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We are different now? The effect of military service on youth reintegration and employment in South Africa

Neil Kramm and Lindy Heinecken

This study examines how young people who have joined the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) on the two-year Military Skills Development System (MSDS) contract experience military service, and the effect this has on their ability to readapt to civilian life. The first part of the study examines the theoretical debates associated with military socialisation and reintegration into civilian life. Hereafter, the findings are presented in terms of the experiences of MSDS privates serving in the infantry, those that have left, and the perceptions of employment agencies in terms of the marketability of military skills. The conclusion is reached that MSDS members experience their two years in the SANDF as life-changing, that this affects their ability to reintegrate back into civilian society, and that the skills acquired during military training is of limited market value. The conclusion is reached that more needs to be done to assist these young military veterans to adapt to civilian life and to augment their military experience with more marketable skills to enable them to find gainful employment.

Keywords military service, socialisation, veterans, reintegration, employment

Introduction

With the formation of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) in 1994, conscription was replaced by an all-volunteer recruitment system. A flexible service system was introduced that enlisted military personnel on short-, medium- and long-term contracts. The Military Skills Development System (MSDS) evolved out of the short-term contract system and involves employing young people between the ages of 18 and 22 years and graduates up to the age of 26 years for an initial period of two years.¹ The MSDS has the following broad objectives. Firstly, to form part of the larger development plan of the South

African government to alleviate unemployment and to train the youth by providing skills training. Secondly, to rejuvenate the core/regular force of the SANDF by recruiting young people into the system on a regular basis. Thirdly, to bolster the numbers in the Reserve Force to enable the SANDF to achieve numerical and functional flexibility to meet its strategic objectives.²

Accordingly, the MSDS is orientated towards preparing members to access either a military or civilian career. After their contract ends, they either receive a new five-year contract with the SANDF or are placed in the reserves and need to seek civilian employment.³ To place this into context, 39 053 people have been recruited since the MSDS was implemented in January 2003. From this number, 24 586 (63%) have been taken into the SANDF in a full-time capacity, 8 286 (21%) have left the service, of which 6 861 have sought employment in the private sector, and a mere 17% of those who have left have opted to serve in the reserves.⁴ The remainder have withdrawn from the SANDF without completion of their contract for various reasons, such as lack of medical fitness or an inability to fit in with the organisational culture.⁵

The first year entails basic military training that aims to introduce recruits to military culture, platoon weapons, survival training and rifle platoon training, which provides members with the skills to perform mobile warfare. Hereafter, recruits obtain specialised military training in order to deploy in infantry-related roles. During this two-year period, the training that MSDS members receive is centred on acquiring the military skills needed to successfully deploy and engage with enemy forces if need be. Therefore, MSDS education, training and development (ETD) primarily provides the members with military skills such as firearms operation, combat and survival skills necessary for future deployment on missions, physical fitness, and having the right military bearing to be able to function optimally in a combat situation.

To date, little is known in terms of whether the ETD that MSDS members receive is of any value in finding civilian employment, or if these members experience difficulties in adapting to civilian life. To address this, this study looks at the process of military socialisation and how it affects young recruits, before presenting findings on the effect that military socialisation has on MSDS recruits, and how this affects reintegration and the ability to find gainful employment.

Debates on military socialisation and reintegration

To mould civilians into soldiers, recruits have to be exposed to an intensive period of re-socialisation through isolation and intensive training.⁶ From the minute the recruit enters a military base, the need for unquestioning obedience to the chain of command is drummed into him or her. This is considered a key element of the socialisation process as it ensures that the individual relies completely on the command structure for orders and decision-making.⁷ The process is then augmented through a process of de-individualisation, where individual needs and wants are subservient to the group or team.⁸ This is done in order to maximise group cohesion, which is essential in combat where members rely on each other's maximum commitment for the success of the mission and their own survival.⁹

Teamwork and cohesion forms the basis of military culture. As Dyer observes, there is a need to act as one and this is practised and ritualised from the onset.

