

By RONEL SCHEFFER

Turning heads on the beat

The current system of basic training in the SAP cannot deliver the credible, effective and accountable policing which is essential to the larger process of social change in South Africa, says researcher Janine Rauch (right).



First you make them talk the talk, then you make them walk the walk." The drawl of a Canadian police chief, but good advice, it seems, for those charged with transforming the South African Police. If members of the SAP begin to talk of "human rights" and "democracy" are they likely to behave in a way that contradicts their language?

No, says Janine Rauch, a Cambridge-trained criminologist and one of two researchers who have been conducting an independent policing research project over the past 18 months, initiated and sponsored by Idasa.

Ms Rauch recently completed a six-month study on basic training in the SAP. She sat in on lectures and talked to instructors at the four police colleges in the country where young trainees' perceptions are shaped by instruction on, for example, how to deal with "terrorists" and "riots".

"This is completely inappropriate language and a long way from our vision of what good policing is," says Rauch, adding that many within the ranks of the SAP share the researchers' understanding of current problems within the force. There is also support for their recommendations to address these problems. "The SAP is not a homogeneous institution that is just bad," says Rauch.

Yet, there is no question about the fact that the values and aims of policing need urgent and thorough-going change. Both the military history of the SAP and the history of the police in enforcing apartheid meant that questionable values and norms were reproduced in training.

"Changing values is a very difficult thing," says Rauch, "and you cannot change a police force simply by changing its training system - the organisation itself must undergo a process of change in order to maximise the benefits of improved training."

Some 1 200 recruits pass through the training colleges annually and such a small number of the force (total 110 000) is not going to change the organisational culture of the SAP.

Rauch's research examined current basic training to see if it had changed in relation to the new political environment, and whether it equips young police officials adequately to deal with the complex social reality. The research was informed by a concern with improving the levels of service provided by the SAP, and with the urgent need to improve police-community relations.

Although the SAP is currently expending a great deal of energy and financial resources on improving their training system, she suggests that that this improvement is impeded by a dominant "anti-training" ethos in the informal police subculture.

Ms Rauch has submitted her recommendations for basic training, some of which could be implemented immediately, to the SAP itself and to the Police Board, a National Peace Accord structure - of which she is a member - comprising police and civilians that advises the Minister of Law and Order on policing. A task force from the board will take her work further.

Her basic argument is that policing is a discretionary activity - there isn't a set of rules for how a good cop behaves. "So what we need to do in training is to give students the skills to exercise their discretion."

'There isn't a set of rules for how a good cop behaves'

When she visited the police colleges her most striking initial impression was that of a military institution, with students marching up and down, spending hours drilling and instructors dressed in camouflage uniform.

"Even in the classroom it is a very regimented, traditional kind of education with the teacher giving the lessons and students repeating it.

"There is no emphasis on questioning or developing an individual critical understanding of the material. The military style, in particular, de-emphasises discretion, it suggests that there is one way of doing everything."

To equip police trainees for their discretionary activity, Rauch recommends a differ-

ent style of education which is skills based and implies a different style of learning - practising skills, role playing to improve understanding, being critical and being self-critical.

By focusing on language a start could be made in the classroom with changing values.

Another of her recommendations entails the importance of engaging outside expertise, and voices not heard before, in formulating training courses and changing the SAP itself.

Rauch points out that the training system followed by the SAP is not necessarily a product of apartheid, in fact it is similar to what was offered until fairly recently to police forces around the world - particularly in

Britain, Canada and Australia. She believes that the SAP can learn much from the latter two, both having been British colonial police forces like itself.

The SAP seems rather keen on "doing it for themselves", says Rauch, who cautions that the same mistakes will be made if the police force does not take seriously her recommendation on broader consultation: "They must listen to voices they have not heard before, not only to Unisa and the HSRC."

Other key recommendations she makes are that the physical components of training should be reduced and made more appropriate to real policework and that a new system of discipline should be developed, with an emphasis on police professionalism.

Rauch is the first independent researcher ever to be granted access to the training institutions of the SAP. She and colleague Etienne Marais, who are both based in the psychology department at Wits University, struggled for most of the first year of their study, to gain direct access to SAP members.

"We went into this research as novices not as academics and what we've tried to do is to work co-operatively with people, from academics to cops, trying to build a friendly relationship with the police force, trying to see how they view the problems and policing in general.

"It has paid off, we have earned their respect because we were prepared to listen to them - being members of the Police Board has also helped."

The two researchers will continue their work, Rauch will focus on "riot" policing and "riot police" training in the next few months while Marais is completing work on the homeland police forces and their reintegration into the SAP.

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