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Core values and attitudes among Swedish conscripts volunteering for international missions: An exploratory study

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to assess core values and attitudes among conscribed soldiers volunteering for international peacekeeping missions (n=146), by a comparison with conscripts from the same class and regiment that did not apply for international missions (n=275). The sample consisted of an entire class of conscribed soldiers whereof 389 completed all three repeated surveys. There were no demographical differences between the groups. Volunteers expressed higher altruistic basic values and held more positive attitudes toward their military education. The findings in this study are of importance for the Swedish armed forces as success in international missions is dependent on soldiers with sound values in order to better understand different cultures in the areas where deployments now are taking place.¹

Introduction

The Swedish Armed Forces (SAF) has recently been re-organised from a previous invasion-based defense to a much smaller force with international focus. Consequently, in 2010, the earlier mandatory military enlistment system was replaced with a system of contracted voluntary enlistment for the armed forces (SOU 2009:63). When mandatory enlistment for the SAF was in practice, almost the entire yearly group of males aged 18 years with Swedish citizenship underwent a pre-screening for military fitness — where physical, cognitive, emotional and social functioning, and fitness were assessed. While pre-screening was mandatory, only between 5-10% of the potential recruits were actually mandatorily enlisted in the last 5-7 years of conscription. This gave the SAF good opportunities to enlist the best-fitted and most motivated individuals of each yearly group. The new recruitment scenario has raised concerns about the quality and standards of the potential recruits, not only in regard to physical fitness for military missions, but also with respect to mental fitness to successfully meet the challenges facing soldiers involved in international missions.

¹ This study has been funded by the Swedish Armed Forces.

During the conscription era, conscripts served 11 months and thereafter had the possibility to voluntarily apply for international military service or to start officer education training. Sweden has a long tradition of peacekeeping missions in, e.g., former Yugoslavia and Lebanon, and since 2002, in Afghanistan.

According to Richardson, Op den Buijs, & van der Zee (2011), an increasing proportion of ethnic minorities in the western world has made cultural diversity an important issue in many organizations. The Swedish Parliament has stated that the SAF should reflect the society in whole, regarding sex and ethnicity. The importance of cultural diversity has also been adopted by the armed forces (Winslow & Dunn, 2002; Richardson, Bosch & Moelker, 2007). This depends mainly on two primary considerations: (1) an increase in numerical troops deployed in Islamic countries (such as Afghanistan) requires an understanding of Eastern cultures, and (2) the fact that a defence force usually should be a reflection of society in terms of gender, socioeconomic class, religion, and ethnicity (Richardson *et al*, 2011). Most countries in Europe have moved from defence forces built on conscription to all voluntary defence forces, signalling that the armed forces are competing with civilian employers in terms of being able to recruit personnel. This is a challenge when civilian employers often offer higher salaries and better career opportunities (Van der Meulen & Soeters, 2007).

The sample in this study consisted of all recruits in a logistics regiment from the last class of mandatorily-enlisted Swedish soldiers and the military training that they experienced when completing the required activities. During the later phase of mandatory training, all participants were offered to voluntarily enlist as contracted soldiers for international military missions. The purpose of this exploratory study was to compare those soldiers who voluntarily enlisted for international service with those not volunteering in terms of values, leadership attributes of their closest officers, and their individual perceptions of the military training education. Earlier research (e.g., Bennett, Boesch & Haltiner, (2005); Gibson, Griepentrog, & Marsh, (2007); & Legree *et al*, (2000)) shows that military education, leadership, and family influence all significantly impact an individual's choice to serve on an international mission.

Both groups were thus mandatorily enlisted during this study. By identifying traits and psychological dispositions that characterised those soldiers who voluntarily enlisted for contracted international peacekeeping missions after completing mandatory enlistment, such findings may contribute to the knowledge of the mental fitness of future, voluntarily contracted recruits serving in SAF's international missions.

Values Orientation and Attitudes Predicting Voluntary Enlistment

With data from a large, national US sample, Bachman, Segal, Freedman-Doan, & O'Malley (2000) found that high school students with more "pro-military" attitudes and those with a more positive attitude towards the tangible benefits associated with working for the armed forces, showed a higher interest for future voluntary enlistment. When analysing the motives behind enlistment decisions among American high-school attendants, Eighmey (2006) distinguished between tangible occupational goals such as job benefits or education, and intrinsic and intangible institutional goals – such as fidelity. In a survey study among participants in the US reserve force, Griffith (2008) found that soldiers motivated by intrinsic, institutional goals reported a higher

willingness to participate in international missions, remain in the army, and serve their country compared to those with more instrumental motives. It can also be assumed that basic values – as well as attitudes related to what Richardson, Verweij, & Winslow (2004) have described as “moral fitness” in relation to fulfilling peacekeeping missions – comprise the ethical requirements to be upheld by the military personnel in the complex types of conflicts wherein peacekeepers are summoned.

