

Engaging with military trauma in former conscripts: Dilemmas and opportunities

You will have noticed that the title has changed from the original title on the program. I felt free to do this because the brief from Prof Thesnaar and Dr Edlmann was to analyse our problems with our research. It was a valuable exercise to do just that. The change in the title reflects a transition from a very unformulated and scattered collection of insights and concerns which made me feel stuck and demotivated to a much more clearly articulated understanding of different levels of problems with inquiry into conscription.

As I wrote the drafts of this paper, the motif of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Ancient Mariner became more and more significant. The mariner in the poem is gaunt, white-haired and slightly mad, detaining a wedding guest outside the church with his terrible tale. His glittering eye mesmerises his unwilling auditor who is held, spellbound, almost against his will to listen, and afterward is left feeling altered and distraught. I have asked myself if I am that Ancient Mariner, obsessing and re-visiting an ancient trauma and ancient wrong, asking myself if it is not time to put this all to rest.

I begin with something that soldiers understand all too well, but only after, often long after, they return from war. In essence it is an understanding of betrayal and exploitation. The writings of Ernest Hemingway demonstrate this well. He wrote a letter to his father at twenty years old from an Italian military hospital where he lay wounded. In it he says:

'I wouldn't mind being wounded again so much because I know just what it is like. And you can only suffer so much, you know, and it does give you and awfully satisfactory feeling to be wounded. It's getting beaten up in a good cause. There are no heroes in this war. We all offer up our bodies and only a few are chosen, but it shouldn't reflect any special credit on those that are chosen.....I am very proud and happy that mine was chosen....Dying is a very simple thing. I've looked at death and really I know....And if I die, I'm lucky.'

I heard conscripts say this kind of thing, back then. Hemingway's introduction to the 1948 edition of Farewell to Arms reflects something of the journey he has travelled, to a mature appraisal of war and the military industrial complex:

'...since 1933 perhaps it is clear why a writer should be interested in the constant, bullying, murderous, slovenly crime of war. Having been to too many of them, I am sure that I am prejudiced, and I hope that I am very prejudiced. But it is the considered opinion of the writer of this book that wars are fought by the finest people there are, or just say people, although the closer you are to any fighting, the finer people you meet; but they are made, provoked and initiated by straight economic rivalries and by swine that stand to profit from them.'

I would suggest to you now that as Milan Kundera says:

The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.
The book of laughter and forgetting.

I will briefly explain how I have structured this paper, but I will ask you to read it separately and today I will highlight what I feel are the most important points. I have divided this assessment of the challenges to my research into:

Structural issues

Theoretical issues

Mainstream Interventions

Expanded Interventions

Future themes

What do conscripts really think today? WE DONT KNOW!

There is almost no scholarly data available on what opinions the silent majority of conscripts hold. We have some idea what is being said on internet chat rooms and websites such as armytalk set up by veterans. But one researcher for the End Conscription Campaign pointed out that the total number of people on the internet chat rooms is in the region of 6500 to 7500, well short of the 600 000-odd conscripts in the cohort. And there is no way of knowing just how many of those who express some very intemperate opinions are actually former conscripts. A number of former conscripts joined the ECC, and we have some idea what they thought of their time in the SADF, but again there has been no scholarly attempt to determine the precise numbers of these.

Already this symposium has yielded important new information. Dr Pieter Bezuidenhout has recently done a study to find out what a cohort of former conscripts feel today about Apartheid, their military service, and their place in the new South Africa. As far as I know, he is the first researcher to look at this.

What is the state of conscript mental health? WE DON'T KNOW!

I would like to quote briefly from the text of my paper and summarise what my study and world research tell us about the nature of PTSD in former conscripts and liberation fighters in South Africa.

We see very different results when Academic, Government -funded research and Military researchers do studies on PTSD prevalence. Academic researchers get figures of 20-30%, some as high as 56%. Government funded research yields figures for PTSD of 10-13% and military researchers find figures of 2% (in reservists) and 6% (in regular troops). An analysis of why these differences are there is interesting and I think is a product of different biases from the funders. There is not time to examine these. I have no doubt that the academic research is closest to the truth.

I want to highlight that the condition is extremely long lasting and prone to relapses over time. A number of high-quality studies reflect this, especially the National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study (NVVRS) which was a huge study which looked at over 40 000 veterans. Studies from other wars show identical trends: these are studies of Israeli conscripts from the Lebanon War and WW II veterans. Former conscripts and liberation army fighters can be expected to have to live with the fallout for the rest of their lives.

