

Military Social Work in the South African National Defence Force

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The transformation of the South African National Defence Force has prompted a critical reassessment of the Directorate of Social Work. As a result, the directorate realized the need for a formal business plan to align the profession strategically with the core business of the military system. After completion of the business plan, the need for a unique military social work practice model was identified. Such a model should present social workers with a strategy for the achievement of the goals and objectives of the business plan. The practice model rests on two key concepts: binocular vision and practice positions. Since the onset of the transformation process in the South African National Defence Force, these two documents have reflected the changing milieu within which social work is practiced. The main concepts of these documents are presented.

Introduction

The change imperative for the Department of Defence emanates from significant changes in the South African strategic environment.¹ Seven military forces united in 1994 under a new flag and a newly elected democratic government.² The original purposes and designs of these former forces were invalidated by their unification.¹ The South African National Defence Force (SANDF) became a truly national force, for the first time representing the people of the country.³

The SANDF comprises four arms of service: Army, Air Force, Navy, and the South African Military Health Service (SAMHS). The SAMHS renders a comprehensive health service to military employees, their families, and the organization itself. Within this service, several disciplines (medicine, nursing, dentistry, physiotherapy, psychology, social work, etc.) render curative and preventive services to military members and their families.

This article hopes to portray the significant changes that the Directorate Social Work of the SAMHS underwent to become a significant helping profession in the integrated SANDF. Military social work has different roles and content in different countries. The authors intend to portray the purpose and practice of military social work in South Africa.

The Current Situation

Modern notions of partnership enable the military to recognize not only that it has the right to support military families, but that it is in the military's best interest to support families. Segal and Harris⁴ found that family perceptions about the de-

sirability of continuing in military life and attitudes about military leaders have a demonstrable effect on soldier retention and morale. "The availability of Army community support services is essential to the well-being of the Army community."⁴ Because there is a correlation between the family life satisfaction and the work satisfaction of the military member,⁵⁻⁸ it is in the best interest of the military itself to have family support programs.

Studies in South Africa⁹ and elsewhere⁹ indicate that spouses and families use formal support structures (in addition to informal supports) during military separations. The most widely used formal means of support are the commanding officer and the social work officer. This indicates the role and status of social work as a profession in the military community and suggests that support services have become an integral part of effective modern military forces.

The military career is a family affair.¹⁰ The partnership between the military and families has evolved over time.¹¹ Consequently, the Directorate Social Work must remain aligned with the dynamic needs of families and work communities in the military system. Jolly¹² states that social work services will have to take on a more aggressive marketing role to demonstrate its contribution to the military's mission readiness if it hopes to continue to receive funding from the defense budget. Funds allocated to support services are subject to the mission of the military organization.¹²

In South Africa, the White Paper on Social Welfare¹³ dictates a developmental approach as the foundation for social service delivery. Programs that support this view have been presented in the military community. Examples of these are the Deployment Resilience Seminar for couples in the South African Navy¹⁴ and a program to empower spouses of infantry soldiers to function in the absence of deployed members.¹⁵

Social workers in the new SANDF have to prove that their service contributes to the mission readiness of a peacetime military. The focus in the SANDF, therefore, is currently on the development of employees. Social work services focus in this instance on the teaching and facilitation of job-specific social skills. In this way, we can remain relevant and effective in service delivery.

In every military unit there is a Military Community Development Committee comprising the commanding officer, a social worker, and other members of the unit and health team who are able to accurately identify needs in the unit. This committee then addresses these needs through programs and projects. There is an open-door policy between the commanding officer and the social worker, who is viewed as a consultant to management on issues regarding the well-being of the unit.

The purpose of the social work services in the SANDF is to enhance the social well-being and functioning of the military community, thereby ensuring the mission readiness of the SANDF.¹⁶ Social workers are thus called upon to contribute to the effectiveness and objectives of the organization.

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The Future State

Military Social Work Business Plan

The vision of the Directorate Social Work of the SANDF is to be "a world class occupational social work service comprising highly competent, creative, and performance-driven personnel. We render an excellent and committed service to the total satisfaction of all stakeholders and contribute to the development of a changing nation."¹⁶ It is clear from this vision that the Directorate Social Work sees itself as an indispensable part of the SANDF. However, it is also clear in the statement that the stakeholders need to share this view.