Method

Procedure:

The present study was based on data from three repeated surveys distributed to all the initial mandatorily-enlisted soldiers in a logistics regiment. The first questionnaire (N = 475) was completed one week after joining. During this period of basic training, the mandatorily-enlisted learned fundamental soldier skills such as the handling of personal weaponry, marching, etc. The first questionnaire was administered by researchers from the Swedish National Defence College, who gave information about the aim of the study and the voluntary nature of participation. The following two data collections were acquired by officers at the regiment in accordance with written instructions regarding procedure and information given to the participants. In all three measurements, a document that informed the participants about ethical considerations, confidential treatment of data, and voluntary participation was included at the beginning of the questionnaire, together with contact information of the researchers. Each participant was asked to provide his or her signed consent for participation in the study and was also asked to provide such authorization for use of his or her social security number in order that all three questionnaires could be matched.

The second questionnaire (N = 436) was completed after the first term of basic training (month 4) and the third questionnaire (N = 421) was completed after the completion of unit training (month 11) — one week before the conscripts would complete their compulsory military service. In total, 389 conscripts responded to the questionnaire on all three occasions. Most of the attrition occurred during the initial training period. In all, about 5 percent failed to complete their mandatory enlistment duties. There were also a number of participants who joined the regiment at a somewhat later point of time who only completed the second and third surveys.

Participants:

The mean and median age of the participants at the start of their education was 20 years; 97 percent of the respondents were males and 3 percent females. Thirty-eight persons failed to report their country of origin, while 96 percent of the respondents were born in Sweden. All participants were Swedish citizens, a requirement for inclusion in mandatory military enlistment. In all, 44 respondents failed to report the military rank for which they were to be trained. Of the completed responses, 72.5 percent were private soldiers while 21 percent were non-commissioned group officers. The remaining 6.5 percent were non-commissioned platoon officers. The term “non-commissioned officer” (NCO) here refers to conscripts serving as NCOs. Those conscripts had high psychological and physical assessments at the time of enlistment and several served 15 months instead of 11 months depending on their respective positions.

Instruments:

For an overview of the scales used in the study and in which of the surveys they were presented, see Table 1 below.

Table 1
Overview

	1	2	3
Initial Expectations of the Training	X		
Personality Traits (PQ)	X		
Sensation Seeking	X		
Basic Values	X		
Psychological Hardiness		X	X
Psychological Fitness for Missions		X	X
Assessments of Quality of Training			X
Assessments of Platoon Officer (Positive)			X
Assessments of Platoon Officer (Negative)			X
Benefits/Risks with International Missions			X
Application for Voluntary Enlistment			X

Basic Values

Basic values were measured in the first survey by selected items from an inventory developed by Österberg and Carlstedt (2010) and were calculated from three indexes according to the structure that had been established in earlier studies of conscripts (Österberg & Carlstedt, 2010). The values were:

Altruistic:

($\alpha = .70$, three items: “I willingly do sacrifices to help others”; “I care about people”; and “I feel sympathy for individuals who are worse off than I”).

Family-orientated:

($\alpha = .69$, four questions: “One of my goals in life is to make my parents proud”; “A parent’s duty is to do their utmost for their children”; “You always have to respect your parents”; and “Family is an important part of my life”).

Patriarchal:

($\alpha = .71$, three questions: “If a woman earns more than her husband, there are bound to be problems”; “Men are almost always the better political leaders than women”; and “When jobs are scarce, men have more right to jobs than women”).

Attitudes to the military system and military education:

Initial expectations with respect to mandatory military training were assessed in the survey by an inventory consisting of nine items, e.g., “physical training” and “a good education” ($\alpha = .85$), developed by Österberg & Carlstedt (unpublished manuscript).

Perceived negative aspect of the platoon officer’s leadership:

This was assessed in the third survey by a scale derived from the Hogan Development Survey (Hogan & Hogan, 2001). This scale consisted of 22 items ($\alpha = .92$), assessing potential negative aspects of leadership, e.g., that the platoon officer “does not trust other persons”; and “act impulsively.” A high value on this scale thus indicates a negative attitude to the leadership of the platoon officer.

The perceived quality of the military education:

This value was measured in the third survey by an inventory consisting of six items ($\alpha = .83$) (Österberg & Carlstedt, 2010). General attitudes towards the platoon officer were also measured in the third survey by an inventory developed by Österberg and Carlstedt (2010) consisting of 11 positively formulated items ($\alpha = .94$).

Potential benefits and risks associated with international missions:

These factors were measured by an inventory consisting of 14 items in the third survey (Österberg & Carlstedt, 2008). An exploratory factor analysis with varimax rotation gave a two-factor solution that explained 56% of the total variance in the inventory. The first factor ($\alpha = .88$), with an eigenvalue of 5.75, included positive values or benefits with international missions and consisted of 11 items, e.g., “developing self-discipline” and “doing something to be proud of.” The second factor, ($\alpha = .90$), with an eigenvalue of 2.07, consisted of three items that concerned potential risks and dangers, e.g., “getting injured or killed.”

