

Article: **Some Attitudes Towards  
Conscription in  
South Africa**

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Conscription and the militarization of Southern African society are issues that have been largely ignored by psychologists in this country. This paper presents some recent exploratory research that has focused on the effects of conscription on "white" South Africans. In so doing, it attempts to provide guidelines for the conceptualization of further socially relevant research in this area. The research findings presented in this paper focus on student attitudes towards military conscription and the ways in which mothers come to terms with conscription of their sons.

Conscription into the SADF began when a ballot system was adopted. This took place in the context of the increased militancy of the ANC in the late 1950s. Compulsory conscription was introduced in 1960 with "white" males being required to serve for a period of 9 months. After the Namibian migrant workers' strike of 1971 and the subsequent increased activity by SWAPO, the period of conscription was increased in 1972 to 12 months plus

the addition of five 19 day camps. Faced with the 1975 SADF invasion of and defeat in Angola, and the 1976 uprisings, the period of conscription was increased from 12 to 24 months with camps being increased to 240 days. After increased guerilla resistance in the 1980s, the length of camps was increased in 1982 to 720 days, giving conscripts an effective period of 4 years "National Service" in the SADF. Furthermore, in 1983, the penalties for conscientious objection were increased from two to six years in jail.

With approximately one million "white" males between the ages of 18 and 65 being eligible for military service, conscription into the SADF has aroused considerable opposition over the last few years. This has taken place against a backdrop of the increasingly political stance adopted by the SADF in terms of its deployment in townships, destabilisation of foreign countries and participation in the State Security Council. This increased opposition has been highlighted by the formation of and the support experienced by the End Conscription Campaign (ECC). In 1983, after a motion was passed at the Black Sash conference demanding "that the South African government abolish all conscription for military service" (South African Outlook, 1985 : 56), a decision was taken to launch a campaign against conscription. By the beginning of 1986 ECC committees existed in Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban, Port Elizabeth, Pietermaritzburg and Grahamstown. The deployment of the SADF in the townships in an attempt to quell uprisings seems to have resulted in increased opposition to the system of conscription.

Another symptom of opposition has been the increasing number of people who have failed to report to the SADF. It was reported that 1 000 objectors were granted political asylum in Britain between 1977 and 1981 (Total War in South Africa, 1984, cited by Omond, 1985). It was reported in Parliament that 7 589 conscripts failed to report for duty in the SADF in January 1985



as opposed to 1 596 conscripts in the whole of 1984 (Omond, 1985). However, the SADF stated that the former figure was incorrect as it included some students and scholars (Objector, 1985). In January 1986, General Magnus Malan refused to reveal in Parliament the number of people who had failed to report to the SADF.

It is in the context of the increased political role played by the SADF, and resultant opposition to it, that these studies have been conducted.

#### STUDENT ATTITUDES TOWARDS MILITARY CONSCRIPTION

Feinstein (1985) investigated attitudes of white male university students towards conscription in South Africa. A sample of 18 "white" male students of the University of Cape Town (mean age = 21,6 years) was divided into three a priori groups : (A) a group adamantly opposed to conscription into the SADF; (B) a group with no particular strong views on the issue, and (C) a group adamantly in favour of conscription to the SADF.

Through a piloting procedure, an interview schedule was developed which investigated the following categories: (a) socio-political attitudes about South Africa and their relationship to attitudes towards conscription; (b) general attitudes towards war; (c) attitudes towards compulsory military service in South Africa; (d) the formation, development and strength of these latter attitudes, and (e) behaviour in relation to military service. In addition the following scales were adapted for use in South African conditions: Kerlinger's (1963) Social Attitudes Scale, Adorno et al's (1950) Ethnocentric Scale and Coleman's (1971) Attitudes towards Africans Scale. In-depth partly structured interviews were conducted and the participants completed the scales at the end of the interview.

The study found important differences between the groups holding divergent attitudes towards conscription. Meaningful differences in the factors influencing the formation of these attitudes were identified as were crucial "psychological moments".

Table 1. Mean scores on the Social Attitudes Scale (SAS), Ethnocentrism Scale (E-Scale) and Attitudes towards Africans Scale (AA) recorded by three groups of university students with differing attitudes towards conscription.

