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Manuscripts

1
2
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The link between conscription experience and conscripts' attitude towards national

military service at the end of training: An example from Estonia

Abstract

The purpose of the study is to investigate the relationship between the experience of

conscripts in their training period and their subsequent attitude towards national military

service immediately after training. Self-report questionnaire is used to measure the

experiences of Estonian conscripts (n=518) in three categories: perceived stress, applied

coping strategies and evaluation of training as important. Attitude towards national military

service is measured as a critical versus neutral/positive answer to an open-ended question.

We found that a perceived reduction in general quality of life, concerns about what is

happening at home, and experiencing/expressing negative emotions were associated with a

critical attitude. In contrast, taking a proactive outlook towards training and finding military

specific aspects personally important were associated with a more neutral/positive attitude.

Our findings emphasise the importance of improving the conscription training experience in

order to foster less critical attitudes towards service, and are discussed from a person-

environment perspective.

Introduction

Although conscription (or draft) is relatively widely practiced worldwide (Barany, 2017;

Bove & Cavatorta, 2012), the relevance of conscription as a research topic can easily be

dismissed in a world where military service is seen increasingly as a professional affair. In an

age of biotechnological improvement of human capabilities, with more talk of cognitive

warfare, research into conscription may sound somewhat outdated. However, there are

countries where, for unique historical, social or (geo) political reasons, conscription is still

practised in some form. A post from The National Commission on Service in the United

States (2018) estimates that about seventy-five countries have some form of mandatory

service, with some countries planning a reintroduction (e.g., France and Morocco).[1]

By definition, conscription can refer to any policy which relies on the threat or use of force to

recruit members into the military (Asal et al., 2017). The backbone of conscription is a

behavioural expectation that, in a future when duty calls, a well-trained force of reservists

will be willingly ready for national defence. While there is an ongoing discussion about the

influence mandatory military service can have on state military affairs and public support for

armed conflicts (Henderson & Seagren 2014; Vasquez, 2005; Pickering, 2011; Horowitz &

Levendusky, 2011; Kriner & Shen, 2016), little is known about the link between conscription

experience and attitudes at the end of training. However, national defence strategy implies

territorial presence and relies on the assumption that a trained military force will be secured

through mobilisation in times of need. There is an expectation that called-up reservists (i.e.,

those who have completed conscription training) will form an adequately trained and

motivated defence force when threats emerge. However, the hoped-for relationship between

defence expenditure invested in the training of conscripts and reservists and the level of

national security they eventually deliver may not be practically realised. The performance of

forcibly mobilized reservists may not necessarily meet expectations (Ben-Ari & Lomsky-

Feder, 2011), whether due to non-participation in training/reserve service, low motivation to

learn due to poor attitudes towards military training, or anti-war and anti-military sentiment.

Studies showing the relevance of conscript and reservist attitudes in mobilization-based

defence are emerging. Among Finnish conscripts' the relationship between attitudes towards

conscription and the subsequent role of reservists was recently explored by Kosonen,

Puustinen and Tallber (2019). Interviews were conducted with conscripts who were either

liable for non-military service or with those who had completed conscription but

subsequently applied for non-military service. Whilst most respondents expressed a personal readiness to fulfil their national defence responsibilities, the specific military aspect of service was seen as a problem; interviewees wanted to perform non-military tasks related to their civilian expertise. Other concerns included unwanted obligation for conscription and moral dilemmas about killing. The authors refer to the possibility that people who question the system, their responsibilities or their role as reservists might be lost for national defence. This suggests that in the case of forced enlistment, high motivation to serve, as might be expected by authorities, should not be taken for granted among reservists. Also, if conscription or reservist military training has been perceived stressful and meaningless, then it is reasonable to suppose that any critical attitudes towards military service and national defence may be strengthened. In order to expect reservists' motivated contribution to national defence it is crucial to evoke supportive attitudes towards national service. Conscription may prove to be an effective way not only for military training but also in attitude management. Individual experience of conscription is important from the perspective of learning professional skills but also to ensure reservists are motivated when called for duty.

To make a more justified assessment of reservists' defence capability, it is important to investigate their attitudes towards national military service based on their exposure to the conscription experience (Griffith, 2011; Jones & Smith, 2010). In our research, we examine the relationship between conscription experience and conscripts' attitudes towards national military service at the end of their training. Our aim is to identify elements of the experience which have the power to predict *post eventum* attitude as either critical or neutral/positive. This link, if established, will be vital to consider in countries where conscription is applied, or considered for reintroduction.

The literature review below starts by discussing aspects involved in behavioural modifications. We do that combining concepts proposed by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975; 2010)

and Bandura (1989; 2001; 2006) focusing especially on the role of attitudes in predicting

behaviours and their subsequent modification as a consequence of interaction taking place

between the behaving Agent and the Environment. Conscription will then be discussed as a

particular type of learning environment where conscripts are expected not only to acquire

military skills (ability to perform) but also build supportive attitudes towards national defence

(willingness to perform).

From Attitude to Behaviour and Back Again

In order to make predictions about the likelihood of a wanted behaviour occurring in the

future (e.g., performance of post-conscripts when called to national defence), we need to

investigate relevant factors preceding the behaviour. Behavioural precedents, comprising of

individual attitudes, subjective norms and perceived control are notably researched within

theoretical frameworks of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1985) and reasoned action (Fishbein &

Ajzen, 1975). Norms are found to interact with social identity to influence attitudes,

behavioural willingness, and actual behaviour (Smith & Louis, 2008; Smith & Louis, 2009)

being especially influential in high uncertainty conditions (Smith, Hogg, Martin & Terry,

2007) and in conditions of peer influence (Jung, Shim, Jin & Khang, 2016). Norms for

attending military service can be seen as favoured or disfavoured in a given country (Ben-Ari

& Lomsky-Feder, 2011), society or subgroup. In relation to conscription, it has been

suggested that although personal characteristics are important, other variables, such as social

status or school achievement, may also have an impact on service motivation (Taubman-Ben-

Ari & Findler, 2006). Reservists, in addition to being able to be called to arms, are also

military ambassadors to society. Referring to them as certain types of social and

organisational hybrids, Lomsky-Feder, Gazit, and Ben-Ari (2008) have compared them to

migrants traveling between military and civilian spheres; they are both outside and inside the

military system. This may mean that any negative attitudes towards their service not only

affect their own willingness to contribute but also spread through their social circles, creating a wider network of opinions and potentially influencing the other two elements of behavioural intent: norms and perceived behavioural control.

