

## THE MENTAL HEALTH OF BORDER SOLDIERS

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### Abstract

The conditions of this assignment mission were often uncontrollable and unsafe, leaving soldiers frustrated and predicted to experience post-traumatic stress disorder. This research aims to provide an overview of the psychological perspective of Indonesian National Armed Forces soldiers who serve at national borders. The research design uses a qualitative approach using problem research procedures. Semi-structured interviews were conducted by digging up information orally about experiences open and closed problems—information analysis using the Colaizzi method. The validity of the information was carried out by re-confirming the respondent to determine the suitability of the information with the transcript, conducting re-discussions with the research team in order to obtain a narrative that was in accordance with the respondent's experience. We found four themes and three sub-themes related to the mental problems of border soldiers. The themes encountered were Feeling honoured to be given a task, Priority, Ready to carry out tasks, and Ways to cope with stress. The sub-themes are related to priorities, namely tasks or family, work or family, and sad to leave the family. Future research could be directed towards identifying potential discouragement in servicemen during service life. In addition, it was knowing the potential power of family support during the service of the soldier.

### Introduction

The military is exposed to various stressor events as part of their military training and work assignments. Several studies have identified symptoms of common mental disorders (CMD) due to poor coping (Muschalla et al., 2018; Williamson et al., 2019). Psychological stress and pressure are related to age, education, income, lifestyle, job characteristics, physical activity, and psychological environment. Several studies have shown that they experience isolation, ambiguity, helplessness, boredom, and danger/threat during an assigned mission.

Active-duty military personnel was found to have poorer mental and physical health than veterans and reserve personnel. The conditions of these assignments were often uncontrollable and unsafe, which made soldiers frustrated and predicted to experience post-traumatic stress disorder (Raju, 2014; Sharma, 2015).

The border army is one of the elite troops that often requires its members to operate alone or in small teams, relatively isolated from support so that they have a higher degree of stress than the army in general but are still required to focus and have high motivation (Olinover et al., 2021).

When military personnel is deployed for military operations across national borders, they face a high risk of physical injury and an increased risk of shocking their mental health. The increased risk of mental health is mainly due to the dangers of war, exposure to combat: shooting guns, roadside bombs, seeing fellow soldiers, friends, civilians, and enemies injured, maimed or killed, leadership factors, work rhythm, risk of death, and risk of sexual harassment. These experiences can cause severe mental stress and adversely affect mental health (Barnett et al., 2021)

Several studies have shown that the Indonesian National Army experienced problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping due to dealing with official situations without the family's presence and conditions at the office. Soldiers experience severe pressure to leave their wives at home and live in conflict-affected service areas without their wives. However, they have ways to maintain intense communication with the bereaved families and regularly try to maximize time to meet the family in person, for example, seeking leave. This is different from previous research, which found that American soldiers serving in Europe made several attempts to reduce stressors that arise during their service, such as the use of alcohol.

Indonesian soldiers who have good coping will feel life is more meaningful such as having great self-esteem and getting used to retirement. Soldiers with good coping, cognitive restructuring, and religious values will have satisfaction in life. Meanwhile, coping efforts related to the character are predictors of increasing psychological health. The state of adaptive coping in soldiers can be inversely proportional when soldiers cannot reach a state of well-being, so they have a maladaptive attitude. A maladaptive attitude can be felt by soldiers when carrying out military operations, which are indicated in mild to severe types. Mild maladaptive attitudes can be experienced by female soldiers when sent to the battlefield by displaying an attitude of smoking, alcohol consumption, unable to sleep again, to bulimia (Kheokao et al., 2018; Rodriguez et al., 2020).

Research in some countries confirms concerns about negative attitudes shown by soldiers on duty, such as alcohol abuse, reduced performance by hindering skills, lack of vigilance at work (Waller et al., 2015). On the

other hand, Indonesian soldiers face insomnia, rudeness, irritability, often remember traumatic experiences, cannot maintain good bonds between personnel, commit violence, and become heavy smokers (Brown et al., 2013; Huang et al., 2021; Mustriwi, 2015).

Psychological problems in soldiers who do not get immediate action will become more severe, such as suicide attempts. Some research has shown that military suicide attempts occur after long deployment periods in conflict areas (Sadler et al., 2021; Ursano et al., 2017).

