

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Perceptions of Officer Training Among Newly Employed Officers and Specialist Officers in the Swedish Armed Forces – A Qualitative Study

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Professional officer training in Sweden has gone through some major changes in the last 30 years. The current officer system is a two-category system, where officers complete the three-year academic Officers' Programme, and specialist officers complete 18 months of vocational training at the Swedish Armed Forces' training schools. The aim of this study was to investigate newly graduated officers' and specialist officers' perceptions of their officer training. Results showed that their perceptions could be covered by three overriding themes: identification, vertical versus horizontal career paths and the perceived relevance of the officer training. Furthermore, the respondents' officer identification seemed to have developed before officer training, and the individual motivators concerned deliberate choices of becoming either an officer or a specialist officer. Coaching was crucial to both officers and specialist officers. However, the officers stated that coaching came at an early stage of their basic military training, whereas specialist officers were coached at a later stage in their career. The implications for the Swedish Armed Forces is that identification and career path are issues that need to be addressed early in a soldier's military career, and that officer training needs to be more focussed on defining career paths, especially for specialist officers.

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**Keywords:** identification; officers; specialist officers; officer training; career

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## Introduction

The Swedish Armed Forces (SAF) are characterised by an explicit culture that is rather isolated from society as a whole. Soldiers and officers work in separate barracks and units, and they often live there as well (Soeters 2018). Cadets and recruits receive their training in specific schools, academies and units, where a sense of uniqueness is highlighted. Military personnel also wear uniforms that make them stand out from most of the working population. Military organizations are considered greedy institutions that demand a lot of their personnel. During active duty, personnel are on 24-hour call and face quite distinctive working patterns (Druckman & Stern 1997). The military can also be sent on missions to remote places at short notice. Generally, military personnel systems create an officer career path consisting of 20–30 years of continuous military service. However, the context for military officers has changed in recent decades. Today's military requires officers who can think in a different and more strategic way than before (Lewis 2004). They must be able to make decisions in unclear settings, due to increased international deployments, possibly involving asymmetrical warfare. Additionally, Manigart et al. (2018) show how demographic changes affect the militaries in Western societies, and how flexibility, instead of traditional job security, is a major factor when it comes to employment.

Hedlund (2013) shows how officer training in Sweden has changed over the last 25 years due to strategic decisions, different manning systems (conscription and all-volunteer force [AVF]) and the implementation of the academic Officers' Programme (OP). Furthermore, Hedlund (2013) states that the military educational system is important, because it is partly through this system that the military can successfully convey formal and informal knowledge and observe its own institutional rules. However, much of the literature on military identity focusses on how officers perceive their identities, mainly related to leadership and culture. In light

of the changing character of the officer profession, of the labour market and the challenges in retaining skilled officers, it is interesting to examine how officers and specialist officers perceive their military training in relation to their newly acquired profession.

### **Officer Identity**

The main body of research into officers' identities often concerns leadership and other characteristics closely connected to the military profession. Stouffer et al. (1949) were among the first to conduct systematic quantitative studies of the impact of war on the mental and emotional life of a soldier. In 'From Institution to Occupation', Moskos (1977) argues that the US military changed with the introduction of an AVF. According to Moskos (1977), the introduction of an AVF creates a situation where military employment more closely resembles employment in civil society. The institutional orientation, where the mode of compensation is non-financial, or deferred, and the spouse is an integral part of the military community, is replaced by an occupational orientation where salary and bonuses are appreciated, and the spouse is removed from the military community.

Forsythe et al. (2002) show how US forces have been deployed throughout the world carrying out a broad range of missions in complex operations, requiring rather different roles and identities for soldiers and officers. Lewis et al. (2005) have used Kegan's (1982, 1994) theory of identity development to study military cadets entering college, and their results show that the college years represent a time of significant developmental change. Cobbina, Nalla and Bender (2016) have explored security officers' perceptions of the training they received to perform their duties effectively. Among other things, they have found that security officers perceived a lack of adequate training to perform their tasks effectively, and they highlighted the importance of systematic and standardised training. Bartone et al. (2007) have showed that positive developmental growth by West Point students predicted positive peer and supervisor ratings of cadet performance. And Boe (2015) has explained that the Norwegian Armed Forces introduced an officer development concept in order to better prepare cadets for the increasingly complex and difficult environment that officers meet after graduation.