This is why I think we need to at outcomes that are gentler and more realistic than closure. Like the Ancient Mariner, we wear an Albatross around our necks. Our lives have changed for ever by exposure to combat and war, even if, like the Ancient Mariner, we experience a moment of Divine dispensation and healing.

In the USA, returning veterans with influence set up an effective lobby and forced congress to set up the Veterans' Affairs hospital with enormous resources. The annual budget I don't have at my fingertips, but it is huge, and has increased after the Iraq and Afghan Wars. We simply do not have, and will never have, those resources. We will have to find other, self-financed ways. Mutual self-help groups may be the answer, but I think they have to have trained psychotherapist facilitators and they have to be as organised as the Alcoholic Anonymous groups.

Mutual self help

To give you a sense of how the mutual self-help operates I want to share an important moment for me. I spent about four hours with Paul Morris on the day I first met him, some years ago. It was healing, just to be able to talk. But when he sent me this poem next morning I felt a sense of relief and joy. I don't think my family could hear this. I don't think that anyone but a fellow ex-combatant can truly hear this:

I hear you

by Paul Morris (abridged)

I hear your painful story
Of broken bodies beyond your power to mend.

oooOOOooo

I hold it now, only a tiny part, I know,
A sadness, heavy on my soul.
A darkening of my spirit at the hearing of it all:

The death and maiming and terror I inflicted from afar is the horror you saw and the
broken bodies you tried to heal.
A different time yet part of the same sweating hell.

Refer briefly to two issues mentioned in my paper:

Repeat trauma

Stigma of seeking help

Theoretical issues

Debates around the nature of PTSD

These are complex and I refer you to the detail of my paper.

WHAT I THINK IS IMPORTANT is that the unconscious analysis of the issue around trauma only through the lens of PTSD is deeply limited and flawed. PTSD is sexy, sounds as if we doctors and psychologists know what we are doing. But the reality of trauma related outcomes in the former conscripts' lives expands well beyond PTSD.

There are significant mental health issues outside of the PTSD label:

The NVVRS study showed that a further 11.1% of male veterans had partial PTSD.

BUT that PTSD has ALSO a substantial negative impact on the lives of spouses, children and others living with such veterans'

This is similar to the numbers for the Everatt and Jennings Study. So research in former liberation fighters in the South African context bears this out. This means that for a clinician the problem of medical and health outcomes involves a much larger cohort than the prevalence statistics for PTSD alone.

I want to quote here from my paper.

☞The society that soldiers return to often finds it difficult to accept them back. One reason is that returning soldiers had put their education and their lives on hold to go and fight. The men who return are not the same as the ones who left. Many have become difficult men, emotionally distant, shunning former friends, prone to fits of rage, using alcohol and other drugs to sleep, or even to escape into oblivion. While many came back with a sense of increased discipline and determined to throw themselves in study or work to forget the military past, a high percentage no longer had the internal balance to be able to study. In many cases marriages and relationships broke up, not once, but many timesq

Demobilisation, disarming and re-integration program (DDR)

☞After all wars the state sets up a demobilisation, disarming and re-integration program (DDR). For all the ex-combatants the various governments have been quick to attend to the first two, to remove the danger to political stability, but have done little to see to the lastq

A personal interaction illustrates this and informs much of the thinking in this paper: I met a former APLA cadre met at an academic seminar on trauma in South Africa. His paper was articulate and well-constructed. It detailed a very good study of former liberation fighters and their plight today, as well as their own understanding and capacity of where to go next. It adhered to important

academic norms regarding validation, anonymity of respondents and triangulation of data. It was a good study.

Yet, he did say that he was a former APLA cadre. He had been my enemy. He may have even looked at my back through the sights of a rifle. It is not easy to describe how this makes an ex-combatant feel. I was no longer angry, but I was wary and slightly hostile, despite myself. His eyes when they rested on me had a glow of hostility as well. I went up to him afterwards and politely commended him on his paper. His response was polite, but cold and distant. We parted.

Over tea and snacks afterward, in conversation with a sociology academic she let fall the APLA cadre's first name. I realised that I had corresponded with him by email often. I went back to him and said so. His face lit up: 'Oh so you're the doctor who has been emailing me!' We started talking with great feeling and excitement. I took him to the station and we sat for two hours in my car, talking, with crowds of black travellers looking in puzzlement into the car at the ill-assorted couple we made.

I identified strongly with him and he with me. We continue to support each other with research. But importantly, at this juncture I want to point out how the re-integration program failed him: he did get a grant to study. But his thinking was fuzzy after his years of military training and underground fighting and he could not study. He failed his first year. The new SANDF told him 'You wasted the money, you lazy bugger. There is no more for shirkers. Be off!' His common-law wife left him because he had no money and she denies him access to his daughter.

