

IMPORTANT CHARACTERISTICS OF OPERATIONAL FORCE MEMBERS

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Introduction

The operational forces military context is generally acknowledged as one of the most stressful contexts as it is demanding of members on a physical, psychological, social level with organisational, intra- and inter-personal demands of an extreme nature (Gruber et al., 2009; Skomorovsky & Stevens, 2013). The South African Operational Forces – as a unit of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) – functions similarly to other such units internationally (Bartone et al., 2008; Gruber et al., 2009; Svendsen, 2014).

Despite many referring to their military careers as a vocation or a calling, the military as employer - no different from other organisations in this regard – need to continuously try to optimally balance unique requirements and available resources by recruiting, selecting and training individuals that are a good match for the organizational requirements.

Purpose

The purpose of the study was to obtain a better understanding of what it takes for individuals to cope with, attain success and flourish within this very demanding specialised military context.

A total of 14 Individual interviews were conducted in a qualitative exploratory study with the aim of allowing qualified and experienced operational force members to share what characteristics they viewed as important within the operational force environment.

The information gathered was to be used towards updating and refining the existing profile for screening and selection purposes and to consider what other skills, knowledge, abilities and other characteristics may be required to cope with new and possible future demands.

Literature

Wessels (2010) has provided a historical review of the integration and amalgamation of eight different military organisations to establish on the 27th of April 1994 the new South African National Defence Force (SANDF). This was an astounding accomplishment, considering that some of these entities had been sworn enemies before (Van der Waag, 2015). Groups that had been enemies were expected to serve together in the new dispensation and this transformed military was to serve the new democratically elected government.

Members of the Operational Forces as specialist military group are considered an elite group for whom the challenges associated with military service are even

more pronounced and extreme – thus placing very high demands on individuals who are to succeed in this context (Bartone, Roland, Picano, & Williams, 2008; Jensen & Wrisberg, 2014). Various coping indices such as hardiness, sense of coherence and self efficacy of operational force members are generally higher than that of the general population (de Beer & van Heerden, 2014, 2017) and have been shown to predict success (in training, graduation and performance) in a military context (Kelly et al., 2014).

The initial selection and training as well as ongoing maintenance of skills and operational readiness bring about high costs and thus necessitate the use of scientific processes to optimise effectivity in providing relevant information to identify, select, train and equip those individuals who will be able to effectively perform in this role and cope with the extreme demands associated with a career in the operational forces (Gruber, Kilcullen, & Iso-Ahola, 2009; Rumsey & Arabian, 2014). To this end it is important to understand the demands placed on individuals and what characteristics, skills and abilities may increase their probability of success.

Method

Sample

The sample comprised of 14 Operational Force members with years of experience ranging between 8 and 30 years. Individual members were contacted based on

their years of experience and they in turn also recommended others to be included in the research.

Purposive and convenience sampling was used to include members with short, medium and long service who were available to participate in the study.

Participants were informed of the purpose of the study and the principles of informed consent were explained. They were assured that the information shared would be kept secured, confidentiality maintained and that the identities of the participants would not be disclosed in documents for reporting on the study.

Measuring Instruments

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain information from the participants about the research topic - of better understanding the characteristics that active members viewed as important for success within the South African operational forces context.

At the start of the interview process, the purpose of the study was explained, informed consent obtained and permission requested to record the interview. One participant declined to be recorded and for this individual the researchers relied on handwritten and typed notes taken during the interview.

Procedure

Participants were invited individually to participate in the study. Experienced members also assisted to identify others that could be considered rich data sources who could contribute to the aim of the study.

The core interview questions were constructed and refined with input from experienced qualitative researchers.

Semi-structured interviews allowed for the same questions to be posed to all participants while further probing could be done based on the comments made and information shared during the interview.

Ethical considerations

Organisational approval was granted for the larger project of which this particular study formed part. Permission was obtained from the particular units in which the individuals served to allow them to participate during work time.