Research on soldiers with psychological problems due to the spread of culture in the military is mainly tried quantitatively. Some research suggests that soldiers face psychological problems such as mental stress to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after being sent to conflict areas. On the other hand, this research tries to identify potential mental problems as primary data qualitatively. There is still little research that explores mental problems in soldiers during assignments in national border areas.

The position of health workers can be tested with primary deterrence efforts to obtain accurate information regarding cases regarding soldiers on the battlefield. Early assessment of the psychological condition of army soldiers is related to the duties of health workers as educators and assessments to use as a basis for implementing innovations to improve adaptive coping of border soldiers.

## Purpose

This research aims to provide an overview of the psychological perspective of Indonesian National Armed Forces soldiers serving at national borders.

## Method

The research design uses a qualitative approach using problem research procedures that focus on reviewing the problem at a time, with a special place. Problem research aims to describe a uniform problem. This research is intended to discuss the psychological state of soldiers on the Indonesian border who survived in a few circumstances. The inclusion criteria in this

research are Representatives of the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) on duty at the Indonesian border; Participants can speak efficiently, are Willing to be an informant, in physical and spiritual condition, no complications from psychological diseases, Age 20-40 years.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by digging up information orally about experiences with open and closed problems to create themes—data from interviews combined with observations and audio recordings. We used an interview guide developed from psychological well-being theory which was adapted to the psychological state of soldiers while carrying out their duties. This instrument has been tested for validity by three psychological experts and language. Analysis of information using the Colaizzi method, which begins with the preparation of a transcript based on the results of audio recordings. Coding to maintain the confidentiality of the informants and make it easier to review the results of the data. Next, the researcher extracted the transcript according to the statement points and adjusted the theme. The researcher categorizes the statements into sub-themes so as to produce a theme structure. In the end, the researcher validates and equates the description results.

The validity of the information was carried out by re-confirming the respondent to determine the suitability of the information with the transcript, conducting re-discussions with the research team in order to obtain a narrative that was in accordance with the respondent's experience. The researcher also re-confirmed the notes written during the interview containing the results of observations and track records. We protect the purity of information as a reflection of the results of information used in the same situation or position setting with different periods.

## Results

This research was conducted on the border of Indonesia and Papua New Guinea, which is located in the Kiwirok district and the Towe Hitam village. This border area is in the middle of mountains and forests, so it can only be accessed by helicopter. Soldiers in these two command posts are tasked with guarding state borders and markers, safeguarding the

sovereignty of the Indonesian state from separatist groups, preventing illegal logging, and assisting health facilities in the two villages. In carrying out their duties, each team consists of a commander and members. There are several team members who have skills in the field of health.

The first participant is 23 years old, unmarried, comes from Banyuwangi, East Java, and Joined the Kostrad four years ago. This participant served as a member of the team. New participants were first assigned to guard the border through elections. Participants leave their parents who are in East Java. Participants view that this is a state duty that must be carried out even though there is fear because it is the first time working in Papua. Participants served in the Kiwirok district for six months. Participants said they were afraid that their parents were sick or died while on duty.

The second participant is 34 years old, married, and has a daughter. They are currently serving as a member of the health on-duty squad in the Towe Hitam district. This was the first time that the participants were assigned to the border because they had previously served in West Papua. Participants have completed Nursing diploma education before being assigned to the border. The participant leaves behind his wife, who is continuing her studies while working in a hospital, and a daughter who is seven years old. Participants feel heavy because their children are currently being cared for by neighbours. A few days ago, participants contacted their wives and children, but their children did not want to talk to participants because they had been away for too long. In addition, the nanny said that his wife fell asleep due to exhaustion after finishing college and continuing to work. Participants feel confused about what to do because they have two responsibilities at the same time, namely carrying out state orders but their families also need them.

The third participant is 29 years old comes from Ternate, North Maluku. Has been a member of the Indonesian Army National Army since 2012 but was first assigned to the border between Indonesia and Papua New Guinea. Initially, the participants thought that they would be stationed on the main border of Skow, but it turned out to be on duty in a Towe Hitam r located in the mountains. The participants were afraid because

they had heard before the deployment that there was a war with a separatist group. When they were about to leave for work, participants cried because they had to leave their wife and one-year-old child. In addition, participants felt guilty because when their child was born, participants were on duty. Participants were afraid when they were going back, and their children did not recognize it. Participants only hope that their children and wives are in good health.