	SAS	E-Scale				AA
		Jews	Africans	Others	Total	
Group A : opposed to conscription	42,5	1,25	1	1,4	1,2	21,33
Group B : no strong views on conscription	2,17	2,36	1,31	2,7	2,09	20,5
Group C : in favour of conscription	9,5	1,97	1,94	4,43	2,69	12,33

It was found that attitudes towards conscription of the group adamantly opposed to conscription (hereafter referred to as group A), formed part of their general world view. There was a link between this group's attitudes towards the SADF, perception of the unjust nature of the government and scale results : the group recorded a highly liberal score on the Social Attitudes Scale, an item mean score on the Ethnocentric Scale lower than the original "low ethnocentric" in Adorno et al's (1950) study (i.e. 1,2 as against 1,8), and a very favourable attitude toward Africans. In addition, they



described the disadvantages of conscription in purely moral and political, as against pragmatic, terms. Thus group A, in the same way as the anti-war group tested by Gaier et al (1972), reflect an "inner directedness" which serves as a basis for their attitudes.

In contrast, the attitudes of the group with no particularly adamant attitudes to conscription (group B) appeared to be contradictory. For instance, all but one of this group perceived South Africa as being economically unjust, whereas on later questioning, all six claimed that the present economic system is a means of bringing prosperity to all. Members of this group stated that their attitudes were still in a state of development and flux, and therefore it is suggested that this group does not have the inner direction of group A. This view was borne out by the quantitative results. On the Attitudes towards Africans Scale, this group's attitudes were similar to those of group A (20,5 as against 21,33), whereas their ethnocentrism and social attitudes scores are closer to those of group C (the group adamantly in favour of conscription). This inconsistency of attitude may have been due to the fact that the mean age of group B was 19,2 years in comparison to 21,6 and 24,8 years for the adamant groups C and A. Five of this group were first year students in comparison to two in group C and none in Group A. Therefore, it is possible that these differences in age could be of significance.

The group adamantly in favour of conscription (group C) believed that South Africa faced an external threat, believed in change that did not endanger the "white" minority, and had a conviction that racial, cultural and class differences were "natural". Thus the attitudes held towards conscription were also at one with their general world view. The scale results again validated this proposition of group C's belief in the inherency of the

divisions in South African society. Their fear of losing minority identity can be related to their less favourable attitudes towards Africans and their fairly high degree of ethnocentrism. Their negative social attitude score illustrates their general tendency towards conservatism, which was evident throughout the study.

Thus it was concluded from the study that those who hold attitudes strongly opposed to conscription into the SADF have a liberal/radical political orientation, have favourable attitudes towards "Africans", and are not ethnocentric. Those who hold strongly favourable attitudes to conscription into the SADF have a conservative political orientation, are less favourable in their attitudes towards "Africans", and are ethnocentric.

In analysing the attitudes of group C, it was interesting to note that they seem to have accepted the SADF's ideological portrayal of "National Service": viz. they share a belief in a "communist threat" to South Africa, the resultant need for patriotism and its concomitant sense of duty, and the "man-making" and educational effects of military service (as documented by South African Outlook, 1985 : 61-62).

The fact that group C's attitudes so closely approximated the SADF's portrayal of military service makes an analysis of the formation of their views of vital importance. With one exception, this group claimed that the media had a positive influence on their views. Half of the group also claimed that their school careers played an important role in developing their support for military service. In contrast, nine members of the other groups claimed that they reacted negatively to attempts at school to influence them in favour of "National Service". Sixteen of the participants mentioned that they were between 12 and 14 years of age when they realised that they would have to undergo military training, and four members of group B recalled



their attitudes to conscription changing when they had to register for the SADF in Std. 8. Eight of the participants reported that they had been in some way affected by cadets. These facts lead to the hypothesis that two seminal "psychological moments" can be isolated in relation to the formation of attitudes toward conscription, namely a boy's starting high school, which involves his introduction to cadets and its military concomitants (i.e. uniforms, shooting, discipline and subordination) and his registering for "National Service" in Std. 8. This thesis is supported by Adelson and O'Neil's (1966) finding that between the ages of 13 and 15, there is a natural development in political attitudes, suggesting that the period from Std. 6 to Std. 8 may be crucial to the formation of attitudes toward the military. It is suggested that the uni-dimensional approach to the military and its activities exhibited by these institutions is influential in the formation of attitudes supportive of conscription. This suggestion should be seen in tandem with Meier's (1982) work on militarization in education.