During basic training, because marching in formation, with every man moving his body in the same way at the same movement, is a direct physical way of learning two things a soldier must believe: that orders have to be obeyed automatically and instantly, and that you are no longer an individual, but part of a group.¹⁰

Military service requires commitment and the sacrifice of self to institutional goals; this has become all the more difficult with the rise of individualism and the emphasis on human rights within society. In some cases, this has meant that training instructors are even harder on recruits in their attempts to enforce and instil discipline and loyalty to the institution. Thus the process is often experienced as traumatic, and the effect is frequently long-lasting given the control that institutions such as the military exercise over the individual. Various researchers concur that the military is a typical 'total' institution,¹¹ as espoused by Erwin Goffman: 'A place of residence and work, where a large number of like-situation individuals, [are] cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time together [leading] an enclosed round life ... which they do not control ...'¹²

Essential to the socialisation process is the isolation of recruits from society for lengthy periods and having strict control exercised over their lives. Daily life is rationally planned, formally administered and scheduled in a 24-hour period leading from one task into another. The activities are rigidly controlled and administered by an impersonal bureaucracy that affords little recognition to individuals' needs or wants. This control ensures not only compliance, but enhances identification with the organisational goals and values. Although coercive, recruits may embrace this as, depending on performance and compliance, they may be afforded the opportunity to move up the ranking system.¹³

The effects of this socialisation are often long lasting, affecting the values, beliefs and behaviour of personnel even when they leave the military. Research by Haney found that socialisation in total institutions like prisons, monasteries, reformatory camps and the military not only dehumanises individuals but creates high levels of alienation in them when they leave the institution.¹⁴ According to Haney, members that leave total institutions exhibit behaviour

characterised by apathy, lethargy, passivity, and the muting of self-initiative, compliance and submissiveness, dependence on institutional structure and contingencies, social withdrawal and isolation, an internalization of the norms of institutional culture, and a diminished sense of self-worth and personal value.¹⁵

This affects their ability to adapt to civilian life, where they not only display behaviour that is typically akin to military culture – like being more authoritarian, aggressive and disciplined – but also tend to lack social skills when interacting with civilians. A dichotomy exists where on the one hand young recruits become more authoritarian, but on the other they are more reliant on the authority structure to guide their daily lives. Thus, when they exit the military, they experience an immense sense of loss of purpose, as confirmed by numerous studies on military veterans.¹⁶

Several factors appear to contribute to the difficulty of reintegrating back into civilian society. According to de Vries and Wiegink, one of the obstacles is the sudden lack of command structure and hierarchy that regulated their daily lives.¹⁷ For most veterans this results in a crisis of identity and loss of purpose, as they 'remain reliant on paternalistic

military-social structures and are unable to think and act for themselves, having fostered high levels of dependency in the “surrogate household” of the military institution’.¹⁸

This loss is felt not only in terms of structure and purpose, but also in terms of peer bonds and friendships. Even though most veterans come from different racial and social backgrounds, their military experience creates a bond between them that often transcends their former connections with their own families and even community, affecting their ability to reconnect when they return home.¹⁹ Research conducted by de Vries and Wiegink, for example, found that this is often exacerbated when veterans have suffered traumatic experiences in the course of their duties.²⁰ In this regard, Elder and Clipp found that such traumatic life experiences among military veterans might have long-term effects on their psychological well-being, which could hinder reintegration into civilian life and the ability to obtain and maintain employment.²¹

When military veterans return to civilian life they often have very little to peddle on the civilian labour market other than their military skills. Mashike has expressed concerns about this in a society like South Africa, where veterans return to civilian society with only ‘what they know best’ – how to fight.²² He also argues that this is the reason why military veterans could trigger civilian unrest and even participate in criminal activities. The fact that members cannot find productive employment can become problematic not only for the individual, but for society by creating more complex social problems that are not easily resolvable.²³

Not all military personnel battle to adapt to civilian life. Much depends on where and in what occupational categories they served in the military. Research has indicated that administrative skills like human resources, logistics, technical services and financial planning are more easily transferrable, and even sought after.²⁴ However, the bulk of military personnel serve in combat branches where the skills are mostly related to military tasks and functions that are less transferable or valued in the private sector. Nonetheless, there are military skills or character traits that are valued by society in specific contexts, such as discipline, physical fitness, cohesion and the ability to work in teams.²⁵

Jelusic, however, argues that even where skills are transferable, military personnel find it difficult to adapt because they are not used to using their own initiative. Socialisation in the military results in individuals that function in a top-down leadership environment that only requires execution. The civilian professional culture requires a more adaptive workforce that requires buy-in and operates on a top-down and bottom-up form of management.²⁶ This, and the fact that military skills have relatively little market value, except in the private security sector, has meant that military veterans typically display higher levels of unemployment compared to their civilian peer groups. In addition, research conducted by Humensky et al. found that potential employers find military personnel less attractive as they are considered more prone to psychological disturbances like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other physical ailments. Another contributing factor is that the general public does not hold the military and military employment in the highest regard.²⁷

Against this background, this study explores what difficulties MSDS members experience in adapting to civilian life and finding employment. How do employers view these young people who typically have not had the opportunity to study or acquire a tertiary education?

