

## Exploring Military Performance Motivation From An African Ubuntu Perspective

Adelai van Heerden

CSIR Defence Peace Safety & Security (DPSS):

Technology for Special Operations

Behavioral Science Capability, Stellenbosch, South Africa

### *Abstract*

The purpose of this study was to use a Positive Psychology lens to explore the perceptions of elite military candidates about motivational strategies that assisted them to cope with the challenges of specialized military selection. Results from our quantitative and qualitative analyses confirmed the significance of the African Ubuntu philosophy linked to positive psychology constructs like Sense of Coherence, Internal Locus of Control, Self-efficacy and Hardiness as sources of coping mechanisms in high stress occupations like the specialized military. Qualitative results revealed four main themes associated with high levels of coping during military selection: Meaningfulness being the most grounded theme at 52% of the quotes referring to it: 525 out of 1066 quotations followed by adaptability at 26% of responses, positive self-concept at 15% and interconnectedness at 7%.

### *Introduction*

The importance of studying human behaviour from the whole person context is increasingly being appreciated.

By exploring the various facets that motivate human behaviour including cognitive, non-cognitive and cultural aspects that form the whole person ...the body, mind and cultural contexts that contribute towards human behaviour, we apply **empirical and interpretive research studies** using mixed method approaches from an indigenous African perspective. Appreciating the different points of view in the exploration of human behaviour from within the cultural contexts from which individual come, we aim to gain better insight into the drivers of behaviour. We apply indigenous social science methods that offer a deeper understanding of the motives from which individual behaviour stems, and the drivers of behaviours within certain contexts.

One of our main clients are the SA Dept. of Defence, we work with certain specialised grouping to assist in improved training outcomes. In this his context only the best candidates succeed to qualify, candidate Selection is often described as being extremely arduous. The selection Phase is carefully designed to make it physically impossible for the human body to complete on finite physical resources alone. Yet, as much as the training is about the individual, it is also about seeing how the individual fits in with the team, trusts his life to a very unique grouping, a brotherhood of African warriors who find success through meaningful inner and interconnectedness. The oneness and wholeness put to the ultimate test.

### **Literature**

Braud (1992) point to the interconnectedness between humans in themselves, between themselves and within the context of nature points to the connectedness of all beings on earth. He states:

***“Our senses, our everyday observations, and the reports we find in our daily newspapers and in radio and television broadcasts do not hint of our connectedness. Rather, they suggest that we are isolated, self-contained individuals, inhabiting and s struggling within circumscribed niches while satisfying individual needs. (p1).... “At other t times we feel differently. We are overwhelmed by feelings of commonality, sharing, harmony, union, and communion. Which of these views is the valid one? Are we fundamentally separate individuals, isolated and unique? Or are we intimately interconnected and united? I think we are both of these things. T these views a and ways of being are complementary rather than opposed, paradoxical rather than contradictory. Each is true. Each is incomplete without the other.”***

In order to understand the drivers of behaviour, we must first understand the context and frames of references from which that behaviour stems. These are the factors that form individual world views and determine behavioural patterns and determinants.

***The Zulu word Indaba is defined as: “Listen I have a story to tell you” (Mutwa, 1964).***

***Tradition, communal orientations, honour, endurance and the fine art of dialogue and conversation is a cherished value in African relations.***

### **Values**

The same values also exist within specialised military groupings where military tradition, a sense of community, pride honour, endurance, self-sacrifice and interconnectedness are

core values. In both the Ubuntu philosophy and the Specialised military there is an essential interplay between the parts and the whole = between one-ness and wholeness, Ubu and Nthu.

When we explore African culture in this context, Morawksi (1994) pointed out that the 'self' in the African self-concept is part of a whole, it is not independent or detached from society; it is neither the centre of knowledge ('one who knows'), nor the possessor of rationality or the author of its own words.

### ***Culture***

Hofstede (1980) sees culture as the "collective programming of the mind which distinguishes "one category of people from another", being entirely learned and specific to the group.

Ter-Miasova (2003) refers to a "shared code" that forms the basis of successful communication

Jones (2007) also point to culture as 'programming', a "slow process" of becoming part of a social grouping that enables exposure to values as the dominant beliefs and attitudes, interconnected activities that include rituals, role models and symbols.

## *Method*

### *Data*

All data was collected in written form. The responses to multiple-choice questions were captured as quantitative data and for the qualitative data; the written responses to the open-ended questions were transcribed word for word, excluding any possible identifying details.