School and media influences turned most members of groups A and B against the military, while university and its related political organizations had a profound influence on 11 out of the 12 members of these groups. In spite of the fact that there was only one pacifist among the sample, the church had had some influence on anti-conscription attitudes held by four members of group A. By contrast, no members of group C claimed to have been influenced by the church in the development of pro-conscription attitudes, but four of them denied that compulsory military conscription showed a lack of respect for the conscience of the individual. While nine members of groups A and B mentioned the effects of the presence of the SADF in the townships on their attitudes towards the military, no members of group C

made any like-minded mention of this issue. Instead four of the group felt that the SADF should be used in some capacity to quell the present "unrest" in the townships. It was felt that group C's attitudes towards conscription were also characterized by support for the present status quo in South Africa.

An interesting finding was that whereas groups A and B gave a wide variety of responses to the question of who the most important person in their life was, all six members of group C answered "father". Although only one member of this group claimed his father to be the most important influence on his attitudes toward conscription, every member of the group claimed that his father supported his views and played a role in their formation. This was in contrast to the fact that "father" was mentioned by only three other participants, two of whom claimed their views differed from their fathers.

The dominant role of the father amongst group C's participants is of interest in the light of the contributions of Adorno et al (1950). They posit the notion of an "authoritarian character" with the following components:

- a tendency to describe only the desirable and positive aspects of oneself
- the adoption of a "pseudo-patriotism" and a suspicion towards other nations
- an identification with the father in a patriarchal, disciplinarian family situation, leading to a repression of feminine trends and a "pseudo-masculinity"
- an uncritical obedience to the father and an idealization of him
- submission to parental authority which is related to submission to



authority in general. This masks resentment which is activated in the guise of displacement to out-groups  
an inability to identify with humanity as a whole which is a result of high ethnocentrism and a need for an out-group  
a tendency to take up ready made options, attitudes and values of a given group.

Although Adorno et al's (1950) thesis is highly generalized, and suffers from a number of other weaknesses, as documented by Billig (1978) for example, it is felt that it has particular relevance for group C in the following four ways :

- (1) No member of this group mentioned a negative factor about himself in the self-description section of the interviews.
- (2) The group's support for conscription was based on a belief in an external threat facing South Africa, and the need for patriotism and duty. They also scored high on the "Other minorities and patriotism" sub-section of the Ethnocentrism Scale, and they expressed the opinion that other countries should be more positive to South Africa or should "leave us alone", a view that pervaded their responses to the Social Attitudes Scale.
- (3) As has already been seen, all six members of this group identified their father as the most significant person in their lives, and four members of the group still lived at home (in contrast to a combined total of two in the other groups). This leads one to speculate that the "authoritarian" family situation may well apply to all members of this group.
- (4) They appeared totally accepting of the ways in which dominant ideology portrays the military, gaining impetus for their attitudes from largely government controlled sources, such as schools and the media.

Based on this information, it is tentatively suggested that there may be a particular authoritarian attitude to military conscription in South Africa, with the prototype being similar to that of group C in the present study.

In analysing the participants' intention to do "National Service" it was felt that group A, given the inner-directedness of their attitudes, would, as they claim is their intention, not do their military service. Group C's attitudes towards the military are also related to their general socio-political attitudes. Their resultant acceptance of the status quo on attitudes towards conscription compels one to predict that they will follow their intentions and complete their "National Service". The inconsistent nature of group B's attitudes, suggests that their subjective norm or reference group, as described by Ajzen and Fishbein (1980), would play a pivotal role in their decision whether to do their military training or not and that they would follow the advice or opinions of people close to them.

#### MOTHERS AND CONSCRIPTION

Moyle and Savage (1985) investigated the ways in which "white" middle class women in South Africa came to terms with their sons' military service in the SADF. They were primarily interested in the contradiction between the mothers' opposition to conscription and their sons' possible personal involvement in the SADF.

Eight women aged between 40 to 45 years living in Cape Town's Southern Suburbs were interviewed. They all had at least one son over 15 years of age liable for conscription, with the sons attending schools or university in the area. All women were opposed to apartheid. An interview schedule was developed through a piloting process. The schedule focused on the



mother's attitude to conscription and her perceptions of her son's attitude on the issue.