In adapting to the social environment, Goffman (1959) acknowledged that the individual, very much like an actor, makes his appearance hoping that others will accept his portrayal of the role in question. Over time, the ideals of the institution will evolve through individuals' experiences in their roles (Berger & Luckmann 1966), just as previous research has emphasised that the values that represent the foundation of the officer corps are profoundly socialised into recruits (Moelker & Richardson 2002). However, previous research has also drawn attention to insufficient interest in the academic side of the officer profession among cadets. Kramer (2007) outlines how Dutch cadets are oriented to the officer function rather than to the intellectual challenges of academic studies. Furthermore, he also questions the benefit of cadets being educated in an institute more or less isolated from the rest of the organisation. In previous attempts to introduce a general military operational identity, shortfalls have been associated with undervaluing institutional features such as serving a greater cause and also overstating the significance of aspects related to warfighting (Johansen, Laberg & Martinussen, 2013).

### **Officer**

There are different denotations of the word 'officer' in different armed forces. Throughout this article, we use the following definitions:

Officer: Officers lead units from platoon level and up. They are trained at the Military Academy Karlberg, where they follow a three-year academic programme (180 ECTS credits) and graduate as *fänrik* (second lieutenant/ensign). Cadets with no prior service must complete a six-nine-month preparatory course before they start at the Academy.

Specialist officer: Specialist officers normally train at specialist schools and centres for 18 months and graduate as first sergeant. Experienced soldiers who have served as corporals and sergeants may complete a shorter course. Civilians must complete a preparatory course before the 18-month specialist training starts.

### **Professional Officer Training in Sweden**

The professional officer system in Sweden has undergone a number of almost revolutionary changes from 1972 to the current iteration, which was implemented in 2008. It has thus developed from a three-tier

system with officers, senior NCOs and junior NCOs to a system with regimental officers, company officers and platoon officers. In 1983, a one-tier system without NCOs was introduced, and today the country has a reformed three-tier system with officers, specialist officers and junior NCOs. Furthermore, in 1981 the different services' officers' academies and schools were merged into service academies, a system that remained in place until 1999 when the service academies were merged into three joint officer academies. In 2008, officer training was transferred from the auspices of the Swedish Armed Forces to the Swedish Defence University (SEDU). At this time, the OP became a university programme, and the SEDU was transferred from the Ministry of Defence to the Ministry of Education, a situation that remains today. The Swedish OP is a three-year university programme that leads to a bachelor level degree in war science. The OP is currently conducted in four main streams: war science, nautical, military technology and pilots. The OP differs from normal higher education in Sweden in the following ways: Officer students are selected more stringently than students for other programmes, officer students are subject to military discipline, and officer students live in a military dormitory and receive the same benefits as conscripts (lodging, food, travel home every second week, per Diem, free medical and dental healthcare etc.). The training of professional specialist officers (senior NCOs) and junior NCOs remains within the SAF and takes place at service and specialist branch schools. The NCO training within the SAF is non-academic. The Swedish Defence Recruitment Agency (SDRA), which is a civil agency under the jurisdiction of the government and part of the Ministry of Defence, is responsible for military recruitment in Sweden, including the OP.

### ***Prerequisites for Entrance to the Three-Year Officers' Programme in Sweden***

Entrance to the OP requires basic upper secondary school graduation with university qualifications and particular requirements decided by the SEDU. All applicants must pass a two-day test at the SDRA. The first day includes assessment of the applicant's intelligence, physical and psychological health, basic fitness and ability to serve in the military. On the second day, applicants undergo a suitability test. Additionally, in accordance with a special law that applies to the SEDU, there are four additional basic prerequisites for entrance to the OP, which are Swedish citizenship, basic military training, security clearance and personal suitability.

Sweden has not only changed its professional officer training system a number of times in the last 30 years, it also suspended conscription in 2010 and switched to an AVF. In 2017, the government found that this experiment had not been fully successful, though, and conscription was reintroduced (gender neutral) as a recruitment principle alongside the AVF. The first conscripted soldiers entered basic military training in summer 2018, in parallel with a number of volunteers. Security clearance is granted by the SEDU Head of Security based on a security interview conducted by a psychologist and clearance from the Swedish National Security Police. This requirement is unique to the OP and not found for any other university education in Sweden.