Individual consent was obtained to use the information obtained and for the individual interviews to be tape recorded. All participants agreed for the interview data to be used. (One participant declined for the interview to be tape recorded and the discussion was captured by means of typed and written notes of the researchers.)

RESULTS

Data Analysis

Content analysis was used as primary analysis method (Cresswell & Plano-Clarke, 2009) for identifying themes and topics to gain better understanding of the characteristics required of operational force members that are likely to help them to cope with and achieve success within this demanding context.

The interview content was electronically transcribed and thoroughly checked. The text was read multiple times and codes assigned and themes extracted as understanding grew and patterns emerged through a combination of deductive and inductive processes towards meaning making.

Some of the identified themes indicative of important personal characteristics were expected, such as physical, mental, psychological and interpersonal abilities. Additional characteristics that were extracted from the qualitative content analysis were values, humour, personal background, intergenerational characteristics.

The ability to manage ambiguity and coping with paradoxical demands was a theme that seemed to be supported by a variety of content.

Theme 1: Cognitive ability and agility

- “The more important is the cognitive ability – and the softer skills and to apply then correctly more important than the physical skills of shooting a weapon – running fast. “
- “Need person to be able to focus on what you are doing. “
- “Intelligent – you must be able to think very quickly. “
- “Physically fit, emotionally fit, ability to learn quickly. “
- “The complexity just grows and grows. The ability to understand and then to build on previous knowledge.”
- “If things go bad – you must always try to make a new plan – to make a success of it.”
- “A good operator must always have good initiative ... he must be able to solve something – or a problem.”
- “Quick, fast, adaptable, initiative, definitely ”

Theme 2: Physical ability, hardiness and endurance

- “Obvious – health must be strong “
- “Physical attributes – helps if you can carry weight ”
- “... the ones that are average ... but he is consistent”
- “You must be able to maintain a physical presence – must have the ability to acquire and learn a lot of skill and apply that. “
- “A reality is, you must have an above average person... Not a super human being – just above average.“
- “Balance in running, balance in body power, balance in willpower”
- “It is that kind of person that doesn’t give up – almost seeing how far he can push himself. Wants to see what his own limits are. ”

Theme 3: Psychological and mental resilience

- “You can observe resilience – early – you will be able to observe it.“
- “It is not personality – you must not be a softie.”
- “Singlemindedness” “Dedication, self-discipline, perseverance ”

- “But you must have the attitude that you have to work for it – it will not come easy.”
- “There is something in the mind – in the head – that is different!!”
- “May be they should teach us more emotional skills to cope”
- “... if I put my head on something, if I want to do something, I will keep on trying until I achieve what I wanted to. So, once I put my mind onto something I will keep on until the end. ”
- “if you cannot motivate yourself during bad times, you are going to struggle”
- “It’s definitely not physical. There are stronger, fitter, people, faster people. It is definitely mental.”

Theme 4: EQ, interpersonal skills (teamwork)

- “high on the list will be the softer skills, high EQ”
- “A person that has control of his emotional spaces – very good EQ“
- “They must have confidence – they must portray confidence.”

- “Humour takes you a long way – probably the biggest thing that takes over when it gets difficult.”
- “Friendship – the fear of disappointing those around you.”
- “The fact that if you are in a small buddy team – one must always be awake – shared accountability, responsibility.”
- “sense of belonging”
- “You are in this brotherhood – everything you do is done instinctively together – you plan together – do together – everything happens like that.”

Theme 5: Values

- “Character – the will to survive.” “Some courage – also important. “
- “Discipline in operation, exercises, small tasks also, take from other guys, loyalty, perseverance.” “Must be someone with a high standard of discipline. “
- “Just looking at people – if you see self-discipline- you know that there is a person who can organise his own space.”

