Youth employment after military training

What happens to youth after receiving military training? Are they able to integrate into civilian life and move on to other jobs? **Neil Kramm** and **Lindy Heinecken** look at the dynamics.

Military service is life-changing in many respects – it is 'more than just a job'. But how do the youth who have been enrolled on a two-year contract in the Military Skills Development System (MSDS) experience this? Are they able to reintegrate seamlessly after their experience of military socialisation and does their military training and experience enable them to find meaningful employment – or does it hinder it? These are some of the questions this article will address.

This article is based on findings from focus groups and semi-structured interviews with instructors, current MSDS members and MSDS members that have left the South African National Defence Forces (SANDF). Representatives from employment agencies that have MSDS members on their books were also interviewed to determine the marketability of the members' skills.

EFFECTS OF MILITARY SOCIALISATION

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. In fact, once they walk through the 'military gate' they enter a new life, where every aspect of their daily lives are regulated. This is aptly illustrated by the following quote from one of the MSDS privates:

'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…'

One of the instructors supported this view and stated:

'Basic military [training] is basically taking a child from school. In the old time we say you deprogramme him and reprogramme 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…'

Through this process of socialisation, the civilian recruit is turned into a soldier, somebody who ascribes to the military culture which is based on rules and regulations, unquestioning obedience, team work and self-sacrifice. This process if often life changing as members are expected to behave in a certain way which is different from civilians. One of participant commented:

'When you go to the army you [loose] a part of yourself that you can't ever be given back. You become a soldier and from then on you can never be a full civilian again'.

For most of them their experience in the military was positive and resulted in personal growth in terms of becoming disciplined and developing skills like team work and developing leadership skills. Other positives that resulted from their time in the military is the experience of nation building by getting in contact with people from other cultures and races to break down stereotypes, as reflected in the following two quotes and which represent the views of the majority of MSDS members interviewed:

'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…'

'… before I joined I never knew people from other cultures. I was afraid of them and maybe they were

A soldier marches in solidarity with the police and prison service during a Police and Prisons Civil Rights Union March in Johannesburg.

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…'

What this indicates is that military service has the potential to enrich the lives of young people, but it also has a number of negative consequences when they have to reintegrate back into civilian life.

REINTEGRATION

Military culture is in many ways an antithesis to civilian life, which allows freedom of movement and choice, values initiative and creative thinking and is highly fluid and insecure. The question is whether military personnel find their re-entry into civilian life liberating, or problematic? For most it was the latter, with more than half of the current MSDS members indicating that they even experience anxiety when they go on leave. One of the participants stated:

'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…'

What is evident is that MSDS members became reliant on the military social command structures to provide them with purpose and direction.

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

'…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 round anymore 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 an army man…'

Based on the interviews, one can make the following deductions. Firstly, military socialisation creates a kind of dependency. Secondly, the

lack of structure causes anxiety. Thirdly, it leads to behavioural change that affects how they interact with others.

SKILLS TRANSFER AND EMPLOYMENT

Most of those interviewed who had left the military had served in the infantry, which is the combat arm that focuses on training for 'warfighting'. The general finding in this regard indicates that the infantry skills acquired by MSDS members are not transferable to the civilian labour market. The instructors provide some insight:

'There are not many skills that really are transferable to the outside, except the ability to carry a gun, but no other skills. No computer or maths skills, or things like that. 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… any skills here [from the infantry school] can be used in civilian life, I know for the engineers… But like for us [in infantry] our core training is not recognised outside but only inside.'

In contrast skills associated with

other branches of the military like technical, and support branches like medical, logistics, fire brigade and engineering are transferable due to some of their training being accredited in the civilian sector.

The recruitment agencies expressed similar sentiments. They claimed that the MSDS training provides the members with little marketable skills and where these were transferable, in most cases, members require further training and qualifications to be employable. One of the representatives from an agency stated:

'The MSDSs 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 MSDSs 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.'

Hence, only their weapons handling skills were easily transferable to the civilian sector. It is also the only skill acquired that is accredited via the Fire Arms Control Act that allows for an individual to handle a fire arm as a vocation. However, attributes that are valued are that these members are generally well-disciplined, timely and able to work well in teams, as reflected in a comment made by one of the employment agency personnel interviewed:

'Ex-military people are well disciplined... that is a benefit to them... 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…'

These are the positive characteristics, but many of the employment agencies felt that former military personnel generally lack initiative, as reflected in the following quote.

'Due to these guys only being able to follow orders, they cannot take 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. Overall, it appears as if 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.

In reality, many of the former MSDS members have remained unemployed. Of the 14 interviewed only four have full-time employment; the other ten are unemployed and looking for work. MSDS members who have left the SANDF illustrates the potential dangers of unemployment:

'A guy from my unit 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'.

'One guy has joined a gang, and 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…'

The concern in this regard is that military personnel need to be equipped with the necessary skills to enable them to find gainful employment, and not to use their military skills to the detriment of society.

CONCLUSION

What this study shows is that firstly, the military re-socialises members into a military culture that requires them to think and behave in a particular way which is routine, regulated, highly bureaucratic and authoritarian. Secondly, reintegration for these MSDS members is problematic and causes anxiety and changes personal relationships and connections with the community. Thirdly, when these MSDS members reintegrate back into civilian society they have little or no skills to peddle on the labour market, other than their 'military mind' and 'military skills'. If the government and the SANDF intend on using the military as a tool for social upliftment and nation building, as it seems to want to do, then more needs to be done to facilitate both the transition of these young people back into civilian life and to equip them for civilian employment. While the results of this study cannot be generalised to all military veterans or MSDS members who left the SANDF, it does point to some very serious concerns about the impact that military service has on the youth. Clearly, more research is required on this topic in order to fully understand the challenges ex-military members face when they take off their uniform and have to push their military identity aside.

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