Research methodology

A qualitative research design was used. MSDS instructors responsible for the socialisation process were interviewed, as were both current and former MSDS members about their adaptation and reintegration into civilian life. Finally, representatives of employment agencies were interviewed to obtain their views in terms of the employability of MSDS members.

Sampling

For instructors and current MSDS members a convenient sampling method was used whereby recruits were nominated by a wing commander of the South African Infantry School. The selection of participants was based on availability and criteria set by the researchers in terms of representativeness regarding rank, race and gender. For MSDS members who had left the military, a snowball sampling method was used. This approach was adopted due to the fact that the database with the names of those who had exited the SANDF could not be released due to protections under the Access to Information Act. The application to access this information was still in process upon completion of the research. A snowball sampling strategy was also adopted to establish which agencies had military veterans on their database and in what jobs they are typically placed. This was achieved by contacting agencies and referrals by them to other agencies they knew of. Thus, both former MSDS members and employment agencies were selected based on referral by other participants or informants.

Data collection

Focus groups were used to collect data from the MSDS members and instructors currently in the SANDF. A total of eight focus groups were conducted with the instructor corps, of which two were composed of officers and senior non-commissioned officers involved in the training and socialisation process of recruits. A total of six focus groups were conducted with current MSDS members, which were segregated by gender as we wanted to see if there were different responses among male and female privates. For both instructors and privates, the size of the focus groups varied between three and five members and took approximately 60 minutes per session, which allowed ample time for open and frank discussion.

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with MSDS members whose contracts were not renewed in order to establish whether they had found employment and how marketable they felt their MSDS training and skills were. A total of 14 members were interviewed, of which three were female and 11 male, all of whom had served in the infantry. The ages of participants varied between 21 and 28 years. A total of 10 were still unemployed and, of those who were employed, all worked in the security sector. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with seven employment agencies, some located in the Western Cape and others in Gauteng, which had former MSDS members on their books. The aim of these interviews was to establish where these members are typically placed in terms of employment.

Data analysis

Interviews with the current MSDS members and instructors were digitally recorded and transcribed. Field notes were taken during interviews with the employment agencies.

Immediately after the interviews, the recordings and fieldwork comments were transcribed to ensure that the data was as complete as possible. Data analysis was carried out by coding the data around the themes identified in the conceptual framework. This was done to examine what skills MSDS members receive, how they are socialised, what effects the re-socialisation has on them, how they experience reintegration into civilian life, and what employment they have or what employment they think they will be able to get. Interviews with the employment agencies concentrated on the reintegration of MSDS members into civilian life and their perceptions on the employability of MSDS members.

Ethical considerations

Institutional permission from the SANDF was applied for and received. Participation in the study was voluntary and written informed consent was requested from all the participants. Although SANDF members were instructed to participate, the researchers gave them the option to either leave or not participate in the focus groups. Some members did not participate in the focus groups, and in one case a member left of his own free will. In terms of former MSDS members, because recalling these experiences could be traumatic, participants were informed of the content of the study and asked to only participate if they were comfortable talking about the time they served in the SANDF. Informed consent was requested on the basis that they are comfortable speaking about their training and experiences.

Limitations

The methodologies utilised and the sample size in this study has limited the generalisability of the findings. However, the sample size is sufficient to draw some preliminary conclusions on the experiences of the MSDS members, the challenges they experience, what skills they consider beneficial for gainful employment, and how employers view them.

This study has further limitations in that it cannot be generalised to the entire SANDF as the participants of the research were drawn exclusively from the infantry. This is the largest branch of the South African Army and appears to be the group that experiences the most difficulties in adjusting to civilian life based on the literature. There may also be salient influences like race, gender, class, level of education and family bonds that may influence reintegration into civilian life but are not explored in this study.

Discussion of findings

The following section outlines the effect of military socialisation, the challenges MSDS members face in terms of reintegration into civilian life, and their employability.