Studies show that belief in one's own ability to perform a behaviour successfully (i.e., one's perceived behavioural control) increases the intention to do so. Study on school children, for example, reveals that perception of their own efficiency in knowledge and thinking skills can positively influence future intentions to participate in the task (Huang, Chiu & Hong, 2016). One might argue that the influence of some form of perceived behavioural control on actual behaviour has been seen during the Vietnam era, when voluntary enlistment increased not because of the calling but for an opportunity to avoid being drafted later, which might make combat more likely (Shields, 1980). In the conscription environment call-ups may choose to become drafted voluntarily, to get 'the term' done so they can go ahead with their lives afterwards. Behavioural control manifesting in voluntary enlistment for conscription can also be seen as a way of terror management if threats are perceived to be present (Taubman-Ben-Ari & Findler, 2006). However, we also observe behavioural control being exercised in the other direction when conscription (and therefore being called up for service) is innovatively resisted or evaded by call-up selectees.

The relationships between attitudes, behavioural intentions and behaviours have been widely demonstrated in research (see for example Elliott, Brewster, Thomson, Malcolm & Rasmussen, 2015; Bashir & Madhavaiah, 2014). Indications that attitude-behaviour consistency increases in future oriented behaviours (Rabinovich, Morton & Postmes, 2010) are especially important when expecting performance from reserve forces. Attitude predicts behaviour even more in conditions of uncertainty (Fung, Griffin & Dunwoody, 2018; Glasman & Albarracin, 2006), as in a situation of mobilisation. Findings such as these suggest that reservists' attitudes towards military service are important to consider when

predicting their mobilisation behaviour. This is especially pertinent in a politically unstable

world and in countries which rely heavily on reservists' contributions.

When discussing people's will to behave in one way or another, it is necessary to add an

element of self-regulation. Bandura's (2002) Social Cognitive Theory states that people self-

regulate their behaviour by engaging in activities that give them satisfaction and a sense of

self-worth. People naturally disengage from potentially harmful conduct unless they feel that

it is morally wrong to do so. What happens between the person and the environment (as a

result of expressed behaviour) can have a reciprocal loop back to behaviour, not directly but

via psychological precursors of behavioural intention (attitudes, norms and behavioural

control). The course of moral actions is processed based on the reciprocal interplay of

personal and environmental influences, corresponding to individual and conscription

experience in our study (see Figure 1 for illustration).
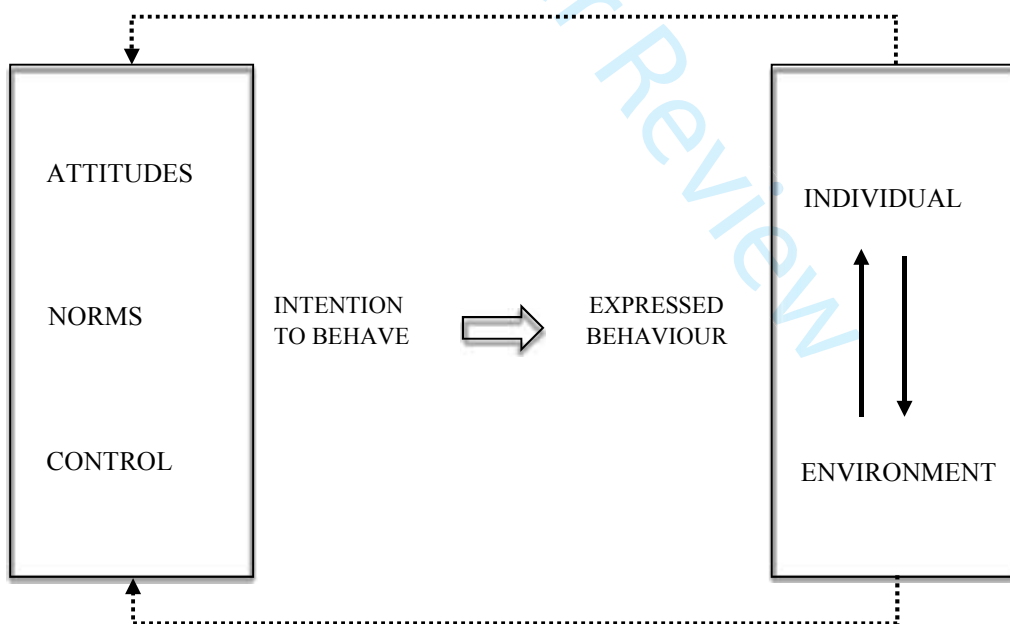
Figure 1 *Reciprocal looping between components of behavioural intention and interactional*

mechanism of expressed behaviour (source: Parmak, 2015).

For reservists to be expected to contribute to national defence by engaging wilfully in

potentially harmful conduct, a positive conscription experience needs to be integrated back

into behavioural causation via a positive attitude (with supportive norms and wanted

behaviour) by reciprocal looping. Combining concepts of reasoned action (Fishbein & Ajzen,

1975; 2010) and reciprocal causation (Bandura, 2006), it can be stated that the result of every

interaction between the individual and their environment, after certain behaviour is

expressed, is fed back into the psychological precursors of the next behavioural intentions

and subsequent behaviours (illustrated in Figure 1) by reciprocal looping. This integrates

person-in-environment consequences (box: Individual ↔ Environment) and behavioural

causation (box: Attitudes – Norms – Behaviours).