Before I move to the next important issue in my paper - the issue of spirituality, I would like to try and give you a sense of what PTSD feels like, using a brief phenomenology. It does more than anything to explain why it is a spiritual issue. This is trying and exposing for me, but I think it is important. The last time attempted a presentation on this I cried almost all the way through. Let me hope that I don't inflict that on you all this time!

A prose poem by a former conscript:

Sometimes.....
In quiet moments,
Like an echo from the distant past and within me
I hear and I feel,
Something more than normal memory
Something that is almost-current reality,
The moment the world rocks, a bright flash to the right,
A detonation so loud it deafens me,
The world becomes the surreal soundlessness of insane screaming, thudding
decibels.
My head is jarred violently to the left with a crack of bone,
Shards of glass and metal spear all around me
With the whine and the hiss of

death
The world plunges into chaos and meaningless violence.
Dust billows, soldiers run, and die;
It is so unreal, so horrible
I feel my hold on my own life loosen
And go into a void of uncaring.

□ □ □ □ □ □ □ □

I was that conscript.

These are lines written by a master, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in his poem 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner.' The imagery resonates for me with the feelings left by traumatic stress and the aftermath of trauma:

All in a hot and copper sky,
The bloody Sun, at noon,
Right up above the mast did stand,
No bigger than the Moon.

The very deep did rot: O Christ!
That ever this should be!
Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs
Upon the slimy sea.

About, about, in reel and rout
The death-fires danced at night;
The water, like a witch's oils,
Burnt green, and blue and white.

Alone, alone, all, all alone,
Alone on a wide wide sea!
And never a saint took pity on
My soul in agony.

I looked to heaven, and tried to pray;
But or ever a prayer had gusht,
A wicked whisper came, and made
My heart as dry as dust.

I closed my lids, and kept them close,
And the balls like pulses beat;
For the sky and the sea, and the sea and the sky
Lay dead like a load on my weary eye,
And the dead were at my feet.

Possibly the biggest area of inadequacy with current approaches to PTSD and military trauma is our discomfort with grappling with issues of spirituality.

Spirituality

Quotes from my paper:

One of the proximate experiences which set the scene for PTSD is nearness to death and a deep, inescapable knowledge of one's own mortality. This usually involves responses of intense fear, helplessness or horror and meaninglessness. This awareness inevitably initiates a process of searching for meaning. Soldiers often come to a point where they have rejected religious beliefs they were raised with, and are deeply offended and enraged by attempts to corral them back into platitudes of established religion which have often become empty after experiences of combat and war. But they often need to search quite deliberately for something that makes meaning of their experiences for them. I have found it helpful to reframe spirituality in non-religious terms.

There are many definitions of spirituality in the literature. One definition is that it is the search for transcendent meaning+ which can be expressed in religious practice or expressed exclusively in a relationship to nature, music, the arts, a set of philosophical beliefs, or relationships with friends and family. Another that spirituality is a universal quality of human beings and their cultures related to the quest for meaning, purpose, morality, transcendence, well-being, and profound relationships with ourselves, others and ultimate reality.

Traumatized soldiers need to rediscover some form of faith on a journey of recovery: a faith that includes centres of value; images of power; and master stories. This understanding of faith provides both a goal and a template for getting there. For example a centre of value may be breaking the silence around the trauma of conscription. An image of power might be interconnectedness and shared storytelling. A master story might be Odysseus in Homer's epic.

Moral injury is a related but different concept :

Service members are confronted with numerous moral and ethical challenges in war. They may act in ways that **transgress deeply held moral beliefs or they may experience conflict about the unethical behaviors of others. Warriors may also bear witness to intense human suffering and cruelty that shakes their core beliefs about humanity** Another study noted the presence of **moral repair**. Further attention needs to be paid to ways of encompassing this.

The next area I want to mention is the study of the destruction of memory which occurs with trauma. Healing from trauma is rendered much more difficult because of the numerous ways this hinders learning and moving on from trauma. There is a wide literature on this but I want to focus on three levels of memory injury: these are:

Denial, repression, dissociation

I quote from my paper: These [memory injuries] cause difficulties for the traumatized person, because having an altered memory of events, he or she can never learn from them.

