

SOME PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF COMMENCING 'NATIONAL SERVICE' IN SOUTH AFRICA

Alan Flisher

University of Cape Town

There is agreement across the entire political spectrum that South Africa is currently in a state of rapid social change. Partly as a consequence of this, the South African government allocates a vast amount of funds, resources and personnel to the South African Defence Force. So far as military personnel are concerned, the International Institute for Strategic Studies estimates that there were 83 400 South Africans in military uniform in 1985 : of these, 53 300 or 65% are conscripted "national servicemen" (Objector, 1985). In the light of this, it is obviously important to consider the psychological effects of "national service". Indeed, Feinstein et al (1986) include the examination of the impact of national service on the conscript as an example of the kind of study that psychologists wishing to do "relevant" work could be contributing in the field of conscription. There is certainly a dearth of both empirical and theoretical work in this area. For this reason, much of the discussion below is based on the personal experience of the author, particularly in the clinical setting.

Psychology in society, 1987, 7, 36-53

This article will begin by delineating its scope. Thereafter a theoretical framework involving crisis theory will be presented in which the subject matter will be embedded. Finally, an attempt will be made to integrate the psychological and ideological dimensions.

SCOPE OF THIS ARTICLE

In attempting to explore the psychological effects of "national service", it is necessary to choose between providing, on the one hand, comprehensive but superficial coverage and, on the other hand, more restricted but more penetrating coverage. In confining myself to the psychological effects of commencing "national service", I have obviously tended towards the latter option.

There are two principle reasons for focusing on the initial period of "national service". Firstly, it would appear that the early months of training are the most stressful (Steinberg and Durrell, 1968). Indeed, McCabe and Board (1976) analysed the admissions to an in-patient psychiatric treatment facility from a group of trainees undergoing a year of military training in the United States Air Force; they found

SOME PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF COMMENCING NATIONAL SERVICE IN SOUTH AFRICA

that two-thirds of the admissions occurred during the first ten days of service. Secondly, the way in which a conscript copes with the initial period of "national service" is likely to have considerable impact on the rest of his military experience; this point will receive further attention below.

In order to convey some notion of the diverse psychological manifestations of "national service", and in order to situate the topic in this appropriate context, some of the areas that have been omitted from the ensuing discussion will be listed :

- the psychological effects of the knowledge that one will be required to render "national service" in the future
- the emotional impact of "national service" on significant other people in the conscript's life, e.g. family, friends, girlfriends (Cronje, 1977; Lagrone, 1978, 1982; Morrison, 1981; and Rodriguez, 1980)
- the exacerbating influence that "national service" could have on individuals already suffering from a psychiatric disorder (McCabe and Board, 1976; and Steinberg and Durrell, 1968)
- the psychological consequences of combat or operational circumstances (Block, 1969; Donnelly, 1982; El Rayes, 1982; Gous, 1976; Noy, 1982; and Rachman, 1982)

- psychological sequelae of military service (Figley, 1978; Louw, 1977)
- the psychological implications of choosing to avoid "national service" by going to jail, leaving the country or conscientious objection.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

It is necessary to provide a theoretical framework in order to understand an individual's response to commencing "national service". An appropriate framework would appear to be that provided by crisis theory. Although several types of crises have been described, two are relevant for this article, viz. developmental and transitional life crises. Developmental life crises refer to the periods of disorganisation and upset occurring at the various stages of the normative life cycle of individuals or families. Transitional life crises, on the other hand, refer to the intellectual or emotional upset that can take place when individuals are faced with important changes in their life situations.

Although there is obviously a large amount of overlap between these two kinds of crises, it is useful to regard the commencement of "national service" as having aspects of both developmental and transitional life crises. Each of these components will be explored in greater detail.

THE DEVELOPMENTAL COMPONENT

Erik Erikson (1950, 1956, 1959) has provided us with an epigenetic model to conceptualise the process of human development. More specifically, he has described the problems and dilemmas confronting individuals he describes as being late adolescents, which would include most conscripts. He chooses this term because it has the proper double meaning - later stages of adolescence and belated adolescence (Erikson, 1959). He regards the great task of adolescence as being the establishment of a sense of identity; this can be said to have been attained when

the individual comes to be and feel most himself, and this in pursuits and roles in which he also means most to some others - that is, to those others who have come to mean most to him (Erikson, 1959, p 76).