Following this model, in order to expect reservists' motivated contribution to national

defence it is crucial to grant their supportive attitude towards national service. Individual

conscription experience is vital in shaping attitudes that affect reservist involvement, but also

in learning the military skills required in the event of mobilisation. In examining the

relationship between factors in the conscription environment and conscripts' attitudes

towards national service, the present research focuses on the interaction between conscription

environment and attitude formation; key components in the above model.

Conscripts in a Non-Voluntary Learning Environment

The present study does not measure conscripts' learning outcomes nor their behaviour if they

were called for active service. However, if conscripts are in conflict with their enforced

conscription training, then their attitudes may be negative and their military learning may

suffer because of this. In turn, this could reduce the effectiveness of any subsequent military

performance. It is therefore relevant to consider what might happen to learning in a non-

voluntary environment and how it might be related to attitudes and potential behaviour.

Whether conscription is imposed in a regular peace-time environment or in an emergency, recruitment generally takes place involuntarily and may be perceived as unwanted by the recruited individual. There is little choice whether to accept or not based on the individual's personal preferences or life perspectives; creating the feeling of inequality and forced confinement for some (Song, 2015). Adler et al., (2013) showed that service aspects perceived as stressful are different amongst conscripts compared to occupationally oriented volunteers; conscripts experience more difficulties in adjusting to the military service. Discomfort is more likely when characteristics of a particular environment are in sharp contrast with personal needs and preferences. The misfit between the person and the organisation finds expression in low morale (Ramsey, van den Berk-Clark & Patterson, 2015), high stress (Mostafa, 2016) and poor engagement (Alfes, Shantz & Alahakone, 2016), leading to severe dissatisfaction (Jaiswal, Dash & Mishra, 2016).

Conscription can be seen as a type of non-voluntary learning environment where those who are drafted learn something in order to later apply it. According to Vroom's Expectancy Theory (Vroom, 1964) it can be expected that a person who perceives their environment as congenial will then be interested in learning something new and adapt (Parmak, Euwema & Mylle, 2012). In contrast, a person who does not perceive the environment as matching their needs is neither interested nor motivated to engage with learning. The mismatch between the person and environment can be a serious learning barrier where learning should take place over longer periods and continuous motivation is crucial. Artino and Stephens (2009) have shown that Naval Academy students' motivational beliefs, such as self-efficacy and task value, along with negative emotions such as boredom and frustration, are conversely related with their course satisfaction, motivation and course outcomes. The underlying expectation in adult education, that the learner is making a motivated choice to learn, may not apply in the

conscription environment, and sometimes even in professional military settings (Cornell-d'Echert, 2012, Thain, McDonough & Priestley, 2008).

The relationship between learners' dispositions, learning motivation and learning outcomes is supported by numerous studies. Stanhope, Pond III and Surface (2013), for example, found that self-evaluative trainee dispositions are related to learning outcome through learners' motivation and allocation of effort in military training even when cognitive ability is controlled. Ainley (2006) conceptualised interest as a key variable in learning motivation and showed that, for learning to be effective, interested engagement is necessary. Learning motivation was defined in this study as an affective state (comprising of arousal, alertness, attention and concentration, or a certain type of energised attendance).

Affect plays an important role in shaping attitudes as well as changing already formed attitudes (Forgas, 2004). In addition to the links with learning outcomes, research suggests the importance of the learning environment in shaping attitudes towards the subject (Vandecandelaere, Speybroeck, Vanlaar, Fraine & Damme, 2012). For example, Hofstein, Gluzman, Ben-Zvi, and Samuel (1979) have shown that learning environment variables such as goal orientation, satisfaction, and classroom organisation promoted a positive attitude toward the subject, while course difficulties and interpersonal tensions were associated with negative attitudes. Research like the above suggests that if there is a motivational mismatch between conscripts and their training then this could be negatively associated with their attitudes and learning outcomes, and, potentially, with their defensive duties.

The Present Study

Although it will be a political and not scholarly decision whether the nation applies conscription or not, reservists' negative attitude towards national military service may impact on their enthusiasm and willingness to respond when duty calls, and, as such, may

compromise national security. In our paper, we intend to investigate, in a large Estonian

sample, whether conscripts' attitude towards national defence can be predicted by factors in

their conscription experience. Our "dependent variable", conscripts' attitudes towards

national military service, is operationalised as critical versus neutral/positive responses to an

open-ended question on the need for national military service in Estonia. Our "independent"

or predictor variables representing conscription experience, are operationalised quantitatively

through perceived stressors (elements of training experienced as stressful), applied coping

strategies (techniques which were seen as helpful in dealing with training demands) and

reported importance of specific training aspects (use of different knowledge and skills in

training). Our questionnaire originates from the Alder et al (2013) study where it was used to

identify information relevant to the mental health of volunteers and conscripts from different

NATO nations. Although only using a small sample (N = 121) from different countries, the

authors found that certain variables were rated as more important for conscripts than

volunteers in military training; for example, lack of down time/personal time.

The ultimate aim of the present research is to emphasize the relevance of, and provide an

empirical basis for, the positive formation of conscripts' attitudes towards national defence

during their non-voluntary military service. Our purpose is to demonstrate the importance of

the link between conscription experience and conscripts' defence related attitudes. In the

Adler et al (2013) study, the authors also carried out a limited number of interviews in

addition to the questionnaire administration. In general, there appeared to be some

connection, which one might reasonably expect, between the subject of the questionnaire

items and the interview comments. For example, increased stress was often reported in

interviews as producing negative feelings or attitudes towards training. Again, as one might

expect, interview comments suggested that trying to actively implement coping strategies was

generally a positive thing to do and could boost morale. One must note that there was no

formal analysis of the relationship between questionnaire responses and interview data, and also that the above findings were not completely consistent; for example, some recruits reported in interviews that increased stress demands had no effect on them. Nevertheless, a reasonable assumption to make in the present study is that, in general, reporting of increased stress will be associated with negative attitudes towards military service, while attempts to implement coping strategies, and rating training aspects as important, will generally be associated with more positive attitudes. This reasoning leads us to formulating the following hypotheses relating to responses at the end of the conscripts' training:

Hypothesis 1: Higher ratings in response to stressors (i.e., more stress) will be associated with a more negative attitude towards national military service.

