

## *Book Review*

# **Contemporary issues in South African Military Psychology**

*Nicole M Dodd, Petrus C Bester, and Justin van der Merwe (eds.)*

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At the time of publication, all three editors (i.e. Nicole Dodd, Petrus Bester and Justin van der Merwe) were associated with the South African Military Academy (SAMA), which is the Faculty of Military Science, Stellenbosch University. Right from the outset (Chapter 1), the editors briefly analyse the term ‘military psychology’ and provide a broad overview of what is known (i.e. previous research conducted on various psychological concepts) and how aspects of military psychology are contextualised within the broader South African National Defence Force (SANDF). In the remaining chapters, various scholars contribute, using military psychology as a ‘lens’ to give insight into contemporary issues experienced in the SANDF (p. 9).

Chapters 2 to 7 of the book focus on the student population of the SAMA. As pointed out by the editors (p. 8), the SAMA is the flagship of higher education in the SANDF and represents both residential students, who are officers on campus in Saldanha, and non-residential students (i.e. known as ‘interactive telematic education students’ who comprise officers and non-commissioned officers, but who are not physically on campus). SAMA students represent all four arms of service: the South African Army (SAA), the South African Military Health Service (SAMHS), the South African Air Force (SAAF), and the South African Navy (SAN). It might therefore be argued that the SAMA student sample is representative of the broader SANDF.

Chapter 2 presents research results, showing that demographic variables, such as gender, marital status, parental status and mode of study (i.e. being a non-residential or residential student) may influence the work–study–family interface of being a ‘first-generation student’ (see Heymann & Carolissen, 2011). The results can be applied to assist first-generation military students to understand issues associated with time-, strain-, and behavioural-based conflict, and to find a healthy balance in their work–study–family roles.

Chapter 3 presents the findings of both quantitative and qualitative results, in identifying salient factors, which contribute to students’ success (i.e. pass rate). Apart from cognitive abilities (e.g. memory and understanding), personality traits (specifically conscientiousness

and extraversion), commitment and resilience all show to be significant indicators of whether students will graduate. Additionally, the authors found that students who are older are more likely to seek academic assistance (as compared to younger students, who perform better on cognitive tasks). The findings can be used to refine the selection process of SAMA students and can also be incorporated in academic assistance programmes.

In Chapter 4, the author uses the Biographical Questionnaire for the Military Academy (BQMA) with both open-ended and fixed-response items to gather information (over the period 2011 to 2016) to identify factors that affect the psychosocial wellbeing of SAMA students. Broad themes that emerge as factors affecting psychosocial wellbeing are *motive* to study at SAMA, productivity and confidence, which directly emanate from *reading habits*; and intermittent social *stressors* (e.g. having family responsibilities, financial pressure, feeling lonely). Once again, the findings of this study can be used to assist academic support programmes.

In Chapter 5, the authors consider three prominent predictors of employees' turnover intentions, namely the violation or breach of the psychological contract between the employee and the organisation, affective organisational commitment, and job satisfaction. By conducting multiple regression analyses, results show that it is unlikely that soldiers with high levels of affective commitment and job satisfaction will consider resigning. Additionally, individuals who perceive a breach and/or violation of the psychological contract between themselves and the organisation are likely to leave the SANDF.

To add to this notion of understanding an employee's psychological bond with the SANDF, Chapter 6 considers whether there is a relationship between a positive psychological contract and the perceptions of organisational support and commitment. The authors conclude that adhering to the psychological contract does indeed relate to soldiers' affective commitment. Military career managers might find Chapters 5 and 6 useful to consider when having career discussions with unit members, because positive psychological contracts may "reduce uncertainty, shape behaviour, and give people a feeling of control over what happens to them in the organisation" (p. 84).

Chapter 7 presents the results of psychometric properties of one of the personality traits, as measured by the revised NEO Personality Inventory (see Costa & McCrae, 2008). More specifically, the research presented in this article focuses on the personality trait, conscientiousness, and the author finds the internal reliability of the six sub-facets (i.e. competence, order, dutifulness, achievement-striving, self-discipline and deliberation) to be acceptable. Further, the results show that each sub-facet is indeed a separate component, which all load on conscientiousness (as a single factor). These results, together with those presented in Chapter 3, show that the personality trait, conscientiousness, might be a reliable and valid predictor of academic success (i.e. pass rate). These findings are relevant in selecting future military students to study at the SAMA.