A sense of identity diffusion is said to exist when a person is temporarily or permanently unable to establish a satisfactory sense of identity (Erikson, 1959).

This crisis is one of a series of crises from birth to death. It does however occupy a special position with respect to the other crises since it is situated between childhood and adulthood. The late adolescent is thus in a psychological stage between

the morality learned by the child, and the ethics to be developed by the adult. It is an ideological mind - and, indeed, it is the ideological outlook of a society that speaks most clearly to the adolescent who is eager to be affirmed by his peers, and is ready to be confirmed by rituals, creeds and programmes which at the same time define what is evil, uncanny, and inimical. In searching for the social values which guide identity, one therefore confronts the problems of ideology (Erikson, 1950, p 254, emphasis in the original).

The overwhelming majority of conscripts are late adolescents. They are thus attempting to establish a sense of identity, which includes the important aspect of ideological identity; this will receive greater attention below.

Superimposed on this developmental life crisis is the transitional life crisis of commencing "national service".

THE TRANSITIONAL COMPONENT

As was implied above, the transitional component of the crisis of commencing "national service" refers to the intellectual or emotional upset that occurs as a result of important changes in the conscript's life situation. Just how important these changes are can be gauged by referring to the Social Readjustment Rating Scale developed by Holmes and Rahe (1967). Various life events are listed, and scores are

assigned that indicate the stress potential of each event. Death of a spouse has a stress potential of 100 stress units. Table 1 indicates the life events applying to almost all young men commencing "national service", together with their stress potentials.

TABLE 1. Life events and stress potential applying to most young men commencing "national service" (Source : Holmes and Rahe, 1967).

<u>LIFE EVENT</u>	<u>STRESS POTENTIAL</u>
Change to a different line of work	36
End school	26
Change in living conditions	25
Change in work hours or conditions	20
Change in residence	20
Change in recreation	19
Change in church activities	19
Change in social activities	18
Change in sleeping habits	16
Change in number of family get-togethers	15
Change in eating habits	15
TOTAL	229

As Golan (1978) points out, these values need to be viewed with some circumspection as they "would have different weightings for different individuals at different times in their life cycles and would probably be influenced by a large number of extraneous and intervening variables" (p 77). Furthermore, there is some overlap between the various events; it may, for example, not have been justified to include both 'end school' and 'change to a different line of work' in Table 1.

Notwithstanding these cautions, some indication of the severity of the stress that commencing "national service" involves can be gained from the consideration that the probability of developing medical or psychological problems is greater for an individual with a score greater than 200 points than for an individual with a score less than 200 points (Holmes and Rahe, 1967).

In addition, there are further sources of stress that confront the conscript that are not listed in Table 1. These include :

- isolation from civilian life and previous support systems
- rank structure and strict discipline
- demands where there is an expectation of high performance and a fear of punishment. In an authoritative hierarchy there is a greater chance of being sanctioned and when this happens "the individual is allowed no face-saving expression : insolence is ground for further punishment" (Langrone, 1978, p 1041)

- subordination of the interests of the individual for those of the group
- excessive physical exertion
- handling of lethal weapons
- lack of privacy
- rumours
- possibly broken relationships or marital problems as a result of separation.

In the light of the large amount of stress to which soldiers commencing "national service" are subjected, it is to be expected that a significant number of them will be precipitated into a state of active crisis. Caplan's (1961) classic definition of crisis is applicable to this situation. He defined a crisis as :

A state provoked when a person faces an obstacle to important life goals that is for a time insurmountable through the utilisation of customary methods of problem solving. A period of disorganisation ensues, a period of upset, during which many abortive attempts at solution are made (i.e. the state of active crisis). Eventually some kind of adaption is achieved which may or may not be in the best interests of that person and his fellows (Caplan, 1961, p 18, parentheses added).

An important corollary of this definition is that the period of disorganisation is temporary, some adaptation is achieved, usually within four to six weeks (Hirschowitz, 1972; Golan, 1978).

