Psychological Factors Post Military Aircrew Selection: A Clinical Perspective

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Military aircrews undergo rigorous psychological and medical testing during the selection process. This paper discusses information gained from aircrew who have been referred for clinical psychological evaluation for four main reasons: i) fear of flying (FOF), ii) loss of motivation to fly/failing aviator syndrome, iii) traumatic experiences such as an ejection or Prisoner of War (POW) experience, and iv) psychological factors affecting medical conditions such as those in musculoskeletal disorders. Projective evaluation using Rorschach indicated different patterns of emotional and perceptual responses in referred clinical and non-clinical aircrew groups. Aeronautical adaptability which consists of flying ability, emotional stability and motivation to fly are characteristics which have to be considered when designing new selection tests with high predictive validity. Inputs from pilots who undergo evaluation in the mid career stage can help delineate important and relevant psychological characteristics which need to be screened at the aircrew selection stage.

Keywords: Fear of flying, motivation, ejection, POW experience

Adaptability for military aviation is a complex issue, which involves motivation to fly, ability to fly, and psychological/emotional suitability (Jones & Marsh, 2001). Clinical assessment has to include the understanding of these three facets. Motivation involves the desire to fly. Ability involves various physical, cognitive, autonomic, neurophysiological, and psychological attributes. These include spatial perception, mental calculations, suppression of emotional reaction to emergent situations in favor of analysis and correct action, psychomotor skills and alertness to a wide variety of sensory inputs along with an accurate filter that screens out stimuli of no aeronautical importance. Matters relating to personality, attitudes and interpersonal relationships comprise stability. A balance of these capabilities is necessary to fly safely and well.

These attributes encompass maturity, attentiveness, perception, anticipation and judgment to make correct decisions related to flying; and the hardness and resilience to endure prolonged stressors in the flying career. It must be noted that the reference point here is not just clinical absence of organic/medical/neuropsychiatric conditions. What the system needs is a safe and effective pilot in the cockpit. Therefore, the reference should be a fully healthy and functional pilot who is likely to perform the required occupational role within the best of his abilities.

Military aircrew undergo rigorous psychological and medical testing during the selection process. Throughout the length of their career their medical category affects their present and future occupational role and status. Inputs from pilots who undergo evaluation in the mid career stage can help delineate important and relevant psychological characteristics which need to be screened at the aircrew selection stage.