Results

Out of 421 participants completing the questions in the third survey on their plans after completing military conscription, 35% (146 persons), reported that they had applied, or had decided to apply, for international peacekeeping missions, while 65% (275 persons) reported other plans. Tests with χ^2 revealed no significant differences between volunteers and non-volunteers in regard to sex, nation of birth, or military rank. In terms of physical fitness, the volunteers reported a better improvement of strength during their military education ($\chi^2 = 9.99$; $df = 4$; $p < .05$) and more frequent physical training during duty ($\chi^2 = 12.63$; $df = 4$; $p < .05$).

There was also a multiple-choice question asking the respondents what plans they had after their compulsory military service. Of those not wanting to continue with the SAF, starting work in the civilian sector was the most common statement, followed by studying and travelling.

Table 2

Basic attitude(s) towards military education and international missions among conscribed soldiers not volunteering (n=275) or volunteering (n=146) for international peacekeeping service after completed military training; t-tests for the group differences; alpha coefficients.

<i>Basic values</i>	<u>NON-VOLUNTEERS</u>		<u>VOLUNTEERS</u>		t	α
	M	SD	M	SD		
Family values	4.81	0.79	5.02	0.81	*	.69
Altruistic values	4.82	0.86	5.02	0.83	*	.70
Patriarchal values	2.01	1.05	1.98	1.00	n.s.	.71

Attitudes toward and expectations of military issues

Expectations	5.03	0.69	5.25	0.58	**	.85
Opinion towards platoon officer	4.64	0.84	5.07	0.77	***	.94
Perceived negative qualities of leadership (platoon officer)	2.40	0.74	2.14	0.68	**	.92
Perceived quality of education	4.14	0.94	4.65	0.75	***	.83
Attitudes to international missions:						
Benefits	4.30	0.74	4.88	0.56	***	.88
Dangers	4.20	1.17	4.45	1.19	*	.90

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

In regard to basic values, the volunteers reported significantly higher altruistic as well as family-oriented values than the comparison group. Both groups reported, on average, low patriarchal values and did not differ in this attitudinal area as is shown in Table 2.

Table 2 further presents the attitudes and expectations concerning military training for volunteers and non-volunteers. The volunteers had higher initial positive expectations regarding mandatory training, and they, to a significantly higher degree, reported that the military training contributed to their own personal and professional development as well as met their personal expectations. They generally expressed more positive attitudes to their platoon officers. Not surprisingly, the volunteers reported significantly more positive aspects and potential personal advantages associated with international peacekeeping missions, but as shown in Table 2, they were obviously also more aware of the potential risks associated with their future missions.

Discussion

Basic values and attitudes:

The volunteers held stronger “family-oriented” and “altruistic” core values than non-volunteers, while the two groups did not differ in regard to “patriarchal” values. According to Richardson et al., (2004), ethics and morality are on the top of an “ethics pyramid” where (basic) values constitute the foundation. If the higher, more *applied* levels of the pyramid (i.e., ethics and morality) are not based on commonly shared values, they do not serve to properly influence individual behaviour or decision processes, particularly not in complex and/or stressful conditions such as they may appear in peacekeeping missions. Furthermore, Richardson et al., (2004), claim that similar to physical fitness, “moral fitness” needs to be regularly practiced in everyday life (applied wisdom) to be upheld. Moreover, moral fitness needs to be rooted in basic communally-shared values and these authors suggest that it is possible and necessary

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for the military community to foster this among its members by daily “application and practice of the principles of accountability and responsibility” (Richardson et al., 2004, p. 109).

The volunteers reported significantly more favourable attitudes to their mandatory military training, with higher initial expectations and further on, more favourable attitudes to the performance of the platoon officers and the actual quality of their completed training. The more pro-military attitudes among the participants enlisting voluntarily are not unexpected in concordance with the findings of previous studies on the associations between pro-military attitudes and the willingness to serve in the armed forces (e.g., Bachman et al., 2000; Griffith, 2008).

Peace-keeping missions raise other kinds of demands on the participating soldiers than traditional military missions in terms of moral responsibility and accountability (Richardson, Verweij, & Winslow, 2004). Although the theme of morale issues in relation to peace-keeping missions was not raised in this survey, it was shown that the volunteers had a higher degree of altruistic core values.

After the transition to an AVF, the SAF is more likely to operate in different areas around the world, which puts new demands on the soldiers carrying out the missions. In the conscription system, the vast majority of conscripts were White, Swedish-born men between 18-20 years old. Within the new system, there is a more diverse and heterogeneous composition of the SAF in both age and experience; this could be a fruitful area for research in the future.

Limitations of the study.

As this study was based on participants from the last year of mandatory military service, there are limitations in generalising research findings of a system based entirely on voluntary enlistment. Thus, while we suggested that the participants who chose to volunteer for further enlistment represented a positive selection of this sample in several ways, we should keep in mind that, with respect to a population basis, the entire group of enlisted soldiers constituted a positive selection of military fitness during the last period of “mandatory” enlistment. It therefore remains an open issue whether the same positive selection mechanisms will be possible to uphold with the transition to a fully professional army. Further, studies should address basic values and attitudes among soldiers in the new system of voluntariness.

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