The effect of military socialisation

Based on the literature it is clear that the military is a total institution that re-socialises members to think and behave in a particular way, which is routine, regulated, highly bureaucratic and authoritarian. MSDS privates described this process in terms of the level of regulation and control as follows:

Here every day you do things from the morning that you wake up to the night that you go to sleep, everything has a plan. Even how much you sleep is planned here ... later you see that is why you do things like this it is all to prepare for deployment

Another private stated, that one is constantly

being told what to do, when to go to the toilet, when you can drink water, everything, it is like being a child again, every move you make you are told what to do, you have to report to someone, 'can I go and do this, can I go and do that?' and we weren't used to that, it's like being a toddler, when your mother tells you everything, even like the uniform they tell you how to wear it ... they expect you to comply to all of this and they say this is discipline

The aim of this regulation is to enforce conformity and to break down the resistance of members in order to remould, or reprogramme them into accepting a different value system. One of the officers described this as follows:

Basic military [training] is basically taking a child from school. In the old time we say you deprogram him and reprogram him to become a soldier It is a long process. It is more in the line of discipline, instilling discipline, telling them what to do, [to be] time conscious; you must force them to do certain things at certain times. Starting early in the mornings, ending late at night. So it is a vast thing and during the day they must still do training. You must still enforce self-discipline that is the most important. Which at the end of the day [in the socialisation process you] psychologically program them to start to act, they must just do. It is not a question of they start to think on their own if I can put it like that. They must do what they are told and know they are part of the group [and] not single people

A sergeant major commented: 'What we do is we break them down totally. And we start rebuilding them again into soldiers ... just overnight in one month they will become like soldiers ...'. If the socialisation is successful it results in members identifying strongly with the military and military culture, which may create dissonance when having to reintegrate back into civilian life.²⁸

This was confirmed in the interviews with both serving MSDS members and those that have left. Many stated that they experienced changes in their personality, values and behaviour. One current MSDS member (private) stated: '[This] organisation changes you completely, the person that you were as a civilian, you are no longer that person, it changes completely ...'. Another former MSDS member explained: 'When you go to the army you [lose] a part of yourself that can't ever be given back to you. You become a soldier and from then on you can never be a full civilian again'.

These findings are similar to other studies, which argue that military socialisation has long-term effects that change the individual in fundamental ways.²⁹ This is not necessarily perceived as negative, as reflected in a comment made by a serving MSDS private:

I came to the army a young boy that can't make a bed or do anything if I don't want ... but the army showed me there are things you need to do ... and you must do them right always with pride ... the discipline was important and I felt good when I did things right ... and did them right from then on ... if you didn't ... you will regret it and have to run with big poles very far ... so it is better to just do it with discipline square always

Many discussed how this enriched them as a person, how they learnt a great deal about themselves and how for the first time they really got to know and work with people from different backgrounds and cultures, which broke down existing stereotypes. A former MSDS member explains this as follows:

... before I joined I never knew people from other cultures, I was afraid of them and maybe they were evil. At the infantry school I learned that all people are the same and for me that is big as I believed before that we are all different and that we can never be friends with other races of people It also made me realise that when we do things we must do them right with pride and I still do everything with pride and discipline way better than any of the other people I work with ... now, and they admire me for that so I have become a leader at work where I was not one before the army

What is interesting is the fact that many recruits felt that military discipline was a positive thing and somewhat empowering. They felt a sense of pride that they are disciplined and can accept discipline (and the associated punishment). On a less positive note, both current and former MSDS members felt that they had lost certain social skills and appear to have difficulty communicating and interacting with civilians. All of them attributed their loss of social skills to the fact that they are now soldiers and identify more with their military peer group than with previous civilian peers and even family. A serving MSDS private commented:

If I have to walk into a bar or something now I wouldn't know what to do. You lose your social skills completely. You don't know how to talk to people, about what to talk [about], because all you know is military talk, cause that is what you had for the last six months. You don't know what to say to people ... you don't know how to relate

An MSDS member that had left also provided some insight:

... when you go to the army you learn that you can't do a thing alone. You need others but you change from a civilian to a soldier. If that happens then you can never relate to civilians in the same way. They say that there is no stronger and better friendship than the one made in the army. It is true ... my army friends are everywhere in the country. I will do anything for them, when we see each other after maybe one year nothing has changed ... but my previous friends and my family, our relationship [has] changed. They can never have the same strong friendship that I share with the guys and girls that I did Basic with ... we just can't relate to each other even now after five years since I left the army

Another member that exited the system commented on becoming more aggressive and authoritarian:

When I joined the army I was a mama's boy, soft and gentle ... I always accommodated everyone ... after training I became hard. I wanted my way all the time and if I could not get it I would lose my head. I even had a physical fight with a family member that I argued with ...