Hypothesis 2: Higher ratings on the use of coping strategies (i.e., more attempts to use those strategies) will be associated with a more positive attitude towards national military service.

Hypothesis 3: Higher ratings for the importance of different training aspects (i.e., the more useful those aspects appear) will be associated with a more positive attitude towards national military service.

In addition, by collecting data in a greatly increased sample of Estonian conscripts, we hope to identify refined questionnaire factors that can be used for possible future studies in other countries relying on conscription as their defence strategy. Thus, an exploratory factor analysis will be performed on the questionnaire responses before we go on to use these in predicting attitudes towards national service. If national defence is built on the will of the people, the conscription service should keep pace with the changes in the expectations of generations. This research is an attempt to identify key variables for analysing the conscription environment from the eyes of the beholder or conscripts themselves.

Method

Sample & Procedure

The final database consisted of 518 respondents aged 18-20 years old, sampled from the entire cohort at one military unit in Estonia at the end of their mandatory conscription service. In Estonia, conscripted military service is compulsory for all physically and mentally healthy male citizens. The service begins with 8 or 11 months of conscription (depending on the person's later role in the Estonian Defence Forces). Upon successful completion of conscription (the point of sampling here), the conscripts then become reservists (sent to the reserve) and are required to attend compulsory training every five years. With the exception of these mandatory retraining exercises, reservists live a normal life in peacetime and are mobilized in military units only during war. For the purposes of clarity, we call our participants conscripts (rather than reservists) as we sampled at the end of conscription training before they departed and were sent to the reserve.[2]

The sample should be reasonably representative of other conscripts in Estonia, given that training is standardised across units. The survey was strictly anonymous, no other data but rank was collected (only private and junior ranks are included in analysis). The sample consisted of Estonian males only as female conscription in Estonia is not mandatory.

The survey was conducted as a part of a unit's regular summative training evaluation. Data were collected by a psychologist in a classroom setting in paper-pencil form at the end of service just before leaving to go home. The timing was important in order to avoid socially desirable answers out of fear that, despite of anonymity, critically minded respondents could be traced by unit commanders.

Materials

To evaluate conscripts' service experience, a self-reported 68-item questionnaire was used. The instrument was developed by the NATO RTG/203 research team (Adler et al., 2013) to identify common training demands, coping strategies and preferred resilience skill training amongst NATO forces to ensure that mental health training programs are responsive to soldiers' needs (Adler et al., 2013). The survey consisted of three sections: I - experienced stressors (25 items), II - used coping strategies (27 items), III – importance of different training aspects (16 items).

In the first section of the questionnaire respondents were asked to think about their experiences during basic training and rate (on a 5-point scale from *very low* to *very high*) how much stress they felt with regard to different service-related aspects (e.g., *'Lack of privacy'*). In the second section respondents had to think about the challenges they faced in basic training and rate (on a 4-point scale from *I haven't been doing this at all* to *I've been doing this a lot*) how much they used listed coping strategies (e.g., *'I've learnt to live with the realities of basic training'*). In the last section respondents rated (on a 5-point scale from *Not at all* to *Extremely*) how important different aspects of basic training were (e.g., *'Specific mental skills to enhance military performance'*).

No previous results have been published on the questionnaire's reliability or validity, and part of our aim here was explore the factor structure of the questionnaire and the reliability of its scales for further use beyond the current sample.

To measure conscripts' attitude towards national military service an open-ended question was used: *For what do you think national military service is needed in Estonia?* (see below for coding process). The phrasing was aimed at making the question broad enough so that

conscripts did not feel obliged to answer negatively or positively but, at the same time,

allowing expression of critical views if they felt so inclined.

Results

Factor Analyses

Factor analyses were conducted using principal axis factoring with orthogonal (varimax)

rotation on each of the three questionnaire scales of perceived stressors (25 items), coping

strategies (27 items) and training aspects (16 items). Items which had factor loadings of .4 or

above, suggesting they have some reasonable relationship with identified factors, were

retained for inclusion in factors (Stevens, 2002) and used in subsequent analyses in logistic

regressions predicting attitude.[3]

Initial analysis suggested relationships between variables were adequate for subsequent factor

analyses (individual correlations were generally significant and Bartlett's test of sphericity

produced $p < .001$ for all scales). Multicollinearity, where unique predictor contributions are

difficult to determine, and which can result in an unstable model, was assessed as unlikely

(the determinant of the correlation matrix was always $> .00001$ for all scales (Field, 2013)).

Perceived stressors. Initial analysis produced five factors with eigenvalues over Kaiser's

criterion of 1 for inclusion in the factor model. However, using the scree plot as a guide, a

subsequent analysis was run specifying four factors. Average communality after extraction,

representing the proportion of variance explained by the factors, was .461, which should be

reliable given the large sample size of $N > 500$ (MacCallum, Widaman, Zhang & Hong,

1999). The difference between the original correlation coefficients and those predicted from

the model was fairly minimal (only 16% of nonredundant residuals from the reproduced

correlation matrix had absolute values greater than 0.05) suggesting a reasonable model fit (Field, 2013). The four factors in combination explained 53.84% of the variance. Table 1 shows the percentage of variance explained by each factor and the factor loadings after rotation. For this and following analyses, Cronbach's alpha is shown to indicate internal reliability for items loading at .4 or above (in bold) on their identified factors (which are then used as predictors of attitude in subsequent logistic regression analyses further below). Factor loadings of .1 and below are supressed.