### *Ethics*

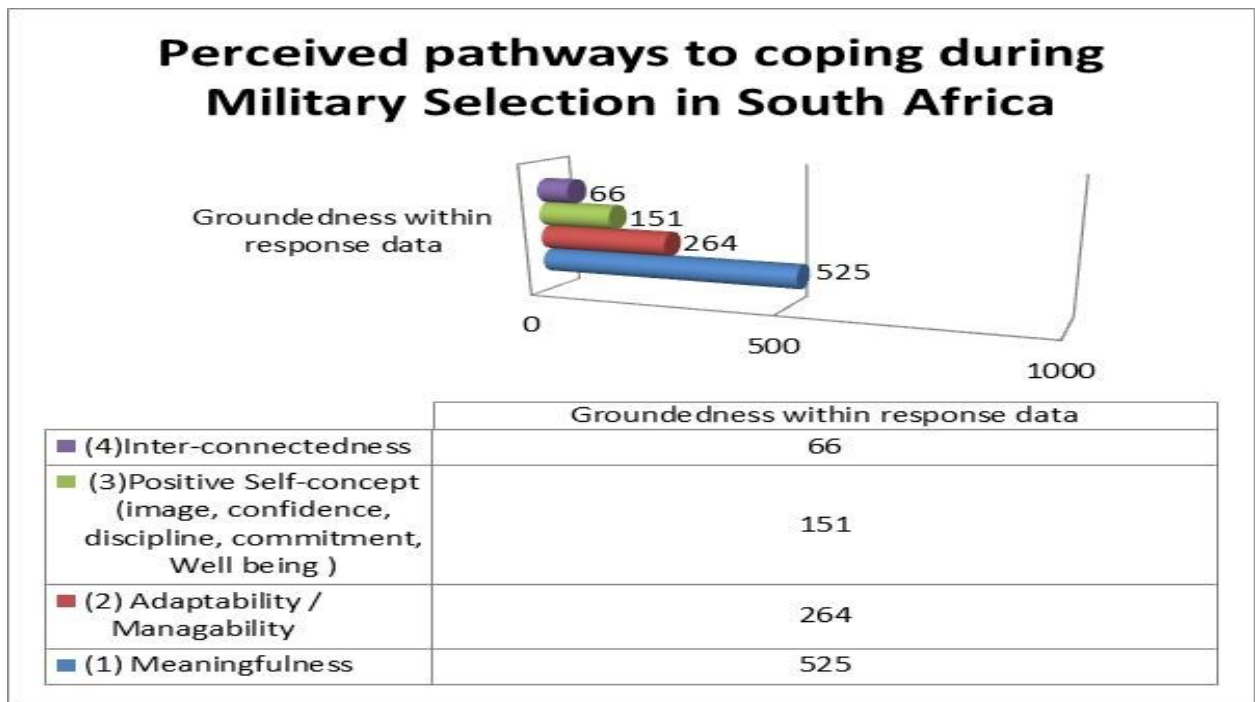
Research Approval was obtained from various military authorities before the commencement of the project. Before the assessments were administered and the written responses to the open-ended questions obtained, the purpose of this study was clarified. Complete anonymity, confidentiality and security of data storage were assured and participants all completed consent forms.

### *Data Analysis*

A qualitative-dominant mixed method study was used. A mixed method research approach was followed, which combines qualitative and quantitative research (Clark & Creswell, 2011). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005, p. 3) qualitative research involves "... an interpretive naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them." With quantitative research, data is represented in a numeric format, and analysed by means of statistical analysis to answer the research question (Clark & Creswell, 2011) **Using a longitudinal mixed-method study we explored the perceptions of specialised military candidates on coping strategies that assisted each individual to overcome the challenges of specialized military selection.** The sample consisted of three different groups of specialised selection candidates of which **90% was male with an average age of 26.4 years.**

### *Results*

Results from our quantitative and qualitative analyses were confirmed the significance of positive psychology constructs like Sense of Coherence, Internal Locus of Control, Self-efficacy and Hardiness **as sources of coping mechanisms in high stress occupations like the specialized military.**



Qualitative results (analysing the results against the Ubuntu Life philosophy principles) revealed that meaningfulness seem to be linked to adaptability, a positive self-concept. Inter-connectedness point to the importance of having meaningful and interlinked interactions between the individual, the whole and the context to enable effective coping. There is a constant interplay between individual and group between the “I am because you are”, between the spiritual journey and the meaningful goals”. Four main themes associated with high levels of motivation during military selection: (1) Meaningfulness; (2) Adaptability / Manageability; (3) Positive Self-concept (image, confidence, discipline, Well-being) and (4) Inter-connectedness.

