

Military psychology or psychologies of militarism? The complexities of psychological research, training and intervention in Africa

[BOOK REVIEW]

Van Dyk, Gideon, A J (ed) (2016) **Military psychology for Africa**. Stellenbosch: SUN Press. ISBN 978-1-920689-95-7 pbk. Pages x + 479

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One of the longest and most complex themes of human existence is the personal, relational and environmental impacts of warfare. From ancient myths and rituals to contemporary theatres of conflict, military leaders, soldiers themselves, and all those with whom they share their lives inevitably grapple with the intensity of the battlefield, the scale of personal and systematic violence required, and the moral demands and contradictions of military life. Warfare in Africa has been particularly complex, given the roles of historical phenomena such as colonialism (and related issues like slavery, mining operations and the Cold War), and the contemporary nature of African conflicts and peacekeeping initiatives.

This publication covers a wide range of issues in making a case for military psychology in the African context. In doing so, it adopts a largely uncritical approach to the title of this work and the scholarly field it lays out. Let us start with the “military” part of its focus; the early sections of the very first chapter include the phrase “warfare has always been and will always be a human endeavour.” (p 8) While this might be true, it becomes the un-interrogated justification for an uncritical assumption that the role of

a military psychologist is to address the consequences of military life. Engaging with the ethics of militarism and the psychological and social impact of military systems themselves is not seen as part of a military psychologist's brief. The primary intended readership of the book is people who subscribe to this view.

The title is both brave and in need of some clarification. Not only is the term "military" used in an uncritical way; psychology as a discipline is defined very loosely, and only shows some engagement with the complexities of adapting largely western models of military psychology to African contexts in the final few chapters. And, even then, only a handful of countries form the basis for case studies.

The publication is more of a handbook than a scholarly text, although research into the various issues being dealt with is cited throughout. Chapters range from military theory to organisational psychology to some extremely detailed descriptions of options for treating for PTSD (the ethics of which needs to be questioned as they provide the reader with enough information to try these highly technical approaches, even if they have not received any training).

The focus of the book is overwhelmingly South African, with strong influences from the apartheid era military systems (the South African Defence Force or SADF) and some engagement with the shifts into the new peacekeeping role played by the post-apartheid military (the South African National Defence Force or SANDF). The contributors are all linked in some way to the Military Psychology unit at the Faculty of Military Science, Stellenbosch University. The pioneer of this work is professor Gideon van Dyk, who is also editor of this book and both author and co-author of several chapters.

van Dyk's biography provides some insight into the framing and positioning of this text, and his relationship with the various contributors. It notes that he was conscripted into the SADF and was a member of the infantry in the "Angola/Namibia war". This phrasing is interesting, as the war being referred to was mostly waged by parties who came from neither Angola or Namibia. The border between these two countries was arguably the primary theatre of war for a complex and layered set of conflicts that played out during the 1970s and 1980s. The two primary dynamics were the struggle for power between the apartheid regime and African nationalist movements, and the fact that these contestations became caught up in international Cold War conflicts. The early sections of the book are strongly framed by the psychologies of militarism that belong to this context and era – presumably influenced by the fact that van Dyk became a clinical psychologist and served as head of the psychology department at the North West Medical Command. The book later shifts into a broader African focus, which is explained by the fact that - under the auspices of the Stellenbosch University Faculty of Military

Science – van Dyk has undertaken research in partnership with Makerere University in Uganda and Yaounde University in Cameroon.

While an evolving understanding of the work being undertaken in a fairly new field is both inevitable and necessary for an institute studying, training and teaching military psychology, I find myself sitting with several dilemmas. These mostly revolve around the largely uncritical shifts between the past and present in the text, as illustrated by the evolving focus and style of the various chapters. In my view the book, and this field of work, would benefit enormously from the kind of questions that a critical psychology-based approach would use – including interrogating terminology and language, avoiding jargon, analysing the role of historical systems, tracing how political oppressions have shaped what African militaries have become, identifying the power dynamics at play, recognising the weighting of certain military understandings over others, understanding the place of psychology in the contexts and systems being studied, and critically defining the role of psychology within a shifting and evolving military, technological and political world.

The book has seven sections in all, each consisting of between two and three chapters. Their titles are: Military Psychology and Operations, Military Psychology and Selection, Military Psychology and Psychological Wellbeing, Military Psychology and Military Families, Military Psychology and Leadership, Military Psychology Need (sic) in Africa, Military Psychology and Soldier Work Readiness.

The opening sections of the book use what could be described as “old school” military theory in defining what military structures are, how military combat functions, and the role of a psychologist in dealing with the consequences of what the military system does to people. The concerns I have expressed so far began to shift as I read the final few chapters of the book; here were small signals of what this field of study could move towards in the future. Alma Grundlingh’s “New military leaders for new wars in Africa” focuses (for the first time) on the continent-wide issues militaries in African face, and provides a model that enables some critical engagement between context and military theory. In a chapter entitled “Military leadership: Process for Africa”, Rose-Ann Mphofu and Gideon van Dyk engage for the first time with the effects of colonisation, and the impact on African military leaders of structures such as the International Court of Justice in the Hague. Rosco Kasujja’s chapter on the military in Uganda provides some useful approaches to linking contextual dynamics with how a country’s military structure functions. The final chapter by Nondlela Ditsela, “Factors involved in subjective career success of soldiers in Africa”, provides a model for combining emerging military theories with tracking the personal trajectories of people who work in military contexts. If this book is the precursor of future work in making sense of the people caught up in war in

the African context, then these chapters provide some sense of the directions this field of study might be able to take.

In conclusion, there are several troubling technical issues about this book that need to be laid at the publisher's door: literal translation from Afrikaans into English in the Preface (which is barely intelligible), no list of abbreviations. I also wonder about the editorial role of a publisher (and its peer reviewers) in highlighting to researchers the need for a more comprehensive analysis of the positioning and purpose of the text, and some critical engagement with the ideas and research that the publication deals with.