/ *Insert Table 1. about here*/

Coping strategies. Initial analysis produced seven factors with eigenvalues over Kaiser's criterion of 1, but the scree plot suggested retaining only four factors. Average communality was lower than for the stress scale above, now at .372, although again adequate with the sample size, and again the model was a reasonable fit (only 21% of nonredundant residuals from the reproduced correlation matrix had absolute values greater than 0.05). The four factors together explained 39.01% of the variance (again lower than the stress scale); see Table 2.

/*Insert Table 2. about here*/

Training aspects. Analysis produced two factors with eigenvalues over Kaiser's criterion of 1. Average communality after extraction was .561, and again the model was a reasonable fit (with 20% of nonredundant residuals from the reproduced correlation matrix having an absolute value greater than 0.05). The two factors explained 61.34% of the variance (see Table 3).

/Insert Table 3. about here/

Description of derived Factors

Table 4 below shows descriptive statistics for the perceived stressors, coping strategies and

training aspects factors identified above. For perceived stressors, overall means are fairly

close to the mid-point of 3 on a 5-point scale (coded from 1 to 5), with quality of life stress a

little higher relative to the other stressors. For coping strategies, measured on a 4-point scale

(coded 1 to 4), means are again close to a mid-point on the scale of 2.5 except Internal

Adapting which is quite low. This factor included just two items on coping by

meditating/praying, and finding comfort in religious/spiritual beliefs, and the mean suggests

these activities were not generally used by conscripts. Mean responses in rating the

importance of different aspects of training, measured on a 5-point scale (coded 1 to 5), are

slightly over the mid-point of 3, suggesting that respondents generally rate these aspects as

reasonably important.

/Insert Table 4. about here/

Logistic Regressions to Predict Attitudes

Coding and inter-rater reliability of attitude measure. Attitude towards military service

was measured by response to the open question: *'For what do you think national military*

service is needed in Estonia?'. Answers were coded dichotomously as either negative (i.e.

critical) or neutral/positive attitudes towards military service. Examples of answers are: '*Do*

not see very much sense in this at all, rather should be voluntary than forced' (negative) and

'*To give the soldiers the skills and knowledge of gun handling and experiences in battle*

tactics.' (neutral/positive). The first author coded all available responses (N = 472) and the

second author coded a randomly selected sample of 27% (N= 128). The overall agreement

was 90% with a Cohen's Kappa of .77; suggesting "substantial" inter-coder agreement

(Landis and Koch, 1977).

Regressions. Initially, three separate logistic regressions were performed. In each, the

identified factors from Perceived Stressors, Coping Strategies and Training Aspects were

used to predict attitudes towards military service. In all three regressions the factors were

significant predictors of attitude (all $p \leq .001$). In the interests of parsimony, the significant

predictors only from these initial regressions were then entered into a final regression model.

This model again showed these factors as significant predictors of attitude (χ^2 (5) = 90.93, p <

.001). Table 5 shows the regression coefficients, Wald statistics, odds ratios and 95%

confidence intervals for odds ratios for each predictor. This model improved over the

previous regressions, with slightly increased R^2 values and the highest number of correctly

classified cases at 75%. All significant previous predictors remained significant in this final

model, suggesting they each make a unique contribution. The analysis shows that as stress

increases in Quality of Life and Home Front Concerns then recruits are more likely to have a

negative attitude towards military service. Similarly, the more recruits use Emotional

Adapting as a coping strategy the more negative their attitude is likely to be. In contrast, the

more Active Adapting was used as a coping strategy, and the more important recruits rate

Military Specific aspects of training, the more likely they are to have a neutral/positive

(rather than negative) attitude towards service. However, odds ratios are modest and show

small change in the likelihood of different attitudes based on a one-unit change in the

predictors (Tabachnik & Fidell, 2001).

Discussion

Our research was designed to assess relationships between the experiences of drafted

individuals and their attitude towards national military service at the end of conscription

training. First, we analysed the structure of experiences in three categories: perceived

stressors, coping strategies and training aspects. Factor analyses revealed that conscription

stressors, as perceived by Estonian draftees, can be described meaningfully in four

dimensions referring to Quality of Life; Service Demands; Performance Evaluation; and

Home Front Concerns (for items and loadings see Table 1). Strategies to cope with

conscription experience clustered into four factors as well: Active Adapting; Internal

Adapting; Emotional Adapting and Support from Others (items and loadings in Table 2). The

importance of military training aspects congregated into two dimensions: Military Specific

and General Psychological (items and loadings in Table 3). Subsequently, the predictive

value of the emerged factors in each category of experience was evaluated in relation to

conscripts' attitudes toward national service at the end of their training using logistic

regression (see Table 5). We can now reconsider our hypotheses by reflecting on the specific

findings and speculating on possible explanations.

Hypothesis 1 stated that higher ratings in response to stressors (i.e., more stress) will be

associated with a more negative attitude towards national military service. Of the four derived

stress factors, two of them – Quality of Life and Home Front Concerns – were significant

predictors of negative attitudes; suggesting moderate support for Hypothesis 1. These two

factors (see Table 1 for items) seem to be concerned with stress around the personal welfare

within training and wider family or domestic lives of conscripts, whereas the two stress

factors that were non-significant predictors – Service Demands and Performance Concerns –

are arguably more oriented around the practical demands and expectations of training. This

may suggest that there needs to be more monitoring of how conscripts handle training stress

in relation to their personal health and domestic concerns in order to help reduce negative

attitudes. Hypothesis 2 stated that higher ratings on the use of coping strategies (i.e., more

attempts to use those strategies) will be associated with a more positive attitude towards

national military service. Again, only two of the four coping-strategy factors – Active