### ***Specialist Officer Training***

The Military Academy Halmstad supports vocational and functional schools by providing the part of the basic training that is common to all specialist and reserve officers in the SAF. The specialist officer training is vocational and shorter than regular officer training. It provides the SAF with specialists and instructors in various fields. The typically three-semester training starts at the Military Academy with general studies in leadership, pedagogy, tactics, security policy and strategy, physical combat effectiveness and military English. This is followed by a position at a vocational or functional school. Specialist officer training takes three to six semesters, after which graduates are employed. Areas of specialisation in all armed services include: land combat, amphibious forces, CBRN, engineering, aviation, supply, artillery, information operations, command and control systems, air defence, naval combat, airspace control, technical services, submarines, and intelligence and security. The current specialist officer system has been in use since 2009.

### ***Current Situation***

In the aftermath of the significant downsizing of the armed forces in Western societies in general and the SAF in particular (Szvircsev Tresch 2008; Österberg et al. 2017), Sweden is currently rebuilding the SAF. The rebuilding is in accordance with 1) the new direction of the SAF, once again focussing on national defence, 2) the deteriorated security policy situation in the Nordic region and 3) the SAF's difficulties in manning the organization during the years of the AVF from 2010 to 2018 (Österberg, Nilsson & Hellum in press). This failure to recruit sufficient numbers of individuals to basic military training is also reflected in the Swedish officer corps, which has vacancies that might increase in number if the officer training programmes fail to train enough officer cadets in the future (Österberg, Jonsson & Berglund 2018). There are subsequently

vacancies within both officer categories. Retaining officers within the organisation is crucial, as is recruiting enough officers after they have completed officer training. In addition, the new two-category officer system is roughly a decade old now, and it is important to explore how newly graduated officers perceive their officer training.

### **Aim**

The aim of this study has been to investigate newly graduated officers' perceptions of their military training.

### **Method**

A multiple case study design like the one described by Stake (1995) was adopted here. It is an analytical strategy that researchers may use when interested in exploring differences and similarities between the cases. Qualitative, semi-structured interviews were conducted at three army units. The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis (TA) was used to analyse the qualitative data. TA represents a flexible method for identifying themes, e.g. patterns in empirical materials that are either essential or interesting. We used an inductive approach to code our data, driven by the content of the data. For the analysis we used open coding, which means that the codes were developed and adjusted during the coding process. Furthermore, inductive TA often has an experiential orientation (Braun & Clarke 2012). In this process, the data was reduced and structured into fewer categories, and after additional analytical work, three main themes were identified: identification, vertical versus horizontal career paths and the perceived relevance of the officer training. These themes have different meanings for the two officer categories. Consequently, the continued analysis was driven by a focus on the similarities and differences between officers and specialist officers.

### **Participants**

The study included 19 respondents of which eight were officers (three men, five women) and 11 were specialist officers (nine men, two women). The officers' age ranged from 24 to 31 years (mean age: 26 years), and they had all been employed as soldiers for less than a year before starting the OP. The specialist officers' age ranged from 23 to 40 years (mean age: 29 years), and they had been employed as soldiers for about five years before starting the specialist officer training. The respondents had been employed as officers or specialist officers for three to 10 months at the time of the interviews.

## **Results**

### **Identification**

Our analysis of the newly graduated officers' perceptions of their officer training pointed towards aspects related to identification with the officer role and specialist officer role, respectively. Role identification turned out to be a process that preceded officer training. The informants reflected on how identification with their officer identity had emerged during basic military training and while working in the SAF. Rather than focussing on identity development during officer training, to which the informants did not attribute as much importance, the analytical focus shifted. Instead, it was directed towards understanding the informants' motivation to become an officer or specialist officer, and the significance of support and role models in the emergence of these identities.

The identification section has been divided into two subcategories, the first focussing on individual motivators and the second on coaching.

### **Individual Motivators**

The OP informants identified themselves as tacticians. Academic studies were not perceived as an obstacle, and the role of tactical officer was more appealing to them than a practical position as a specialist officer. In addition, several informants believed that an academic degree would provide greater job security in their future careers. Since specialist officer training takes place internally within the Swedish Armed Forces, the informants did not expect to benefit as much from such a qualification if they were to apply for a civilian job in the future.