These themes revealed that military selection was indeed challenging on various levels.

Candidates that were able to cope effectively found that viewing the process as meaningful, having a belief in their own abilities and control, having personal drive towards overcoming obstacles while keeping their focus and feeling that they are part of something important, assisted them in coping effectively throughout the selection process.

This confirms research that point to meaningfulness seems to have a mediating impact on intrinsic motivation. Our study, findings confirmed that:

Motivation levels are influenced by personal meaning (Barrick & Mount), beliefs (Bandura, 1977)

That specific goals (Locke & Latham 1990), sense of purpose (Pargament, & Sweeney, 2011) and a willingness to accept challenges, commitment and engagement into activities (Bartone, Roland, Picano, & Williams, 2008, Hartman & Gronnerod, 2009) enhance performance motivation and

That intrinsic motivation appears to act as a mediating factor within the military training (Loney, 2016);

These findings were also confirmed by Johnsen, Sepik, Saus, Sanden, Olsen, & Hystad, (2017) who found that in the realm of operational duties, motivation was an important factor on perceived strain as well as performance satisfaction.

We found the survey responses (from the three year groups), overlapped in terms of the various references made by candidates to Positive psychology constructs.

Themes arose confirming the importance of specific constructs like Sense of Coherence, Locus of control, Self-efficacy and Hardiness within the specialized military context.

Responses to the open ended survey questions, the authors took care to not only focus on the concepts that were presented through the most frequently used codes but also identified additional ideas that were presented within the text as comments, as the open-ended survey question offers respondents the opportunity to add their thoughts in terms of wider issues which revealed rich and worthwhile data that enabled a better understanding of the Operational Forces selection context.

## ***Discussion***

In analysing the results against the Ubuntu Life philosophy principles, meaningfulness linked to adaptability a positive self-concept and Inter-connectedness point to the importance of having meaningful and interlinked interactions between the individual, the whole and the context to enable effective coping. There is a constant interplay between individual and group between the "I am because you are, between the spiritual journey and the meaningful goals".

From a theoretical perspective, we found that the Ubuntu philosophy is directly linked to related behavioural sciences theories from different disciplines that have repeated pointed towards the importance of meaningfulness and people's individual and shared needs for

meaning.....as **meaningfulness mediates how an individual perceives or makes sense of their own ability to understand, manage and make sense of life's challenges by viewing it as meaningful and worthy of effort.**

Korotkov, 1988 pointed to **the need for meaningfulness as a motivating factor in life.**

Antonovsky referred to the construct of Meaningfulness **that form part of his Sense of Coherence theory as the motivational aspect of coping with life's challenges. Meaningfulness according to Antonovsky provides the individual with a sense of purpose and a behavioural**

In the field of positive psychology, **Seligman's Well-being theory emphasise the human need for meaning. It encompasses five core elements required for well-being namely: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (Seligman, M., 2011).**

Carver & Scheier, 2017, p.400 point to **Optimism, Coping, and Well-Being as pathways to overcoming life challenges**

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) **concept of flow points to individual perception of their capacity, their level of interconnectedness and their available resources to effectively participate in the present challenges.** In his (2014) book *Flow as the foundation to Positive Psychology* he states: **"Flow research has yielded one answer, providing an understanding of experiences during which individuals are fully involved in the present moment. Viewed through the experiential lens of flow, a good life is one that is characterized by complete absorption in what one does...."**

- From both the quantitative as well as the qualitative studies conducted.....Meaningfulness and purpose was presented by all three year groups as being the most important reason for joining the Special Forces, for enduring the challenges presented during the training but also for being successful.
- To appreciate the cultural forces at play within the psyche of the (mainly) African candidates during Special Forces training, this exploration added to an appreciation of the African context and perspectives during Operational Forces training through an investigation of the Ubuntu Philosophy.

## ***Conclusion***

- Perhaps the time has come for us to leave our cultural comfort zones .....Hiding behind normative scientific approaches because it is safer and easier to prove in terms of cold science.....
- Perhaps as African behavioural scientists we should all investigate THE OTHER....the cultures that we are not part of.....that is different to our own.....to start appreciating the cultural and spiritual and contextual cues provided as insight into individual behaviour as the basis and starting point of our enquiries.



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