Hirschowitz (1972) has delineated three phases that the person in the state of active crisis predictably negotiates. These are the impact phase, in which the person is dazed and experiences "fight-flight" responses, the recoil-turmoil phase, in which feelings such as rage, anxiety, depression, guilt and shame are prominent, and the adjustment phase, in which the person begins to feel hopeful about the future as knowledge and understanding are sought in an attempt to come to terms with the situation.

It was mentioned above that the way in which a conscript copes with the initial period of "national service" is likely to have a considerable impact on the rest of his military experience. The reason for this is that any crisis, including the crisis of commencing "national service", can be regarded as a turning point in life development. On the one hand, there is the danger that the soldier's response to the crisis will be postponed or maladaptive - in this case, he will function at a lower level at the termination of the crisis than before the crisis. On the other hand, there is the opportunity to develop unrealised personal resources in response to the situation - in this case, he will

function at a higher level at the termination of the crisis than before the crisis (Halpern, 1973). It is noteworthy that the Chinese idiom for crisis consists of two characters, one indicating danger and the other opportunity (Watts, 1980). The danger and opportunity of the crisis situation are multiplied by the person possibly using the same coping mechanisms in future crises (Caplan and Grunebaum, 1967; Hirschowitz, 1972; and Pasewark and Albers, 1972). In other words, the soldier's response to the commencement of "national service" can have repercussions not only for the remainder of his time in the S. A. D. F. but for the rest of his life.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Before making an attempt to integrate the psychological and ideological dimensions to the commencement of "national service", it is appropriate to summarise the contents of this article so far. Most young men entering the S. A. D. F. are late adolescents who are experiencing developmental life crisis in that they are attempting to establish a sense of identity (including the important component of ideological identity). They are then subjected to a transitional life crisis as a result of the far reaching changes and profound stresses in their lives. A significant proportion will be precipitated into an active crisis.

The conscript thus experiences a transitional life crisis superimposed on a developmental life crisis. Each is likely to exacerbate the other. Thus, it is considerably easier to arrive at a satisfactory sense of identity if the environment is conducive to self-exploration and risk-taking, which is not the case when in the midst of an enormous transitional life crisis. Conversely, the transitional aspects are more likely to be constructively resolved in the absence of a developmental life crisis as there would be a firmer sense of identity on which to base a response.

Furthermore, the resources that are necessary in order to resolve a crisis satisfactorily (e.g. time, empathic listeners) are simply not available during basic training. Of course, the S. A. D. F. does have psychologists, chaplains and social workers, but their usefulness in this regard is limited by three factors :

- it is often difficult to obtain an appointment to see them due to administrative considerations
- there are relatively few of them and they therefore tend to be very busy
- their responsibility is primarily to the military system and not to the individual in crisis.

It was mentioned above that the period of disorganisation associated with a crisis is temporary and that some adaption is usually achieved within four to six weeks. It should be clear that, because circumstances are not conducive to reducing the crisis in a constructive manner, the danger aspect of the crisis will predominate at the expense of the opportunity (with the consequences intimated above).

Furthermore, it was implied above that the individual in crisis is particularly open to new perspectives in the adjustment phase of the crisis sequence. The dominant perspective available to conscripts is that provided by the military establishment. This is done formally by means of lectures and by the less formal communication of attitudes and beliefs. It is thus not surprising that conscripts tend to adopt the values, standards and outlook of the military establishment as they attempt to resolve their crisis predicament.

But how does this adoption of this ideological perspective help to resolve the crisis? As far as the developmental component is concerned, the importance of the ideological dimension to the establishment of a sense of identity in adolescence has been emphasised above. Thus, the conscripts sense of identity diffusion is reduced by

adopting a ready-made sense of identity. Furthermore, the intensity of the transitional life crisis is reduced since the individual is provided with a meaning system whereby to understand and justify his situation.

The adoption of this ideology by national servicemen is an explicit intention of the policy makers in the S. A. D. F. In the words of Brigadier J E Louw :

In the process of mobilisation, members are isolated from their orientation groups with which they have identified themselves over many years and which have afforded them emotional security.

Briefly, this amounts to members being isolated from their primary orientation groups during mobilisation, and being socialised in a system of values that are peculiar to a military organisation as orientation group. In order to be efficient, these members have to accept the standards and values of the military organisation as their own. This means accepting a new group membership, and this affords the member a feeling of security as he is assured of the group's support as long as he respects the accepted standards of the group (Louw, 1977 p 22, emphasis added).