The business plan describes the strategic direction of social work in the SANDF. To ensure that the service remains needs based and people oriented, the business plan specifies five end results, or outputs, that serve as benchmarks in service delivery. Each social work intervention or service should contribute to the accomplishment of one or more of the five end results. Military social workers should be able to align their work with these end results to be relevant, appropriate, and effective. The five end results are summarized as follows:

Operational support. Deployed members and their families cope more effectively during military operations and exercises as a result of social work interventions. (Here the focus is on the person as an employee.)

A productive organization. The SANDF functions optimally, making the best use of its human resources within a people- and family-friendly milieu as a result of social work interventions. (The focus here is on the organization as a client.)

Socially healthy military families. Military families are resilient to organizational and societal demands because of restorative and promotive inputs from military social workers. (The focus here is on the employee as a person.)

Employee development. Employees use opportunities to develop themselves to their fullest potential as a result of social work interventions. (Here the focus is on the person as an employee.)

A well-marketed and valued Social Work Directorate. The Directorate Social Work is valued and considered indispensable by its stakeholders in terms of cooperation and sharing of expertise and resources, and through its alignment with the mission, goals, and values of the SANDF.

The business plan is the Directorate Social Work's response to a changing organization. As a people-centered profession, social work needs to play a facilitative role in the changing environment. Equally important, though, is the fact that the profession itself needs to undergo certain changes within this environment to remain relevant. Social work's role as a change agent can come to fruition within the transforming organization.

After the finalization of the business plan, a strategy had to be devised to attain these end results. This resulted in the formulation of a practice model for military social work in the SANDF.

Military Social Work Practice Model

The end results may be considered overly ambitious, and military social workers may feel despondent in their efforts to achieve them. The authors thus constructed the Military Social Work Practice Model,¹⁷ which operationalizes the business plan.

A model of military social work needs to be fluid and dynamic,

allowing a flow of services to address a diverse range of needs. The military community is not a static environment. The frequent geographical relocations, deployments, courses, and changes are elements of an extremely fluid organization. As a result, there is also a constant shift in management. Different commanding officers demand different roles and inputs from social workers. A model is required that can respond quickly and appropriately to these changes and that allows for role flexibility for the social worker.

The occupational social work literature¹⁸ suggests that there are three client systems that the occupational social worker (and, we believe, the military social worker as well) serves:

The employee as person. In the military environment, this refers to the personal problems of the soldier and his or her family. The soldier is not primarily viewed in his or her role as combat practitioner, but rather in the roles of parent, spouse, child, community member, etc.

The person as employee. Here the attention of the social worker turns to the soldier's work related needs and problems. The social worker enables the soldier to perform his or her duties as prescribed by the organization.

The organization as client. The organization here refers to the military system. The military social worker humanizes the workplace and facilitates the accommodation of human needs, functioning, and problems into the organization's policies and procedures.

To render an integrated social work service, the military social worker must hold these three client systems intact in his or her mind. The reciprocal relationship between these client systems can never be negated. To facilitate this holding, we propose the metaphor of "binocular vision."

The concept of binocularity was proposed by Wilfred Bion to describe the therapist's ability to have dual vision, each eye sensing a different set of information.¹⁹ We customized the term as the ability to have a "telescopic" and a "microscopic" view of a situation at the same time. The microscopic lens of the binocular is focused on issues close up. These can include the everyday struggles of families and individuals, the dissatisfaction of small groups of workers, and the stress that families experience from military demands. The telescopic lens enables the social worker to see the broader picture. This view focuses on the policy and customary issues that marginalize and exclude workers, the policies that are not family friendly, the needs of management at the unit level, and the organization's need for combat-ready military members.

By viewing both sets of issues simultaneously (i.e., binocular vision), the social worker is able to achieve a depth of perception.²⁰ This allows him or her to integrate the individual's everyday struggle to cope with life demands, the dissatisfaction of groups of people, and the reluctance of management to implement family-friendly policies with the need of the organization for adaptable, productive, willing, loyal, and efficient soldiers. The double view allows for more accurate assessments and responses to real needs. Binocular vision is paramount in the effective practice of military social work.

To guide the social worker's activities, within binocular vision, we suggest that there are four practice positions¹⁷ from which the social worker may intervene in any situation depending on the nature of the client's problem or need.

