental health, but also verify moral values. This is because even though service in such formations, including the army, is voluntary, difficult, sometimes extreme, situations in the course of service happen all too often and are not subject to choice. At the same time,

the requirement to act in an effective and honourable, i.e. consistent with the principle of ethics, manner in situations where the opponent treats moral standards instrumentally (as is generally the case) prompts those who uphold the law and order to be equally, or even more, instrumental in their treatment of these standards. In such cases, only those that are physically fit, but above all those with firmly established inner values, such as good, honour, empathy, kindness and human dignity, are able to neutralise the situational influences and associated stress, control their emotions and abide by ethical standards [19].

Conclusions

Conducting research on moral dilemmas of decisions concerning defensive actions in situations of threat of physical aggression requires knowledge from many fields, in particular sociology, psychology, praxeology and ethics. Theoretical basis for tackling such issues is provided by agonology, initiated by Kotarbiński and the Polish school of praxeology. It highlighted honourable defence as the optimal way to counteract physical aggression. The conducted detailed analysis of empirical data enabled verification of accepted hypotheses and articulate, among others, the following conclusions:

- Making decisions concerning actions that are both effective and ethical in situations of threat of physical aggression depends on whom this aggression is directed against (*respondent, bystander*) and on its intent.
- In the process of recruitment to military schools, when selecting candidates, it is advisable to apply the same importance to assessment of both physical and ethical predispositions.
- Social activity of young people is an important component of shaping moral and ethical qualities (*although this article does not prove it directly*), and therefore should be an important criterion for selecting candidates for military schools.
- Given the mental differences in defensive preferences of participating students, the university environment should create conditions for acquiring and establishing socially desirable predispositions marked by ethical values. According to psychologists, specific environmental variables can trigger, inhibit and alter certain actions, regardless of the predispositions of the acting person [20].
- To enable a more detailed assessment of student predispositions in terms of effectiveness and ethics, further research is indicated.

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Conflict of interests

The author declared no conflict of interests.


Author contributions

The author contributed to the interpretation of results and writing of the paper. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Ethical statement

The research complies with all national and international ethical requirements.

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Biographical note

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at the University of Lower Silesia in Wrocław, post of Professor. Vice-Dean for Scientific Affairs of the Faculty of Management (2016-2017) at the then Higher Officers' School of Land Forces. His research interests are focused on issues related to preparation of persons to act (behave) in situations of external threats, on factors which co-determine the manner of command (decision-making) in difficult situations, on conditions of interpersonal security and on types of a person's activities as a determinant of that person's courage. He has authored over 120 scientific publications, including 4 monographs, such as the one published in 2020 titled *Działania człowieka w sytuacjach zagrożeń zewnętrznych innych ludzi (Human actions in situations of external threats to other people)*; he has also authored numerous research projects. He has co-organised and actively participated in numerous scientific conferences.

Moralne dylematy decyzji obrony w sytuacjach zagrożeń agresją fizyczną – analiza porównawcza 1999 i 2018

STRESZCZENIE

Autor w niniejszym tekście interpretuje wyniki badań dotyczące moralnych dylematów podejmowanych decyzji, co do sposobów obrony przed agresją fizyczną. Agresją, w jednym przypadku skierowaną na respondenta z zamiarem pozbawienia go życia, w drugim na osobę postronną bez wyraźnie określonego zamiaru. Badaniami realizowanymi przez autora zarówno w roku 1999, jak i w roku 2018 objęto studentów uczelni wojskowej z I roku studiów (okres szkolenia podstawowego). Przeprowadzona analiza porównawcza danych empirycznych uprawnia autora do stwierdzenia, że moralność decyzji dotyczących działań obronnych w sytuacjach zagrożeń agresją fizyczną zależy przede wszystkim od tego, na kogo została skierowana owa agresja (respondent, osoba postronna) oraz od jej natężenia. Daje również podstawy do postawienia tezy, że na przestrzeni lat 1999-2018 nastąpiła pozytywna zmiana w świadomości moralnej kandydatów do korpusu oficerów Wojska Polskiego.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE moralność, decyzje, zagrożenia, agresja fizyczna, szlachetność

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