In the remaining three chapters of the book (Chapters 8, 9 and 10), it is reported how empirical data were collected from the broader SANDF. More specifically, Chapter 8 looks at the resilience and mental toughness within the South African Navy. In this

chapter, the psychometric properties of two different resilience scales are reported: the Dispositional Resilience Scale (DRS-15), which is often used in military contexts to assess hardiness; and the Mental Toughness Questionnaire (MTQ-18), which is applied in the sporting domain to assess performance under pressure. Results show that the SAN sample scored higher on both these measures, as compared to other military and civilian samples. Preliminary results on the psychometric properties of the MTQ-18 indicate that the MTQ-18 might be a better measure of resilience than the DRS-15, specifically in South African samples. These results are noteworthy, because additional work needs to be done on validating psychometric measures in the South African context. The authors encourage future researchers to investigate the validity of these two tests further, using larger, more diverse samples.

In Chapter 9, the authors investigate whether emotional intelligence and job satisfaction predict work engagement amongst individuals working at the Joint Operations Headquarters. Results revealed that job satisfaction is a better predictor of work engagement than emotional intelligence. As part of practical implications, the authors suggest that job rotation, and job enrichment could be introduced in the workspace to enhance work engagement.

Adding to the understanding of what leads to increased work engagement, Chapter 10 presents data from a cross-sectional study amongst infantry soldiers, investigating whether low levels of work engagement might lead towards the termination of work contracts. The results show that soldiers who consider resigning are low on two sub-scales of engagement (Schreuder & Coetzee, 2021) namely *dedication* (an emotional component of being connected to the job and employees whilst working) and *absorption* (a cognitive component, which relates to being alert and being involved at work). Interestingly, the physical component of engagement (i.e. *vigour*, which is about being physically involved in work tasks) was not a significant predictor of the intention to resign. By getting infantry soldiers to connect emotionally to their daily tasks (e.g. by giving them meaning and purpose) and by stimulating them cognitively, turnover in the SANDF could be reduced.

Finally, Chapter 11 makes a refreshing, theoretical contribution. The authors propose a trauma-survivor-oriented framework, which focuses on positive psychological constructs and psychological growth. The model is specifically formulated for combat-active military personnel, where risk factors can be identified before employment by screening for risk factors prior to joining the SANDF, and by facilitating psychological growth for pre-, during and post-deployment phases. The proposed model shows to have practical value, in that those soldiers who have experienced adversity and trauma, can overcome the negative effect thereof by focusing on various elements of psychological wellbeing. In doing so, combat-readiness in the SANDF can be sustained.

This book, together with the book previously published by Van Dyk (2016), provides a broad picture of theory and practice of Military Psychology as a science in Africa. One would like to see future researchers focusing on the mental health of military personnel during operations, deployments and working in their daily capacity, especially after the Covid-19 global pandemic.

As a final thought, this book may show to have practical value for those working in higher education who develop academic support programmes, for military career managers who make important decisions about soldiers' careers, and for those leaders who may influence decisions on policy and planning. One can draw on the content of this book to gain a thorough understanding of how the future leaders in the SANDF can best be groomed and developed to enhance their full potential and strengthen our armed forces.

**Yolandi-Eloïse Fontaine (née Janse van Rensburg)<sup>28</sup>** 

*Stellenbosch University*

## References

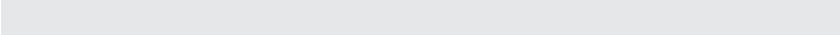
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## Endnotes

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- <sup>28</sup> Yolandi-Eloïse Fontaine (*née* Janse van Rensburg) served as an officer in the South African National Defence Force over the period 2000 to 2014. She resigned from the South African Military Health Service, where she worked as an industrial psychologist, to pursue her dream of obtaining a PhD. She received a Joint PhD degree from both Ghent University, Belgium, and the University of Cape Town in 2019. Yolandi is an early-career researcher and currently serves as Chair of the Industrial Psychology Department, Faculty of Military Science, Stellenbosch University. Yolandi teaches both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Her research interests include honesty-humility, implicit measures, and topics related to career psychology.