The officers described an interest in leadership as their primary motive for applying for the OP. Their incentive was to develop their managerial skills and to be able to fill a managerial position after graduating. One officer said that this interest in leadership had increased during previous work experiences and had considerable significance in the choice of career:

'It was my civilian job ... I worked in a production facility and noticed a huge difference between managers and leaders. And I became very interested in the difference. How much more you wanted to work for those who were leaders, even though they were technically managers, instead of working for those who were just managers'.

Specialist officers described themselves as practitioners. They were motivated by working practically and operationally close to their squad. Several informants said that the OP was not an option due to their lack of interest in academic studies, the long period of training and the lack of a salary while studying. A majority had worked as soldiers for five to seven years and had become accustomed to receiving a regular income. Several informants also said that they 'had not join the Armed Forces in order to work behind a desk', a statement that reflects their image of the tactical officer role.

Specialist officers were motivated by a wish to acquire skills in their area of interest, which they considered an important area for the Swedish Armed Forces. There was also a desire to have more responsibility at work and to get the opportunity to train other soldiers in this specific area of competence. The specialist officers' statements indicate that they regard their occupation as an essential part of their identity. Another motive for applying for specialist officer training was a sense of having gone as far as they could as a soldier. To be able to advance in the Swedish Armed Forces, specialist officer training was seen as a natural step, which one of the specialist officers described as follows:

'I wanted to educate. And I was hired as a squad leader right away. And the next step for me to advance within the Armed Forces was to study further. There were no more career opportunities as a soldier, so to speak; I had already reached the top. [...] And I enjoyed educating, and you get to do that more as an officer than as a soldier'.

In conclusion, the officers' identification with their profession had developed during their basic military training, while the specialist officers' identification with their profession had developed during their employment as soldiers. Hence, instead of being reinforced during training, this identification with professional roles appeared to be a development that had preceded officer training.

### **Coaching**

Support and encouragement from others were crucial for identification with the officer profession. The majority of the officers stated that they were identified as potential officer candidates early in the selection process. They applied for the OP after completing basic military training and a preparatory officer course. Their main reason for doing basic military training was that it seemed like an opportunity to develop as individuals, but they also reflected on military training as having great merit. According to the informants, they had no long-term plan of a career in the Swedish Armed Forces when entering basic military training. However, while undertaking basic military training, support from peers and families seemed to be crucial for them in deciding to apply for the OP. The officers also stressed the significance of their commanders, as they gained confidence when supported by more experienced officers, which emphasises the need for guidance.

The importance of coaching also applied to specialist officers, as their commanders seemed to have played a crucial role in encouraging them to apply for specialist officer training. In line with the previous theme, the soldiers with many years of occupational experience said that they had reached a point where they knew it was time to move on. Yet, they still reflected upon the need for what they considered the 'final push' in the right direction. Here, peers and commanders seem to have acted as important advisors. The informants stressed the importance of personal guidance towards their future career from someone close to them and with similar experience, which one of the participants described as follows:

'And he [the commander] told me that: "You can't tread water as a squad leader doing this. I think you should apply for officer training, so you make progress in the same direction you are currently heading". Then it seemed like it might be time to do it when I, after all, am in "the firm" and have decided that this is what I want to do for a living. So it felt like natural progress in the right direction'.

In summary, officers were mainly influenced by colleagues and supervisors during basic military training, and specialist officers during their employment with the Swedish Armed Forces. Specialist officers assigned greater weight to the importance of personal guidance from military role models than officers. The analysis

shows that there is a significant difference between how officers and specialist officers view themselves, and that both individual motivation and coaching from supervisors and peers are essential factors in their choice of education and occupation. In line with the previous subcategory, this emphasises how identification with different roles preceded officer training, but also highlights the impact and significance of the individual's social environment.

### ***Vertical Versus Horizontal Career Paths***

The officers' narratives are permeated with a focus on personal development and show that their incentive was a desire to progress up the career ladder, which reflects a vertical career path. The informants were aware that the civilian sector often provided a higher salary, but at the same time they believed the Swedish Armed Forces provided better opportunities for personal development. They emphasised the importance of doing meaningful and stimulating work, and how this should be intertwined with their knowledge and rank.