Again, this confirms the findings of other studies, which found that socialisation into military culture results in diminished social skills and that members become more aggressive and authoritarian.³⁰

Challenges of reintegration

Military culture is in many ways an antithesis to civilian life, the latter allowing freedom of movement and choice, values initiative and creative thinking, and being highly fluid and insecure. The question is whether military personnel find their re-entry into civilian life liberating or problematic. For most of our respondents it was the latter, with more than half of the current MSDS members indicating that they experience anxiety even when they go on leave. An MSDS private described this as follows:

During my time at home I was restless, scared I needed something to do and someone to tell me what to do ... I felt like I was doing something wrong all the time ... I was worried and very nervous I needed someone to tell me what to do

Other members reported similar experiences, which included the inability to relax at home, the need to do something (not sit around), and the fact that they found it disconcerting that they were now suddenly able to sleep in late and not get into trouble for it. This is reflected in the following quotes by MSDS members who have since left the military:

After I left the army I was having anxiety, not just about not having income. I was missing the structure and routine. Wake up this time, make your bed, eat this time, train, run, do this, do that. There was no NCO or corporal telling me what to do and what to think. I felt as if I have left my family behind ... I miss the army and I feel lost without it ... I am a reserve and have been called back twice and I feel like this every time I come back to chivvy street

This need for routine and instruction was supported by another MSDS member who had left:

I used to get orders of what to do, when to eat, even what to think and how to think about it. When I got the orders I did it and did not think about it. The commander already thought about it for me ... I felt lost from when I left until now – four years later I still feel lost

What is evident is that MSDS members became reliant on the military social command structures to provide them with purpose and direction. These findings correspond with the findings of Higate who states that the military provides its members with a ‘paternalistic military-social structure’ that thinks for them.³¹ Similarly, Haney found that when military recruits leave the armed forces they become passive, with limited self-initiative, growing dependence on the institutional structure and a diminished sense of self-worth and personal value.³²

Another key finding is that most members indicated that they experienced difficulty maintaining relationships with friends and family or that their relationships were now different, as reflected in the following comment by an MSDS private:

When you get home [and] you are with your friends, you don’t feel as welcome as before, you don’t know what to talk about, [how] to socialise, as if it is boring that life, compared to the life you know right now, so it is difficult to adapt back there.

In a similar vein, a former MSDS member commented:

... when I am in my community I don’t feel comfortable, it’s like I don’t fit in here. My friends and I can’t relate to each other about the same things. We have different interests

and they say I have changed. I just don't want to mess [a]round any more like they do. I have pride and respect for myself, I stay in fit. Things that are not important for civilians I still see myself as a army man

What is apparent from these comments is that MSDS members identify so closely with the military that they almost feel alienated from civilian society and are unable to connect and communicate with family members and friends. One former MSDS participant commented:

I am still not sure what I must do now, my family can't connect with me like before. They say that I have changed. I have lost my friends cause I have become too aggressive and demanding with them ... especially when I just came back home for a few days

From these experiences we can infer that military socialisation can affect how individuals behave even when they leave the military. This finding is similar to other studies conducted, which found that members experience difficulty in maintaining relationships with significant others and family members immediately after an intense period of military training, which may have long-lasting effects on the behaviour of individuals.³³

This means that the transition into civilian life is challenging for MSDS members, both when on leave and when they exit the military. The anxiety and insecurity they feel is heightened when their contracts end and they have to think about finding employment in the civilian labour market, especially when the 'army' is the only place they know and have ever worked. A former MSDS member stated:

When I left I was alone, I did not know where to look for work, what I needed on my CV and what I can do. I found out that there are better people than me to do the job. One woman told me that I am not skilled enough to get the job because I only have military experience

Based on the above, one can make the following deductions. Firstly, military socialisation creates a form of dependency; secondly, a lack of structure causes anxiety; thirdly, military socialisation leads to behavioural changes that affect how members and former members interact with civilians; and, lastly, the skill sets of members and former members are not valued in the civilian labour market.