There is however a broader dimension to this issue. Skinner (1985) has drawn attention to the rôle of the military in terms of inculcating in conscripts those ideological perspectives that are necessary for the survival of the ruling classes in South Africa. It is hoped that this article has elucidated one possible mechanism whereby this process is achieved, thus providing an example of the interdependence of psychological and political levels of explanation.

REFERENCES

- Block, H. S. 1969. Army clinical psychiatry in the combat zone. American Journal of Psychiatry, 129, 289 - 298.
- Caplan, G. (Ed.) 1961. Prevention of Mental Disorders in Children, New York : Basic Books.
- Caplan, G. and Grunebaum, H. 1967. Perspectives on primary prevention : a review. Archives of General Psychiatry, 17, 331 - 346.
- Cronje, J. 1977. Die soldaat en sy gesin. Journal of Social Work S. A. 13, 258 - 269.
- Donnelly, C. 1982. The soviet attitude to stress in battle. Journal of the Royal Army Medical Corps, 128, 72 - 78.
- El Rayes, M. 1982. Traumatic war neurosis. Journal of the Royal Army Medical Corps, 128, 67 - 71.
- Erikson, E. 1950. Childhood and Society, New York : Norton.

Erikson, E. 1956. The problem of ego identity. Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association, 4, 56 - 121.

Erikson, E. 1959. Late adolescence. In : D. H. Funkenstein (Ed.) The Student and Mental Health : An International View, Cambridge, U.S.A.: World Federation for Mental Health.

Feinstein, A., Teeling-Smith, A., Moyle, D. and Savage, M. 1986. Some attitudes towards conscription in South Africa. Psychology in Society, 5, 66 - 80.

Figley, C. R. (Ed.) 1978. Stress Disorders Among Vietnam Veterans, New York : Brunner/Mazel.

Golan, N. 1978. Treatment in Crisis Situations. New York : The Free Press.

Gous, L. 1976. "Bomskok". Paratus, 27, 4.

Halpern, H. A. 1973. Crisis theory : A definitional study. Community Mental Health Journal, 9, 342 - 349.

Hirschowitz, R. G. 1972. Crisis theory. Based on a lecture given to the National Multi-Professional Conference : Psychopathology and Mental Health of the Family, Johannesburg.

Holmes, T. H. and Rahe, R. H. 1967. The social readjustment rating scale. Journal of Psychosomatic Research, 11, 213 - 218.

Langrone, D. M. 1978. The military family syndrome. American Journal of Psychiatry, 135, 1040 - 1043.

Langrone, D. M. 1982. More on the military family syndrome. American Journal of Psychiatry, 139, 133 - 134.

Louw, J. E. 1977. The demilitarisation of ex-soldiers. Paratus, 28, 22 - 23.

McCabe, M. S. and Board, G. 1976. Stress and mental disorders in basic training. Military Medicine, 140, 686 - 688.

Morrison, J. 1981. Rethinking the military family syndrome. American Journal of Psychiatry, 138, 354 - 356.

Noy, S. 1982. Division based psychiatry in intensive war situations. Journal of the Royal Army medical Corps, 128, 105 - 116.

Objector, 1985. Objector, 2, 3.

Pasewark, R. A. and Albers, D. A. 1972. Crisis intervention : theory in search of a program. Social Work New York, 17, 70 - 77.

Rachman, S. 1982. Fear and courage : some military aspects. Journal of the Royal Army Medical Corps, 128, 100 - 104.

Rodriguez, A. R. 1980. The family in the military community. Military Medicine, 145, 316 - 319.

Skinner, D. 1985. The Inculcation of a South African Ideology in White Youth and it does not always work. Unpublished independent study unit, Department of Psychology, University of Cape Town.

Steinberg, H. R. and Durrell, J. 1968. A stressful social situation as a precipitant to schizophrenic symptoms : an epidemiological study. British Journal of Psychiatry, 114, 1097 - 1099.

Watts, T. 1980. Understanding crises. Unpublished postgraduate seminar, Department of Psychiatry, University of Cape Town.