Furthermore, the officers emphasised the importance of long-term career plans and influence over their professional development, which were perceived to increase their employment security. A majority of the informants said that they knew what the future held, and that there was a clear career development over the years to come. Subsequently, they tended to be open-minded about changing their workplace geographically within the Swedish Armed Forces, because they realised that the officer career path relies heavily on their own mobility. However, some officers felt that, during the OP, the message communicated was that their future career path is forced, and that they are expected to rise up a rank every second year. One of the officers described the expected rapid career development as follows:

'I feel that I do not want to get stressed up to the point where I get one more star, but I want to feel that I ... First, that I know what I am doing, now as a platoon leader [...]. Second, that I feel that I am ready to take the next step, that I am not forced to keep up with this eight-year clock. That I am like ... Well, they have said to us several times, "Yes, in eight years you will be a Major". And I don't want that! I feel that if I want to stay at the platoon level for a year longer than intended ... and I think that I should be able to do that if I find that satisfying'.

Specialist officers, on the other hand, outlined a horizontal career path, where focus was on excelling in their specific field of competence. The informants emphasised the importance of professional skills and good working conditions to be able to provide adequate training for others. Several informants outlined the importance of the military unit where they were stationed. This seems to be related to an impression that their specialisation is primarily linked to the unit where they work. Their previous experience and years of employment at their current unit also contributed to a sense of loyalty, which one of the specialists reflected upon as follows:

'I can't imagine working anywhere else. I think I'd rather quit my job in the Armed Forces. It's like this: Firstly, I do not want to live anywhere else in Sweden; secondly, I would not like to do anything else for a living ... The Air Force doesn't attract me, the Navy doesn't attract me. Even though I have seen other units during military training, and I've heard stories about what other people do, you get an understanding of what the job entails ... All these different aspects that you might not have had much of an insight into, I feel that ... there are many competent people in other places as well. But there is nothing else that attracts me'.

The statements above highlight a difference between the two officer categories, where the officers' career path stems from their mobility, while the specialist officers' accounts reflect a stronger bond to their unit. Whereas officers expected to undergo a career development, albeit a speedy one, several specialist officers said that they lacked explicit career plans and that they found it difficult to predict the future. According to the specialist officers, the career paths and preconditions for career development were different for officers and specialist officers. Specialist officers seemed to lack an insight into what their future career within the Swedish Armed Forces might hold.

### ***The Perceived Relevance of the Officer Training***

The officers stated that academic education had provided new ways of analysing and evaluating information. However, this education had a more theoretical focus than expected. The officers described how they

had wanted more practical training and opportunities to practise leadership to be better prepared for their work after graduation. Furthermore, the officers perceived some OP courses, both theoretical and practical elements, to be somewhat basic and rudimentary.

At the same time, the officers felt that the OP had a long-term strategic focus. Although some of the officers regarded gaining an understanding of higher-level command functions as good experience, they believed that they would benefit more from this knowledge later in their careers. Instead, the informants said, it would have been more beneficial if the education had been directed towards tasks at the platoon level. One officer described this misdirection as follows: 'It felt a bit like being trained to become a major in a *lieutenant's* uniform'. Moreover, the officers considered training in tactics at the platoon level especially important for those who lack previous military experience:

'I can't say that anything has really helped me with what I've done since I came here. You are not taught how to administer anything. You are not taught platoon level. So, when we talk tactics. Sure, leadership I have certainly benefitted from without thinking about it. I do believe so. But everything in the OP, it leads to my being supposed to deliver somewhere when I'm a major and higher'.

Much like the officers, the specialist officers believed they would have benefitted from more practical leadership training. One of the more lasting memories from their officer training was that they were not able to put their theoretical knowledge into practice during training. Also, the varying prior knowledge and experience of the cadets resulted in training being adapted to a minimum level so that everyone could keep up. This was frustrating, especially for specialist officers with more professional experience from the Swedish Armed Forces. Therefore, they stressed the need to increase entry requirements for specialist officer training, which they said would ensure well-prepared and competent specialist officers.