The fourth participant, 26 years old, came from Southeast Sulawesi. While leaving for duty at the border, his father died. However, participants must still leave because this is a state order. In addition, if they don't go, the participants will lose the opportunity because the soldiers on duty at the border are the best soldiers who have passed the selection process. Participants hoped that, after returning to the headquarters, they would make a pilgrimage to the graves of their father and mother.

#### A. Honoured to be given an duty

Soldiers feel honoured when assigned to guard the country's defence. Being part of the frontier soldier is referred to as being part of a special elite force that is strictly selected by the assessment team at headquarters. While on duty, these soldiers are the first line in maintaining the country's defence even though there are risks that must be accepted while on duty. Many benefits are obtained when assigned to the border, namely increasing self-confidence, increasing experience as a human and a soldier, getting additional or income allowances. Soldiers assigned to the border as elite troops are soldiers who have performed well both on duty at headquarters and during previous assignments. Some of the expressions that were said by the participants were as follows;

*I am very proud of my assignment this time, to be a part of national security (first participant)*

*I am very proud of the achievements in my career, being able to be part of the elite troops of the Indonesian National Army (second participant)*

*I feel very happy for being the best among my friends for my assignment this time (third participant)*

*I felt the best in performance while at headquarters, so I was assigned (fourth participant)*

#### B. Priority

##### Occupation or family

Prioritizing between family or assignment is something often experienced by soldiers. For soldiers who are married, have children, and have a wife they often don't have the heart to leave them. As for those who are not married, they often feel heavy if they have to leave their parents. Giving understanding to wives and parents may be possible and understandable, but it becomes difficult when it comes to providing understanding for children. This becomes a burden in itself and is filled with longing when carrying out duties at the border.

##### Duty or family

The feeling of confusion to place oneself as a soldier and the head of the household is often experienced by soldiers. With the order for assignment at the border, soldiers must always be ready without exception. But on the other hand, families, especially children, still need assistance. Some of the information presented is as follows;

*I still think about my son to this day. Often I stare at the photos stored on my gadget. Sometimes I cry without realizing it. It's because I miss it. (first participant)*

*When I arrived in Papua and was told that I would continue my journey by helicopter, I thought I couldn't contact my family because there was no telephone signal. I think about many things, what if my child is sick, what if my wife is sick?. This is still bothering me. (second participant)*

*I'm just afraid that my son will call me uncle because I left him too long. (third participant)*

*I still feel burdened because I haven't made a pilgrimage to mom and dad's meals. (fourth participant)*

### Sad to leave the family

Feelings of sadness are often felt by soldiers on duty at the border. In addition, the place of duty is in the mountains, far from the nearest city centre or from the area of origin. Considering that the Papua region is a conflict-prone area, it can cause feelings of anxiety in the family. Feelings of sadness are also felt when leaving a small child only with his mother at home, even being cared for by neighbours. The interview excerpt is as follows:

*I am afraid that while on duty, my parents will get sick or die. (first participant)*

*I feel very sad because, at this time, her child is being cared for by a neighbour. A few days ago, I called my wife and son, but my son didn't want to talk to me because he had been away for too long. In addition, the nanny said that my wife fell asleep due to exhaustion after finishing college and continuing to work. (second participant)*

*I was afraid because I had heard before the deployment that there was a war with a separatist group. When I was about to leave for work, I cried because I had to leave my wife and one-year-old child. In addition, I felt guilty because when the child was born, I was on duty. I'm afraid when I'm going back, and my child won't recognize me. (third participant)*

*While leaving for duty at the border, my father died. However, I have to go anyway because this is an order of the state. (fourth participant)*

### C. Ready to run errands

The feeling of being ready to accept orders for assignment should always be on every soldier's mind. This is proof of a soldier's self in devoting himself to the country. Integrity, sincerity, patriotism have been instilled in the mind since taking education. Since education, it has been implanted to prioritize the interests of the state over personal interests because the interests of the state are the interests of many people. In carrying out their duties, every soldier must carry them out with enthusiasm and a sense of responsibility. The following are excerpts of interviews with several participants that can explain these conditions:

*We are the best team, we are the best, and we have been tested. Whenever and wherever we*

*are given a task, we will always be ready (first participant)*

*In this assignment, not everyone can feel the opportunity. We are ready to protect our beloved country, the Republic of Indonesia. (second participant)*

*We will not think long in carrying out this task, and we will return in perfect and healthy condition. (third participant)*

*I think my late parents will be proud of this assignment. My late mother and father gave me a blessing to join the army. This is the first step in my career. So there is no word any to leave the assignment. (fourth participant)*

### D. Ways to deal with stress

Every member of the army feels discomfort in his mind but must be able to find a way to overcome it. This assignment requires readiness and focus. Some of the participants' statements are as follows;

*Feelings of sadness and stress are definitely there, but praying is the most reliable way to keep me focused (first participant)*

*I am always sincere with this task. the sincerity that makes me strong and still able to smile in this assignment. (second participant)*

*This assignment will not take long. We will be replaced with the following teams. I like growing vegetables and tubers. In addition, I often look for wood for cooking. We can sell these vegetables and tubers in the market. When I was at the market, I was able to talk to the villagers. At that moment, my mind became happy and distracted. (third participant)*

*Every afternoon I play volleyball with the locals. My body becomes refreshed, my mind calms down. (fourth participant)*

## DISCUSSION

The initial purpose of this study was to identify the state of the psychological perspective of Indonesian National Armed Forces soldiers who served at national borders. The results of this study found that soldiers who served at the border experienced confusion in placing

themselves between jobs that contained loyalty and, at the same time, family responsibilities. Previous studies have noted the importance of soldier loyalty as a positive emotion that drives cohesion and combat effectiveness. The loyalty of each personal soldier will spread to the loyalty of the group or team. This loyalty will extend to the close professional relationship within the team (Connor et al., 2021). In carrying out their duties, the military requires high loyalty in order to work as a team and produce high task effectiveness.

But on the other hand, when loyal to duty, families are marginalized, and their children can feel the results as several studies mentioned that there is a negative impact on children, adolescents, and families of military personnel in the United States. Children from military families often experience a lot of stress before and during their parents' deployment and when they return home. Without an appropriate mental health support system, children of military personnel may be at a significant disadvantage compared to their counterparts in non-military families (Fianna, 2010).

One of the interesting findings is that although family and fear of serving in conflict-prone areas such as borders are reasons for psychological problems, soldiers have ways of dealing with these problems. The form of coping that makes them psychologically strong is a sense of love for the country, responsibility, obeying the leadership's orders, and trying to use the resources around the place of work or creating a positive atmosphere with the surrounding community to distract negative emotions. In addition, when soldiers mingle with the surrounding community, they feel loved, and there is a sense of belonging and belonging like family.

Surprisingly, servicemen experienced as much negative emotion and positive coping as they could so that they remained focused throughout the assignment. The demands of assignments and family finances can be reasons to stay on duty and be motivated. This result reflects the results of (Bodziany et al., 2020), which also found that the Polish armed forces, police, and fire services have a dual character. On the one hand, financial factors become a motivation to work, and on the other hand, loyalty to institutions can be the main motivation apart

from financial, promotion, and position motivators.

Based on these data, we can conclude that research has shown emotional experiences related to assignments as soldiers serving at national borders. This assignment is associated with an increase in mental health problems. Issues focusing on military mental health, as well as aspects of well-being, including spouse's employment and identification with the military, have shown similar problems among soldiers' spouses/partners and children. However, most military families cope well with the stressors of military life, although some continue to experience negative outcomes related to service life.

This finding can help us to understand that soldiers' mental problems during deployment are very important for intervention. Family support frequent communication with family while on duty are very important. Spiritual support among each soldier in the team is something that must be done. There must be a role model in the team who has experience in family and religion as a mental reinforcement for other team members.

This is an important issue for future research. Several questions remain unanswered at this time, namely the issue of hopelessness and family support while on duty. Future research could be directed towards identifying potential discouragement in servicemen during service life. In addition, it knows the potential strength of family support during the service period.

### Strengths and limitations

This review uses a qualitative approach as primary data to examine how soldiers perceive psychological problems. These findings also complement the policy review and together provide an understanding of the mental problems of servicemen operationalized across sectors and their implications for the ongoing relationship between research and policy.

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