Melanie Klein (the post-Freudian child analyst) introduced the term "position" to replace Freud's psychosexual "stages," which tended to be prescriptive and linear. Position allows for greater mobility between the life stages rather than a necessary sequential progression from one to the next.²¹ We use the term "position" for the same reason, i.e., to move between practice positions in the work environment. Each of these positions will be described according to four dimensions: the definition of the client, the role of the social work officer, the nature of problems targeted by the social worker, and the forms of interventions used.

Position One: Restorative Interventions

This position of military social work entails the rendering of a problem-solving service to military employees and their families aimed at restoring their problem-solving and coping capacities. These interventions address people who have non-work-related problems. The approach is a positive one in that social workers aim at restoring individuals, groups, families, and communities to a level of wellness. The term "restorative" implies that the client has strengths and abilities. The social worker and client collaborate to unleash and restore these qualities.

Definition of client

The client is defined as an individual, couple, family, group, or community who is experiencing a problem in one or more areas of life. The employees of the Department of Defence are viewed in their roles as people, and not primarily in their roles as employees. The focus, therefore, is on the employee as person. The fluidity of the practice model, however, allows that an intervention on this level will also have an effect on the client in his or her role as employee.

Role of the Social Worker

The social work officer takes on the role of therapist, enabler, advocate, facilitator, community worker, and problem solver. The social worker is active in assisting clients to deal more effectively with their problems.

Nature of Problems

In this position, clients present with problems of a personal nature, such as substance abuse, marital distress, adjustment difficulties, child abuse, family problems, financial difficulties, housing concerns, escalating crime in the community, etc. The social worker deals with the presenting problems at a personal level.

Forms of Intervention

All case, group, and community work interventions that focus on problem resolution and introspection are appropriate here. The worker uses her or his preferred models and techniques (e.g., person centered, psychodynamic, systems, behavioral, problem solving, task centered, social action, etc.).

Position Two: Promotive Interventions

In this position, the military social worker aims to promote or enhance the social functioning and well-being of clients. The main emphasis is on prevention, education, and development. These interventions address people who have non-work-related needs. As with position one, although interventions at position

two are on a more personal level, they will influence the work behavior of the individual, because the holistic nature of the model allows for a flow-of knowledge, skills, and attitudinal changes from one life role to another.

Definition of Client

Here the client is still defined as an individual, couple, family, group, or community. These people have a psychosocial need that they desire to fulfill. They might already be functioning adequately, but they have a need for optimal functioning.

Role of the Social Worker

The social work officer takes on the role of educator, trainer, facilitator, enabler, guide, and coordinator. This role requires social workers to market themselves in these areas. The effective use of the marketing role will determine much of the success of position two interventions.

Nature of Problems

The social worker addresses a broad range of human needs. He or she may also work with clients who have a problem but who desire to live more fully despite the problem. He or she may work to prevent the development of problems that would require future restorative interventions.

Forms of Intervention

The social worker may make use of case work, group work, community work, psychoeducation, workshops, exhibitions, etc., in position two. The success of the intervention will be determined by the quality of the partnership between the clients and the social worker.

Position Three: Work-Person Interventions

In this position, the social worker focuses on what happens between people and systems in the workplace. This requires a shift in thinking from the personally oriented to the occupationally oriented. Because the workplace is one of the two primary systems in which a person functions (the other being the family system), it requires a definite strategy from the military social worker. These interventions address people who have work-related problems or needs, although well-being at work also has an impact on family life satisfaction. The military member is viewed as an employee in working relation to other employees.

Definition of Client

Here the client is defined as the systems or patterns of interaction between employees in the workplace. The employee is defined in occupational terms: as a worker, with a rank, with an office, and with status in the organization. The family and the broader community are also clients inasmuch as they relate to the workplace. The relationship between the military and the family can be a client in this position.

Role of the Social Worker

The social worker takes on the role of negotiator, mediator, facilitator, arbiter, etc. The social worker aims to ease the interactions between employees. The social worker becomes an integral member of the management team, being a specialist in interpersonal relations in the workplace and in community

building. The social worker seeks to assist employees and families to fit better with the organization. In this position, the workers are equipped with social skills to meet the requirements of the military system.