Based on statements from older colleagues, specialist officers had low expectations before starting specialist officer training. Several specialist officers said that they expected to receive specialist competences, but instead received a general instructor education for training recruits. Since this approach had not been communicated to them prior to their training, it led to disappointment among the cadets. There also seemed to be an inadequate flow of information between the schools and the Swedish Armed Forces, which resulted in a mismatch between the training provided and the unit's expectations of the newly graduated officers. One of the informants reflected on this challenge as follows:

'So considering the image of what the specialist officer training really was ... When we came back here, it was like, "Perfect – now the cadets are back. Now we can use them. So, what training have you received?" "Well, we have received training in running combat training with live ammunition, which is the big thing. Then we had some leadership, pedagogy and such. And some squad training". "Well, but ... skill-at-arms?" "No, we didn't get anything like that. We have not received anything formal like that". "Huh, so what should we use you for then? You have received a general instructor training, what should we do now?"'.

The inadequate flow of information between training and work also applied to officers, but it seems that specialist officers experienced the most significant gap. Both officers and specialist officers highlighted the theoretical focus, lack of practical training and lack of opportunities to practise leadership as insufficiencies in their training. Moreover, they perceived their education as elementary and directed either towards a long-term future career (officers) or an uncertain career (specialist officers).

## Discussion

This study aimed to investigate newly graduated officers' perceptions of their officer training. The results show that this can be covered by the following three themes: identification, vertical versus horizontal career paths and the perceived relevance of the officer training. In the discussion, these themes will be elaborated and contextualised, as they will be addressed from the perspectives of the officers and the Swedish Armed Forces, respectively. Furthermore, results from this study could guide the SAF in its effort to increase recruitment and retention to the organisation, which will be highlighted in the following. 1) The renewed focus on national defence suggests that the SAF needs to increase its volume, which basically mean more boots on the ground. 2) The deteriorated security policy situation in the Nordic region requires a bigger defence force in regard to deterrence and operational capacity. And 3) the SAF's difficulties in manning the organisa-

tion during the AVF years from 2010 to 2018 have emphasised the focus on recruitment and retention, in contrast to the previous years of downsizing. Since there are vacancies within both officer categories, results from this study could contribute to the understanding of the mechanisms behind identification as an officer.

### **Identification**

The analysis demonstrates how the officers regarded themselves as tacticians, a label used in the organisation to differentiate between officers and specialist officers, to which the officers themselves do not attribute any particular significance. Instead, the designation 'tactician' reflects a discourse within the organisation – something they have been referred to and later embraced and 'made to their own' (Berger & Luckmann 1966). Overall, the officers emphasised their interest in leadership and stressed the importance of individual development.

The specialist officers, on the other hand, defined themselves as more practical and 'hands-on'. In the interviews, they described having a clear vision of what they were striving to achieve in their future career. Their motivation was mainly to develop their skills within a specific area of expertise. Here, we have identified an interrelation between the time spent in military service before starting officer training and their identification. At first glance, it might seem self-explanatory. However, we will show how this relationship has different consequences for the two officer categories.

Starting with the officers' standpoint, coaching and support from individuals in their unit during basic military training early in their career were regarded as crucial factors when they applied for the OP. For the specialist officers, there was a different tendency. They too emphasised encouragement from role models as essential for them when applying for specialist officer training. However, when applying, the specialist officers described their choice with statements such as, 'having reached an endpoint in their soldier career', 'time to move on', and 'it was either this or quit the Armed Forces'. In terms of information and coaching towards specialist officer training, more career-focussed guidance was given a couple of years into their employment. This postponement of individual guidance is in accordance with the SAF's document *Our Military Profession* (Swedish Armed Forces 2017), which emphasises how the occupational skills, compatible with those of specialist officers, stem from several years of professional experience as a soldier. From an organisational standpoint, this could be regarded as a way of giving individuals time to obtain occupational skills. However, it arguably conflicts with the current organisational requirements in terms of staff shortages and the need for more specialist officers in the SAF.

In the interviews, the specialist officers repeatedly returned to their experiences as soldiers. From an empirical standpoint, this raises the question of whether their identification with the specialist officer role is as clear as we first thought. Most of the informants reflect on how the required professional skills, which they see as essential in being a competent specialist officer, should stem from years of experience as a soldier. Consequently, the informants seem to identify with the soldier role (what they once were) and the specialist officer role (what they are now). Instead of regarding this as an identification problem, it is perhaps more fruitful to consider this as an intercommunicating relation between the two. To gain a more in-depth understanding of the identification with the specialist officer role in future research, one approach would be to more thoroughly investigate the process from 'being a soldier to becoming a specialist officer'. Our results showed a tendency among some informants to question whether the organisation places any value on their years of experience as soldiers, which they regard as essential in crafting their occupational skills.