Skills transfer and employment

This then begs the question of how transferable the skills acquired by MSDS members are and where they typically find employment. In this regard, the majority of the instructors, current and former MSDS members did not think that infantry skills are transferable to the civilian labour market. One corporal commented: 'There [are] not many skills that [are really] transferable: to the outside, except the ability to carry a gun, but no other skills. No computer or maths skills, or things like that'. This sentiment was supported by a sergeant major: 'They get skills that can only be used in the army. Nobody else wants it, only criminals need these skills – and security companies. You need to obtain some qualification to work in the civilian world ...'. Similarly, a former MSDS member stated:

... in infantry training you learn how to use weapons and what to do in war situations, these are not skills that you can use outside the army, only the SANDF is involved in

war Once you [have] learned these skills you can't use it for anything else except war

These findings concur with those of Mashike and of Kleykamp, who found that combat skills are not easily transferable to the civilian labour market.³⁴ The skills that are transferable are associated with those in support or technical branches, as reflected in the following comment by an army captain: 'Not any skills here [from the infantry school] can be used in civilian life, I know for the engineers But like for us [in the infantry] our core training is not recognised outside, only inside'. This was supported by a female corporal, who stated:

... my one friend went to SAMHS [South African Military Health Services]. He did not get his contract renewed but he is sorted, he has a nice job and even studied more through his work. He is very happy now and he is doing well – his skills helped him to get a job

This confirms the findings of other studies that those in technical and support branches like logistics, engineering and technical corps, medical corps, human resources, the fire brigade and legal services have a better chance of finding employment in the private sector than those coming from branches like the infantry.³⁵

Personnel working for recruitment agencies expressed similar sentiments. Out of the seven interviews, three maintained that MSDS training provides the members with few marketable skills and where these are transferable, in most cases members require further training and qualifications to be employable. One of the agencies that specialises in the recruitment of security personnel for private security companies said:

The MSDS [members] get weapons training which is a huge benefit, but they need some form of security training to make them more employable. The security sector requires certification and those with certification get the first option on jobs. It puts the MSDS [members] on the back foot and they tend to enter these companies on a lower level. There is an abundance of people that can fill those roles, as it requires no real training or skills and they tend to have a smaller remuneration package.

Thus, for the MSDS members, even employment in the security sector requires additional training. Given this, most of the MSDS instructors felt strongly that vocational training should be provided to MSDS members, especially those who are not having their contracts renewed. Some suggested a kind of bursary scheme that would enable them to study and place them in a better position to find employment. Otherwise, they felt that if these members remained unemployed, they would resort to crime, which is a sentiment also expressed by Mashike.³⁶

During the interviews and focus group discussions, participants were asked what skills they receive and what skills will transfer easily to the civilian labour market. The only skill that they rated highly and of relevance was their weapon-handling skill. It is also the only skill that is accredited via the Fire Arms Control Act (FACA), which allows for an individual to handle a handgun as a vocation. For many of the participants this was important as they could use the qualification in civilian life. However, the employment agencies said that this was not enough, as they need to acquire other qualifications to enter into private security companies. As one of the participating agencies said: 'FACA is only one component. More is needed for this to be attractive and lucrative for the future employers'.

An attribute that is valued is the discipline these members have acquired. Employment agencies largely agreed with this and said that there is still a fairly good perception among employers that ‘ex-military people are well disciplined ... that is a benefit to them’. The ability to work as a team, to be task-orientated, have good time management and follow orders was valued according to some employment agencies, as reflected by the comment made by one employment agency participant:

Most of the ex-military people we place never have problems with coming late for work. They work well in teams, and do what they need to do. There is always good feedback from employers on this, and they follow orders very efficiently

For some this was seen to be a positive attribute, but for other employment agencies there are negative connotations associated with these attributes, in that the former members lack initiative, as reflected in the following quote.

Due to these guys only being able to follow orders, they cannot take [the] initiative and sometimes they are not adaptable to the situation and can't think for themselves. They need someone to guide them all the way ... maybe it is the nature of the military ... then there is the perception that state employees are clock watchers and never work at full pace.