Adapting and Emotional Adapting – were significant predictors of attitude. However, only the Active Adapting factor was associated with a more positive attitude, whereas Emotional Adapting was associated with a negative attitude. Active Adapting (see Table 2 for items) seems to reflect some acceptance of the reality of training but also the taking of a proactive stance towards dealing with issues. In contrast, the factor we have called "Emotional Adapting" arguably contains items which reflect the venting of negative feelings, perhaps sometimes onto others, and perhaps also reflects some negative disengagement with training. As a "coping strategy", this may represent more of a passive and disengaged way of coping, which involves expressing a range of negative feelings, but possibly does not indicate the taking of positive action to deal with those feelings; hence the association with a negative attitude towards national service. As a whole, the results on coping strategies give only limited support to hypothesis 2, but also suggest that the type of "coping strategy" is important in determining how it will relate to the valence of attitudes. Hypothesis 3 stated that higher ratings for the importance of different training aspects (i.e., the more useful those aspects appear) will be associated with a more positive attitude towards national military service. This hypothesis received some moderate support as the derived factor of Military Specific aspects was a significant predictor of positive attitudes while the factor expressing General Psychological aspects failed to reach significance. Military Specific aspects of training (see Table 3 for items) includes items which refer to features of the military environment using military terminology (e.g., "deployment stress"), and thus these items may have seemed more important to conscripts who took an interest in these areas; hence the association with a positive attitude towards national service. Previous research has suggested that conscripts may be alienated from national service because they are more interested in non-military, i.e., civilian, vocations (Kosonen et al., 2019). Where conscripts cannot be encouraged to take an interest in military knowledge and skills for their own sake, perhaps authorities might improve the conscript experience (and subsequent attitude) by making

explicit links between military and non-military skills, and showing that each can have

relevance for the other.

The exploratory factor analysis has confirmed and extended some findings from Adler et al.

(2013), revealing some useful factors within the questionnaire scales they used. For example,

lack of down time/personal time was rated as more important for conscripts than volunteers

in Adler et al. (2013). In the present study, with a much larger sample, this item was again

also important to conscripts, with the highest loading on the Quality of Life stress factor.

Similarly, military specific skills were more important to volunteers than conscripts in the

Adler at el. study; in the present research, higher ratings on the items under the Military

Specific factor were associated with more neutral/positive attitudes towards conscripts'

military service. This suggests that conscripts who can engage in the learning of these skills

may have more positive attitudes and more similar views to volunteers. In addition, the

derivation of potentially important new factors, like Home Front Concerns and Emotional

Adapting, could be useful for predicting and managing conscript performance in future

research. While it should be acknowledged that the present findings are limited to the specific

Estonian sample, the hope is that the factors derived here (which all tested highly for internal

reliability) will be further refined going forward, allowing for identification of important

variables related to conscripts' attitudes, and perhaps to those attitudes of other soldiers in

different training contexts.

This interesting division of factors predicting differences in attitudes at the end of

conscription training can be effectively interpreted from an interactional perspective, or so-

called Person-Environment framework where the match or fit between the person and

environment (Doruk & Janet, 2018) or group (Li, Kristof-Brown & Nielsen, 2018) or task

(Wronska, Bujacz, Goclowska, Rietzschel, 2018) is emphasised in relation to different

outcomes. Relationships between individual personality profiles and situational perception

(Parmak, Mylle & Euwema, 2013) as well as psychological well-being in a military task-environment (Parmak, Mylle & Euwema, 2014) are also established in military settings. Along those lines we may assume that conscription experience is not equally pleasant (or interesting) for everybody. The research by Adler et al. (2013), conducted in an international military environment, shows that conscripts are expressing different concerns and interests to volunteers (who are more interested in military-specific skills and concerned with their performance). A study conducted in the Finnish National Defence University found that students oriented towards an increase of competence and mastery were more positive in their evaluations towards instructional practices than students oriented towards avoidance of effort (Pulkka & Niemivirta, 2012). Motivation to obtain specialist skills and knowledge is required to be successful in one's learning performance (Ainley, 2006). The study conducted by Artino (2009), for example, showed that people who feel bored and frustrated and are not interested in improving their skills or obtaining knowledge in certain domains are more likely to perceive the full learning environment more negatively. Our findings support this research by suggesting that an interest in and engagement with skills central to the "work" (military) environment will be related to more positive attitudes. In addition, coping strategies which adopt a generally proactive and interested approach, rather than ruminating on the negatives, should also enhance the person-environment interaction in such military settings.

To conclude, our study provides evidence to suggest that improvements in the military conscription training environment, and in particular how conscripts adapt to and cope with that environment, are required in order to enhance acquisition of military skills and knowledge and decrease the number of potentially critically minded conscripts as they move to the reserve force. Attitudes towards national military service (both positive and negative) are related to certain aspects of the training experience. Assuming that attitudes may go on to influence later military performance, military organisations should focus on improving the training experience of conscripts. Conscription can be viewed as a regular future-orientated

military staffing strategy (for a reserve force) or as a reaction to a changed security situation in countries where it is suspended for peace time. In both cases the recruitment takes place involuntarily and, as high motivation cannot be guaranteed from the beginning, it is crucial to create a supportive and interested attitude during the (initial) conscript training. Experiences perceived as unwanted can result not just in burnout and low morale but also a negative attitude towards that situation in particular and military service in general. Our results also support previous findings that if national defence can only be equated with armed defence, then it may drive away more civic-minded people because they do not see their role there (Kosonen et al., 2019).

The security environment in the world has changed and is constantly changing, especially within the last decade. Our results are relevant for countries where military conscription is still applied or where it has been abandoned but re-considered. We know that organisational identification as well as experienced leadership is related to peoples' attitudes and intentions to stay with the organisation (Dewettinck & van Ameijde, 2011; Wilkins, Butt & Annabi, 2018). Our research can be taken as a platform to suggest further studies based on an interactional approach (between person and environment) to advise military Human Resource strategies when conscription is considered.