In summary, both the officers and specialist officers described how their identification with their respective officer category preceded officer training. However, the specialist officers' narratives include, to a greater extent, reflections stemming from cooperation and commitment. The officer informants described a vaguer form of identification centred on their interest in leadership and their motivation for personal development.

### **Vertical Versus Horizontal Career Paths**

The officers' career paths were mainly described as vertical, reflected in upward achievement, whereas specialist officers' objective to excel in their specific area of competence reflected a horizontal career path. Studies of professional aspirations in the teaching profession have shown a separation between hierarchical and lateral aspirations, where the former reflect a desire to progress up the career ladder and attain managerial positions, and the latter mirror an ambition to develop and increase one's knowledge and skills in the field of expertise (Avidov-Ungar 2016). These findings coincide with our study and show that various career aspirations can be found within different professions. The specialist officers' commitment and stronger identification with organisational values could, at first sight, appear to reflect an intrinsic motivation, as shown

by Avidov-Ungar (2016). However, our results show a different tendency, as specialist officers expressed devotion to their current unit.

The officers seemed well aware that their professional career path relies on them being able to move and relocate when required. In terms of their future career aspirations, being mobile could prove necessary, since geographic mobility increases the opportunities for career advancement and promotion (McLean et al. 2013). In contrast, specialist officers expressed stronger loyalty to their units, which seemed to derive from their previous experience in the SAF. After several years in the same unit, a majority of the specialist officers had settled down and begun to think about starting a family, which made them less mobile than their officer counterparts. The age difference between officers and specialist officers, where the latter tend to be older, had obvious implications regarding their willingness to relocate geographically. This might have a negative impact on future career achievements, both for officers who prefer a fixed workplace, and specialist officers unwilling to change workplace geographically.

Previous research shows that recruitment to the OP has been unsatisfactory for the last 10 years (Österberg, Jonsson & Berglund 2018). On the positive side, the majority of the officers in our study perceived their career path as relatively clearly marked out, meaning that they knew what the future held. On the other hand, career paths were lacking for specialist officers, and their need for guidance from peers and commanders could be linked to the apparently unclear career development of the specialist officer role. In other words, they were requesting more information about future career development. Previous research in a military context has found that perceived career insecurity decreased organisational commitment and increased turnover intentions (van Eetveldt et al. 2013). Hence, clear information about possible career paths for both officer categories is important, as is retaining newly graduated officers, now that the SAF is expected to grow again for the first time in many years. Moreover, the importance of information about future working conditions applies especially to the recruitment and retention of female officers (Smith & Rosenstein 2017).

The officers had a clear plan for their future career development, which coincided with their professional aspirations to climb upwards and attain a command position. However, they perceived their postgraduation career path as forced, a factor we also found in the coaching they received before doing the OP, as they were identified as potential officer candidates at an early stage of their basic military training. In contrast, the specialist officers' identification was formed and refined during their years as soldiers, and coaching towards specialist officer training took place later in their working life, not during basic military training. Interestingly, the analysis reveals a potential contradiction amongst the specialist officers. On the one hand, they described a deep commitment to organisational values, but on the other, and to a greater extent, they outlined perceptions of uncertainty about their future career path.

One conclusion from this study is that the specialist officers' commitment seems to be directed towards the military unit where they have been employed. Therefore, the specialist officers' disinclination towards mobility, which from a career standpoint could be an obstacle, needs to be understood against the background of their age, late coaching (during employment) and uncertain career path. These aspects must be taken into consideration in connection with retention. Consequently, more studies are needed to gain a deeper understanding of the identification and career paths of specialist officers.

### ***The Perceived Relevance of the Officer Training***

Research focussing on other occupational groups, such as teaching, stresses that identity should be regarded as a development process comprised of constant interpretation and reinterpretation of the individual's self-image, but which also concerns what she or he aspires to become in the future (Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop 2004). Against the background of the substantial body of research into military identity that focusses on values such as combat morale (Stouffer et al. 1949), cohesion (Manning 1991) and identification with the military (Moskos 1977), it is surprising that time spent doing officer training seems to have neither affected nor reinforced the informants' identification with their occupational roles.