All mothers were opposed to conscription into the SADF, although they did make a distinction between conscription into the SADF and other armies. All women were concerned with the presence of troops in the townships, which had been particularly active at that time in Cape Town: "every time I see one of those trucks (Buffels) full of boys that are contemporaries of my children I feel like bursting into tears." They were all concerned about the psychological effects of conscription, concerned that their son ".... would he come back different, would he come back acting and behaving like a thug." Their perceptions of alternatives to the SADF were seen as "awful" with six years in jail not being seen as a viable option. Seven of the mothers felt it was their son's decision and that they would not attempt to influence him.

The mothers' understanding of their sons' attitudes towards conscription was that peer groups had been most influential in their formation. Only two sons had made decisions about their military service, with one deciding to go to the SADF and the other to leave the country. Some mothers saw boarding school as being perceived by their sons as important preparation for the participation in the SADF. Cadets was also seen as being influential by some mothers, especially in schools with a strong cadet tradition.

None of the fathers was seen to have played an active role in influencing his sons. Generally, the fathers were less "vehemently" opposed to conscription than mothers. The issue of conscription was hardly discussed by the families. Discussion between mother and son on the issue of conscription was almost non-existent. All mothers felt that sons should be informed, but distanced themselves from the process.

What seemed to emerge strongly from the study was the dilemma experienced as a result of the mothers' opposition towards conscription and their simultaneous feelings that, as mothers, they should be committed to supporting their sons :

"It's a very narrow and difficult line for a mother to tread ... I don't think that you have any problems if you are saying "go for it Boetie" and "we are all proud of you" ... Maybe (it) is a lack of courage in actually confronting the issues, but also it was this feeling of anxiety about making sure that X would feel that he would be supported whatever decision he would make. In a way I suppose that is partly an abdication of responsibility, very difficult ... this extraordinary dilemma that one is sort of in and yet in a way it isn't a moral dilemma because what are the options? The options are too ghastly to contemplate."

When confronted with the issue of conscription, the participants responded as mothers, with the feeling that their primary role was to be supportive. The supportive role ruled out the prospect of full discussion on the issue of conscription, as this was interpreted as introducing conflict into the family.

## DISCUSSION

Both of the above two studies lead to very tentative conclusions as they have been based on small samples. However in the two studies, there are a number of themes that arise, that when examined together perhaps have implications for further research in the area of conscription.

The most obvious theme is that of the role of the parents and family vis-a-vis the conscript. On the one hand we have the father, who Feinstein (1985) found to be important in influencing students who were in favour of conscription. The particular home environment of these students seems to



have been influential in the development of their "authoritarian character" and attitudes in favour of conscription. On the other hand, Moyle and Savage's (1985) study illustrates that the role of the mother in the family was largely traditional insofar as they felt that their role was supportive. Their personal feelings on the issue of conscription seem to have been largely subordinate to their defined role in the family. The role of the family in terms of the development of positive or negative attitudes towards conscription could warrant further investigation.

In both studies, the influence of other socializing institutions were briefly highlighted. The school and cadet system emerge as institutions that would seem to have had some influence in the formation of attitudes towards conscription. In Feinstein's (1985) study the media also seems to have been important, while Moyle and Savage (1985) found that the peer group seems to have had important influences. The results of these studies would also seem to have some implications for researchers in the area of political socialization.

Feinstein's (1985) study would possibly also warrant further investigation into his hypothesis that two "psychological moments" are important in the development of attitudes toward conscription, viz. the boy starting high school and his registering for "National Service" in Std. 8. It would also be of interest to investigate the relationship between the authoritarian-type attitude and conscription by using the F-scale of Adorno et al (1950), and by evaluating socio-cultural influences more quantitatively with larger and broader samples.

Both of these studies are illustrations of the sort of work "relevant" psychologists could be contributing in the field of conscription. Other contributions in this area could be an examination of the impact of

"National Service" on both the conscript and his family. A longitudinal study of those who complete their two years "National Service", with an analysis of the effects of the experience on general socio-political attitudes, attitudes to the SADF, and general psychological health could be useful. The documentation of aspects and manifestations of the militarization of Southern African society and its consequences would also be a priority.

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