Limitations

The study can be seen as a concept-building effort. We must acknowledge that attitudes were expressed towards the national service in a particular unit of the Estonian Defence Forces at a unique point in time. Attitudes (and predictive factors) could be different towards specific military deployments in other units or countries, and thus the findings cannot be generalised beyond the particular Estonian sample. Attitudes can relate differently to conscription experience when realistic threats to national security are present or political circumstances change (Asal et al., 2017). Respondents' ethnicity can be a factor of formed attitudes as well (Parmak, 2010; Yan, McManus & Duncan, 2017). However, although issues around security

risks and intended behaviours can change over time, the links between a perception of military training environment during conscription and an attitude towards national defence afterwards should remain fairly stable. Further studies are suggested based on longitudinal rather than cohort design to investigate the dynamics of attitude formation through experience. The topic is sensitive to society's composition and general national spirit. To be valid, an ethno-cultural-political dimension must be addressed by employing an international sample. If further research shows that our findings can be replicated beyond the Estonian sample then they will have important implications for managing the conscript environment in other countries.

The current measure of attitudes was assessed by response to a single, open-ended question on the need for military service. This qualitative question was seen as a positive in allowing conscripts the freedom to respond as they wanted. However, a more comprehensive set of both quantitative and qualitative attitude measures would be desirable to increase the sensitivity and reliability of the attitude measure. This would probably improve the regression coefficients and odds ratios. Our measurements were made at the end of conscripts' training as important potential indicators of their attitudes and behaviour after mandatory service. However, because we have no measure of attitudes at the start of training, we cannot say exactly what the causal link is between training experience and attitudes. We have reasonably assumed that attitudes will in part be influenced by the factors we identified in training experience, but it is also likely that existing attitudes at the start of training will influence how conscripts respond to the training environment. Although the attrition rate throughout training would be minimal (conscripts can only leave on medical grounds) it would have been useful to take further measurements at the start of service and half way through, allowing for time-point comparisons. Concerns about home, for example, may build throughout training and earlier monitoring could produce different findings, as well as being useful in identifying when these issues arise.

In the introduction, we introduced a model (Parmak, 2015) based on the work of Bandura (2002) and Fishbein and Ajzen (2010) which outlines variables involved in the reciprocal loop between behavioural precedents and outcomes. The present paper has only focused on the element of attitude in association with certain environmental aspects of conscription training. However, the model could be carried forward for testing, with further, more comprehensive measurements taken of the other variables (e.g., norms, behavioural control and intention to behave) suggested as important in the conscription environment.

Conclusions

Our research hypotheses generally received moderate support from the study findings: increased stress associated with personal welfare in conscript training, as well as home or domestic worries, and "coping" through experiencing/expressing negative emotions, were all associated with a negative attitude towards national service. In contrast, taking a proactive approach to coping and rating the importance of specific military knowledge and skills more highly are associated with a more neutral/positive attitude. The derived factors were found to make attitudes more predictable by a modest amount, and generally each of them plays a different, and potentially important, role in doing that. The exploratory factor analyses confirmed some previous findings and identified new measures going forward. In future studies, we suggest a greater focus on the interaction between the conscript and the conscription environment with more comprehensive measurement of the variables identified in our review and findings.

Forced enlistment suggests that high service motivation amongst conscripts at the end of training should not be taken for granted. Furthermore, perceiving the conscription environment as stressful and military training as meaningless may lead to critical attitudes towards the military service and national defence. This aspect is vital to consider in countries

where conscription is applied or considered. In terms of practical guidelines for conscript training we recommend the following:

- Conscripts' attitudes towards national military service should improve if they feel more in control of life on camp but also at home (even though they are away). Authorities should pay more attention to conscripts' personal welfare and foster communication with conscripts' home environment.

- Critical service aspects should be considered proactively rather than ruminating on negative emotions. Further efforts could be made to foster proactive coping strategies as part of conscript training.

- Where possible, interest should be encouraged in military aspects of training and performance. In addition, connections between military and non-military skills could be made explicit.

Although more research is needed for detailed recommendations, especially to address our limitations (e.g., lack of longitudinal data and the ethno-cultural-political limitations of the particular Estonian sample), there should be further development of strategies for preventing negative and enhancing positive attitude in conscription-based military forces.

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Notes

1. The archived post from the National Commission on "Mandatory Service around the Globe" can be found at: https://medium.com/@inspire2serveUS/mandatory-service-around-the-globe-c05e11810cfc

2. For more information on conscription training in the Estonian Defence Forces see: https://mil.ee/en/defence-forces/compulsory-military-service/

3. Factor correlation matrices indicated some relationships between factors, so oblique rotation (direct oblimin) factor analyses were also preformed (Field, 2013). However, results were remarkably similar: only 3 factors (out of 10) were affected, and then only in terms of 4 fewer items (out of 68) loading on them. The same factors were derived, and the same factors were significant as predictors in the subsequent final logistic regression below.

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Table 1. Summary of exploratory factor analysis for Perceived Stressors (N=516; loadings <

.1 supressed).