- “Core values – and it goes about Military professionalism, Integrity, Respect and Accountability. “
- “I always had to work hard.”
- “I believed we did it for our country, - to me it was something that I wanted to do. ”
- “everyone who was an operator was like being brothers ”
- “Whenever you get into a situation where – obviously, you must fight for your life – you know the guy next to you is going to stand up – he is not going to leave you there.”

Theme 6: Personal background

- “When I grew up, I wanted to be a soldier – had a vision but did not know about SF. Had dreams of the type of soldier I wanted to be.“
- “My grandfather was also a soldier ” “my father also spent a bit of time in the military, on my mother’s side, her father was also in the military”
- “what drew me to the career – my father was an SFO”
- “At 18 – I wanted to go to the border (war)“

- “As a child I was more involved in physical activities“ “I used to run a lot at school“ “If you grow up easy – then you expect life to be easy.“
- “At school when we grew up – we were always going to become either police men or soldiers”
- “I played soccer with bare feet on rough surfaces. I walked long distances – I got cold sometimes.“ “Most guys came from farms, plots”
- “ ... Grew up in a military family. I saw the career first-hand, all the dimensions of what it involves “
- “Being professional soldier was always there“

Theme 7: Managing ambiguity and coping with paradoxical demands

- “Have to have the ability to almost live a dual life – and sometimes dual value systems – where you have to have a value system for the home and family life and a value system for the work. “
- “You have to be able to distinct between those two lives – to still maintain sanity. “
- “You must be able to adapt to the different roles.”

- “Sometimes the only way that operators can maintain sanity is to drink because they do not have the skill and the ability to move between the two lives.“
- “One of the coping mechanisms to cope was to overindulge in alcohol ”
- “You might go home – but you cannot switch off. If you go home – you cannot switch off .
- ” An operator must be able to put that behind him and just carry on. ”
- “You must be able to turn your back on it and walk away from it.”

Theme 8: Family

- “When you talk about family - you never really see your family.“
- “But it cost me – I lost my first wife – she said I am never at home – 10 days at home in 2 years. Second marriage the same.”
- “Expensive game – you pay the price in time ”
- “My life was not balanced – I did not have friends, did not have hobbies
 - All work related. Reading a story book – is a waste of time.”

- “For prospective operators – a heavy price. Family – a heavy price. Family have to know it will be hard going. The women who survive this kind of environment - need a selection process for prospective wives also.
- “The longest stint that I went without leave was for 8 years!!”
- “Always confronted with guys saying he has not been to his son’s birthday in 5 years.”

Discussion

The input provided by experienced operational force members provides an understanding of what it takes to cope with and be successful within this demanding context as is also evident from other research.

Some of the characteristics already form part of the selection profile that has been developed over years while others provide some focus on new aspects that have not been specifically identified or considered yet.

The cyclical qualitative-quantitative-mixed research processes (Huysamen, 1997) will be continued to further improve and enrich the understanding of the context and the specific demands – with the particular knowledge, skills, abilities and other characteristics required to function effectively and successfully within this very demanding domain.

Limitations

For many of the participants in the study English is not their first language. They may therefore have struggled to express themselves easily and fully in a language other than their first language. The participants focused a lot about their own selection and training – and in that sense did share important knowledge, skills, abilities and other characteristics – but did not elaborate to a significant degree on what would be needed in the future.

Conclusion

The use of the term passion is often encountered in this domain to describe what is required to deal with the inordinate demands that this career places on those who pursue it (Johansen, Laberg, & Martinussen, 2013). These qualitative results in which the own words and views of experienced operational force member can be “heard” provide a rich understanding of the characteristics that allow operational force members to cope with the demands of this context. The knowledge, specific dimensions, skills, abilities and other characteristics identified by means of this qualitative process can be further explored and also quantitatively measured to determine the utility and predictive validity thereof.

Continued research will help to ensure that the dynamic and ever-changing demands of the operational forces context are taken into account towards ongoing optimisation of profiles and processes to ensure optimal organisational and individual effectivity.

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