Based on the findings of this study, the OP and specialist officer training seem to have had no continuing distinctive socialising effect. As shown in the previous theme, the time before officer training was regarded as significant for the 'construction' of their identification with their respective roles. Furthermore, it also reflects the informants' point of reference in terms of when they were socialised into the organisation. Previous research has suggested that organisational culture could be regarded as the 'invisible glue that holds an institution together by providing shared interpretations and understandings of events through socializing members into common patterns of perception, thought and feeling' (McGrath & Tobia 2008: 43). The time when the officers and specialist officers were guided towards officer training (basic military

training for officers, time as soldiers for specialist officers) corresponds with the time when informants felt they were developing and growing into their respective roles.

The findings outline how both officer training courses seemingly had no impact on the development of the informants' identification with their roles; this seems to be closely related to inadequate personal development. In terms of taking responsibility, both the officers and specialist officers regarded the structure of the training and, according to some informants, the way they were treated as students as being similar to their experiences from basic military training.

Furthermore, the educational content of the OP seems, to a considerable extent, to be targeted at job assignments in the long-term future. As a result, the officers have had difficulties linking the knowledge gained during their training to the work expected after graduation. Previous research has identified similar challenges among newly graduated nurses, who have gained theoretical knowledge, but lack the skills required to solve problems that might occur in clinical settings (Kermansaravi, Navidian & Yaghoubinia 2015).

The specialist officer training appears to have been focused on producing instructors in general military skills, although all the specialist officers started with the expectation of developing their specific area of competence. In summary, both officer categories considered their training to be basic and rudimentary, although specialist officers experienced most frustration since they felt the training was adapted to a minimum level and did not provide the specialist competence they expected. Furthermore, both the officers and specialist officers expressed disappointment about the quality of and limited opportunities to participate in leadership exercises.

Both officer categories aspired to continue their development and improve their competences, particularly in leadership, something they associate with 'being an officer'. The impression an individual makes on others is not only related to how others perceive and evaluate that individual, but also to how others will cooperate with the individual (Goffman 1959; Leary & Kowalski 1990), and this analysis reflects how all the informants placed high demands on the organisation, and especially on themselves. Against this background, the majority of the informants, albeit to varying degrees, stressed the lack of communication between training establishments and the military units to which they would return after training. Substandard communication between 'school' and 'practitioner' partially explains not only the resentment informants felt towards their training, but also, as shown in the analysis, the uncertainty felt by specialist officers due to their unclear career path.

## Conclusions

This study contributes to an understanding of newly graduated officers' perceptions of their officer training, and how identification and career paths are important aspects of their occupational development. We found that both officers and specialist officers perceived their educations as elementary, not providing the skills and competences they considered necessary in their current positions as junior officers. The long-term strategic focus for officers seemed directed towards a far-sighted future career, and the lack of specialist competences for specialist officers seemed directed towards an uncertain career. The potential implications for the organisation, if new officers experience vague identification (officers) and uncertain career paths (specialist officers) after officer training, need to be taken into consideration in connection with retention.

With identification being so closely related to the organisational setting at unit level, either via basic military training or work experience, and not to officer training, we suggest that the SAF should focus on identifying ways to bridge the gap between the practical military context and education. Identification with occupational roles should be reinforced during officer training and create a clear picture of the years to come in order to strengthen organisational identification among the officers and specialist officers and to increase their willingness to stay in the SAF. Furthermore, considering the career insecurity among specialist officers, we suggest that the SAF should provide training-related coaching and more information about career opportunities earlier in specialist officers' career. Since training costs are high, and the SAF is in need of more officers and specialist officers, it is crucial to strengthen the occupational identification and decrease career insecurity in order to attract and retain personnel.

## Limitations

The informants only included Army personnel. Officers in the Air Force or Navy could have generated a different outcome regarding perceptions of their officer training. In addition, the results from this study rely on a limited number of informants, which reduces the generalisability of the results. However, with this methodological approach, the generalisation of results is not feasible, and consequently, this is not one of the aims of the study. The gender distribution for officers is skewed in favour of women, and the proportion is not equal to that in the SAF.

## Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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