Questionnaire Item	Rotated Factor Loadings			
	Quality of Life	Service Demands	Performance Concerns	Home Front Concerns
6 Lack of down time/personal time	**.76**	.11		.16
22 Not being able to control my own schedule	**.71**		.26	
3 Lack of privacy	**.59**	.30	.11	.18
5 Not getting enough sleep	**.56**	.19		.17
23 Having to perform when you're tired	**.54**	.18	.36	.17
4 Being away from home	**.52**	.21	.11	.41
21 Not knowing what to expect, things being unpredictable	**.51**	.19	.40	
1 Being yelled at	**.42**	.23	.11	.20
16 Things being different than expected	.38	.21	.28	.20
13 Interacting with other service members	.10	**.87**		.12
15 Fitting in to the group	.13	**.67**	.27	
12 Having to work as part of a team	.23	**.66**	.18	
14 Interacting with instructors/drill sergeants	.28	**.49**	.23	
8 Keep in up with the physical fitness routines	.31	**.41**	.22	.24
7 Having to learn so much	.17	**.40**	.32	.27
2 Being tested on performance	.35	.39	.31	.14
10 Dealing with other soldiers who aren't motivated	.15	.37		.21
24 Worry about making a mistake	.17	.16	**.76**	
25 Worry about being embarrassed		.15	**.76**	.13
20 Being expected to handle everything	.31	.35	**.55**	
19 Worrying about doing well in basic training		.19	**.53**	.19
9 Lack of regular contact with back home	.40			**.73**
11 Not being able to contact family	.31			**.71**
17 Problems at home that I can't address	.10		.13	**.48**
18 Lack of support from back home		.17	.16	**.45**
Eigenvalues	8.16	2.11	1.61	1.57
% of Variance	32.65	8.45	6.44	6.30
Cronbach's α	.85	.83	.80	.73

Table 2. Summary of exploratory factor analysis for Coping Strategies (N=517; loadings < .1 supressed).

Questionnaire Item	Rotated Factor Loadings			
	Active Adapting	Internal Adapting	Emotional Adapting	Support from Others
10 I've been trying to come up with a strategy about what to do	**.61**			
4 I've been taking action to try to make the situation better	**.60**			.19
21 I've been planning ways to cope with the situation	**.59**		.14	.18
16. I've learned to live with the realities of basic training	**.53**	-.13	.13	.14
8. I've been trying to see it in a different light	**.52**			
13 I've been looking for something good in what is happening	**.52**			
1 I've been concentrating…on doing something about the situation I'm in	**.47**			.16
20 I've accepted how things are in basic training	**.46**	-.24	.12	
19 I've been looking at how others in my situation are coping	**.46**	.19		.27
9 I've been criticizing myself	.35	.18		.12
12 I've been trying to identify the emotion I'm feeling	.34	.33		.14
24 Doing exactly as I was told	.30	-.17		
23 I've been praying or meditating		**.69**		
18 I've been trying to find comfort in my religion or spiritual beliefs		**.67**		
5 I've been refusing to believe that that the problem has happened		.38	.22	.16
22 I've been blaming myself for things that happened	.17	.35		
2 I've been saying to myself "this isn't real"	-.14	.30	.14	
17 I've been expressing my negative feelings			**.55**	.20
26 Not taking Basic Training too seriously			**.51**	-.21
6 I've been saying things to vent my feelings			**.42**	.13
27 I've been blaming others		.22	**.41**	.13
14 I've been making jokes about it	.17		.38	
15 I've been doing something to think less about it, such as reading…		.24	.33	
25 Tried not to draw attention to myself	.13		.24	
3 I've been getting emotional support from others		.11		**.67**
11 I've been getting comfort and understanding from someone	.26			**.66**
7 I've been getting help and advice from other people	.31			**.60**
Eigenvalues	4.55	2.43	1.95	1.61
% of Variance	16.85	9.00	7.22	5.95
Cronbach's α	.79	.74	.51	.74

Table 3. Summary of exploratory factor analysis for Training Aspects (N=516; loadings < .1 supressed).

Questionnaire Item	Rotated Factor Loadings	
	Military Specific	General Psychological
10 Knowing how to support a buddy who is struggling with stress	**.74**	.24
11 Knowing about deployment stress	**.70**	.35
9 Knowing when seeking help is needed	**.69**	.32
13 Knowing about mental health resources	**.68**	.26
12 Specific skills for preventing stress reactions	**.65**	.44
14 Knowing about how military service can lead to personal growth	**.63**	.26
16 Specific mental skills to enhance military performance	**.58**	.30
15 Knowing how to manage fatigue/sleep problems	**.56**	.29
8 Specific skills to facilitate effective interpersonal communication	**.50**	.50
3 Specific skills to manage negative thoughts	.29	**.81**
5 Specific skills to manage anger	.27	**.76**
6 Specific skills to manage feelings of depression	.33	**.73**
4 Specific skills to manage anxiety	.36	**.71**
2 Specific skills to build psychological resilience and handle stress	.33	**.68**
1 Understanding and recognizing stress and how stress affects…military performance and health	.33	**.62**
7 Specific skills for building and maintaining healthy relationships	.47	**.53**
Eigenvalues	8.39	1.42
% of Variance	52.44	8.90
Cronbach's α	.90	.91

Table 4: Means and standard deviations (SD) for each scale and factor

Questionnaire and *Factor*	Mean	SD
Perceived Stressors		
Quality of Life	3.3	0.8
Service Demands	2.3	0.8
Performance Concerns	2.6	0.9
Home Front Concerns	2.4	0.8
Coping Strategies		
Active Adapting	2.6	0.5
Internal Adapting	1.3	0.6
Emotional Adapting	2.2	0.6
Support from Others	2.1	0.6
Training Aspects		
Military Specific	3.5	0.9
General Psychological	3.3	0.9

Table 5. Logistic regression analysis of attitude towards military service as a function of

previous significant predictors (N= 472).

Questionnaire and *Factor*	Beta	Wald	Odds ratio	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower	Upper
Perceived Stressors					
Quality of Life	-0.05	5.51*	0.95	0.91	0.99
Home Front Concerns	-0.08	4.44*	0.92	0.86	0.99
Coping Strategies					
Active Adapting	0.15	32.06***	1.16	1.10	1.22
Emotional Adapting	-0.19	11.93**	0.83	0.75	0.92
Training Aspects					
Military Specific	0.03	4.54*	1.03	1.00	1.06
Constant	1.11	3.19			

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001 Note: R^2 = 0.18 (Cox and Snell), 0.25 (Nagelkerke); Hosmer-Lemeshow

p = .66