Nature of Problems

The social worker shifts her or his focus to problems within the workplace, such as conflicts between peers, poor management patterns, inadequate channels of communication, conflict between the employees' and the organization's sets of values, low worker morale or productivity, etc. The social worker also focuses on the interaction between the military system and the family system, facilitating greater communication and cooperation between the two systems and promoting the family's capacity to deal with job demands. The social worker may also facilitate civil-military relations.

Forms of Intervention

The social worker may make use of group work techniques, problem-solving processes, experiential exercises, community development, team building, community building, negotiation, mediation, participation in committees and workgroups, etc.

Position Four: Workplace Interventions

In this fourth position, the social worker focuses on the workplace, that is, on the unit or organization that comprises policies, structures, hierarchies, standard working procedures, etc. These interventions address the workplace itself and aim to humanize it.

Definition of Client

The organization, workplace, management, or unit itself is defined as the client. The social worker focuses on the impersonal structure of the workplace within which employees function. Although there may be a complete turnover of employees in a particular workplace, its structure may remain the same. The employee is seen as part of the organizational structure at this time.

Role of the Social Worker

The role of the social work officer in this position is that of social engineer, policy maker, systems analyst, researcher, organizational development consultant, etc. The social worker endeavors to assist the workplace in developing a structure that promotes optimal productivity, effectiveness, morale, and social well-being among employees. The social worker is an integral part of the management of the workplace, being a specialist on the interaction between an impersonal organization and a personal workforce. In focusing on this interaction, the social worker serves as the social conscience of the organization.

Nature of Problems

The social worker focuses on problems in the structure of the workplace (e.g., unit standing orders, policies, organizational culture, procedures of working, utilization of personnel, etc.). When these structures and processes are less than efficient or when they adversely affect employees or families, there is a problem warranting the attention of a social worker.

Forms of Intervention

The social worker bargains and negotiates with the workplace to change its structures and processes. He or she conducts

research into the effect of certain structures on the work force and develops policy proposals to enhance the structure and functioning of the organization. The social worker participates in work groups that are tasked with addressing structural issues in the workplace and that promote cooperation between the military and the civilian communities.

Discussion

Because we work with people in both the work and family systems, military social work has to strike a unique balance in responding to the needs of families and the demands of the military. For this purpose, a model that can serve both client systems, and the interactions between them, was presented. The model serves to integrate generic and occupational social work within the context of a military setting.

We strongly believe that there is a reciprocal relationship between work and family life. If we address the unique needs of the family, we inevitably address the military system. This is the reason for placing the interventions with these two primary systems in one model. Military social workers understand the importance of wellness in both of these areas and the degree to which they influence each other.

This model holds the person-in-situation as a central concept. The practice positions allow social workers to aim their services at the real needs and problems of their client systems without compromising any of their roles as military social workers. This model states strongly that there is no hierarchy or status differentiation in the components of military social work practice. The restricted focus of occupational social work on the working environment must be challenged. In its place is a model that values all forms and fields of social work practice as encountered in the field of military social work. The myth that we exist in two worlds, the world of work and the world of family, is exposed for what it is: a myth. The holistic and flexible nature of human living and social existence is recognized as the model allows for intervention in every sphere of the military member's life.

A comprehensive service implies that all four positions are addressed by the social work officer. The social worker has to develop her or his knowledge and skills to address the four positions described in the practice model. This opens a window of opportunity for supervision, performance agreements, and on-the-job training. Management has to ensure that the social worker is willing, able, and allowed to practice in all four positions. In this, the model also serves as a guide to plan and evaluate the practice of a particular social worker or a group of social workers.

Binocularity avoids the artificial distinction between work and family life. Instead, it is recognized that the needs of individuals may suggest something about the broader population, and the concerns of the broader population may indicate the problems experienced by its subsystems. The focus must remain on a double vision, the dual client, and on the interactions between two systems, rather than either only the one or the other. Social workers in the military cannot afford to focus only on personal or work-related problems; rather, they must address the interaction between the personal and work systems. The concept of binocularity should act as a guide throughout the military social worker's career.

The practice model provides military social workers with a

model that can be used to market the professionalism of the social work service to commanding officers and other personnel involved in the management of human resources. It is the demarcation of professional territory to ensure a more comprehensive service to our client systems. This model carves a niche that is unique to social work in the military. The acceptance of this practice model leads to a more directed service and can result in the enhanced social functioning of the military community and the optimal realization of the military mission.

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