What is apparent from these findings is that the skills and attributes acquired as a result of military training and socialisation are only valued in contexts that are related to security, or in highly regulated and/or bureaucratised work environments. The employment agencies mostly agreed that military personnel are most suited to working in these highly structured environments, but they also pointed out the realities that

...these organisations are also operating in a space where the economy determines how many they can employ, so they will never be able to help all the MSDS members. All these organisations also employ people from the rest of society as well ... [who] might have qualifications that could make them a more viable option for employment

Overall, it appears that two factors play a role in MSDS members gaining meaningful employment – the qualities instilled in them through socialisation, and military skills relating to the handling of weapons. However, as previously indicated, they often have to augment this with additional skills or qualifications, as described by one employment agency participant:

These guys come in here [and] they have the skills that can help security companies, but they need a driver's license and security accreditation ... [that] most don't have or don't want to do. They expect to enter security companies easily, but there is a lot of red tape in employment, especially the armed response people – that pays a lot better but they need qualifications and some experience, which the MSDS members don't have enough of

In reality, many of the former MSDS members have remained unemployed. Of the 14 interviewed, only four are in full-time employment; the other 10 are unemployed and looking for work. It appears as though many do not know where to apply for work and most have never worked since they left the military. Some of the serving MSDS members mentioned that they know of some that have turned to crime and gang activity to survive: ‘A guy from my unit who has been without work for four years now, I hear that he has started robbing people

close to a taxi rank. When I last spoke to him he said that he had enough of suffering and going to bed hungry'. A corporal mentioned that some of his peers who have left the military have joined street gangs:

One guy, he has joined a gang, he has got a number on his neck. I think he went to jail, but he has got nice things and a car. He said that I must join him, he can look after me, they are a tight group of people that look after each other like when one is in the army

These findings are similar to those of Mashike, who found high levels of unemployment among veterans and the inclination towards using military skills to commit crime.³⁷

Conclusion

In this study we tried to establish what skills MSDS members receive, what difficulties they experience when reintegrating back into civilian life, and how marketable their MSDS ETD is. It is clear that the findings of this study resonate with those of other studies, in that the sudden lack of structure experienced when leaving the military causes anxiety. According to Higate, the military provides its members with a 'paternalistic military-social structure' that thinks for them.³⁸ When members attempt to reintegrate back into civilian life, this frame of reference is the first loss they experience. They become passive, lethargic and with time start to develop a diminished sense of self-worth. Military socialisation also appears to affect interpersonal relationships with friends, family and the rest of the community. The voices of former and current MSDS members confirm this, as many have experienced difficulties relating to friends, family and civilians in general and this affects how they reintegrate back into civilian society.

When soldiers leave the military, they exit with a 'military mind' and 'military skills'. The big question is: to what extent can they find gainful employment with these skills and character traits? Various authors argue that the skills received from the armed forces are not transferrable to the civilian labour market, especially if they mostly relate to combat; this is less so for the support and technical branches. The infantry is the largest branch in the South African Army and it is particularly these members that battle to transfer their skills to the civilian labour market. Even where their skills are valued and needed, this often requires more training before the skills they have become marketable to employers. For this reason, unemployment is often higher among these members than those of other branches, such as the navy and medical services.³⁹

While military skills, especially weapons handling, is valued, it is limited to work opportunities in law enforcement and private security and is often not sufficient to secure employment. From the research it emerged that there are perceptions that MSDS members are most suited to jobs where a 'military bearing' is required by an organisation. These are typically organisations that are very bureaucratic and provide a rigid structure, such as governmental departments and law enforcement agencies. However, many former members find it difficult to find employment coming from a military background where they have only military skills to peddle on the labour market and have to compete with civilians who are often better qualified and more adaptable.

Recent international research indicates that military veterans experience unemployment rates of almost double that of their civilian peers groups.⁴⁰ Similarly, in South Africa, studies

have found that military veterans experience high levels of unemployment.⁴¹ Even though the sample in this study cannot be considered as representative of all veterans, MSDS veterans certainly experience problems similar to other veterans seeking employment. For Mashike, a high unemployment rate among military veterans is a source of risk, as they can apply their military skills to committing crimes. The findings of this study show that some MSDS members have resorted to criminal and gang activity as a means of survival, and those that have found employment are all working in the security sector.⁴²

Thus, gaining a deeper understanding of the challenges the youth experience when they leave the military, and what can be done to ease their reintegration back into civilian society, is a matter of great importance. To train members to be able to kill and then leave them to fend for themselves without any support structures is not only doing these young people an injustice, but poses a potential security threat to society as well. Clearly more research is needed on this topic.

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