Freud wrote the essence of repression lies simply in the function of rejecting and keeping something out of consciousness. This implies keeping items out of awareness, items that evoke psychological pain. The psychologist Daniel Goleman

notes that **‘Painful moments or dangerous urges are repressed in order to ease the burden of mental anguish. But the tactic is only half successful: the pains so defended against skew attention and exert a warp on personality. The subtle menace of repression is the silence: the passing of a pain out of awareness sends out no warning signals; the sound of repression is the sound of a thought evaporating’.**

Leslie Epstein, a journalist researching a book about the Holocaust became aware that he felt guilty about the callousness and distance he felt from the terrible material: he wrote **‘What I noticed first was a lack of responsiveness not so much to the horrors of the past but to those occurring around me’**. [many disasters listed] **what I did was take a series of notes. The world was stale, flat’ it was not the calamities of the day that rolled off my duck’s back like water, it was all manner of pleasures as well’**). Goleman comments: **‘There is a price, though, for striking such a bargain. What’s more, it doesn’t work so well and the repressed fear and loathing leak out in disguise, blemishing innocent thoughts’**

According to Freud the penalty for repression is repetition. Painful experiences not consciously dealt with are, unconsciously, repeated **‘[and]’ attentional schemas shape the deep structure of personality’**. **Personality is defined as the construct of our THOUGHTS, FEELINGS and BEHAVIOURS**. With repression there is a full declarative memory sequence which the unconscious shields us from, but with therapy one can learn to access fully.

[There is a] deep destruction of memory which is called dissociation.

Dissociation is a kind of self-hypnosis, a willing of oneself away, and so there is no narrative memory. There are images: images that may be in the form of sound, smell, position or spatial sense, which are powerfully informed with emotions such as misery, despair, fear and wishing to die. There may also be a history of behaviours which alert the therapist to a dissociated subtext. These are linked to implicit (embodied, non-verbal) memory, particularly if the trauma was repeated often. There are also behaviours observed during the therapeutic interview which reflect back to the trauma. A dissociated memory can never be fully retrieved to form a coherent narrative.

Interventions

Time does not permit me to go into these but I have presented a brief overview in my paper. I do want to draw attention to what one of the authorities in the field has to say about the complex and ambiguous nature of PTSD:

Judith Lewis Herman writes **‘In general, the diagnostic categories of the existing psychiatric canon are simply not designed for survivors of extreme situations and do not fit them well. The persistent anxiety, phobia, and panic of survivors are not the same as ordinary anxiety disorders. The somatic symptoms of survivors are not ordinary psychosomatic disorders. Their depression is not the same as ordinary depression. And the degradation of their identity and relational life is not the same as ordinary personality disorder’**

In closing I would like to refer to an important drive which motivates me to keep working in this area. There is credible and well-supported research which

says that the effects of trauma are transmitted to the next two generations at least. There is less evidence as to what we can do to reduce or prevent this. But I suggest that this is a matter of great importance for our country.

Lastly I would like to ask the same questions asked in 2010 by a psychologist who is also a former conscript and veteran, Roger Brooke:

1) How many South African soldiers on both sides of the conflict from the 1970s and 80s suffer from combat trauma? Do we have carefully researched numbers?

2) How many are in need of redemption? More and more veterans have been travelling to Angola to visit old battlegrounds and, it seems, to pay their respects and to seek a certain peace.

3) Is there any possibility of recognition and respect, even redemption, across the lines of former enemies?

4) How many veterans feel betrayed by our politicians, both then and now? The sense of betrayal might be a surprisingly shared experience across great ideological differences: white Afrikaner professional soldiers who feel their leaders sold out, and/or who feel unappreciated for their continued support for the military in the new South Africa; national servicemen who feel that their sacrifice and continued psychological distress were meaningless; former Angolan 32 Battalion soldiers who swore allegiance to South Africa, and who were promised in return, the benefits of South African military retirees; Umkhonto we Sizwe fighters who politically won the war in South Africa, yet who may feel their political leaders are abandoning them and their communities. There needs to be some cultural room for the narratives of sacrifice and betrayal so that lessons may be learned.

5) Can our current political leaders follow the example set by Nelson Mandela and other statesmen, which is to honour those soldiers who fought on the wrong side of history, but who were nevertheless defending South Africa in the terms they understood? That is to say, how can we recognise and honour veterans from both sides of the conflict?

6) Can we as a society find room in our cultural and political discourse for the lessons learned by our old soldiers across the political spectrum?

To finish with a final reference to the Ancient Mariner who has been haunting me. I have a duty and a need to write and act to reduce the consequences of our war if that is possible, and make it as difficult as I can for future governments to use war as a solution to problems. This version of the Ancient Mariner will have to continue to pull the sleeve of the wedding guests until enough of them hear.