English Summary

Morality and Normalcy in A-Symmetrical Conflict:
Distancing, Denial and Moral Numbing among Israeli Conscripts in
Everyday Practices of Occupation

This work is a study on young Israeli men and their experiences as combat soldiers in the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) while serving in the ‘Occupied Palestinian Territories’ (OPT) during the ‘Al Aqsa Intifada’. The focal point of the research is the moral orientation of these soldiers within the daily lives they led as conscripts in this specific setting. The study is based on fieldwork conducted in 2006-2007 in Israel, mainly via in-depth interviews. We could call this a research into micro-ethics, to apply a term M. Ignatieff (2001) used to indicate the need for research on moral issues on the level of the soldiers and young commanders themselves. When commencing with this research, my main goal was to gain a deeper understanding of the moralities – the moral behaviour and self-positioning - of young Israeli soldiers, of their way of thinking about the world around them and the people they were confronted with. I, furthermore, tried to understand how the physical and emotional factors that Israeli soldiers faced while serving in the OPT influenced their moral behaviour, self-conception and decision-making.

Throughout the research, more and more questions around the daily challenge of dealing with Palestinian civilians by Israeli soldiers begged for a better explanation. In view of the often harassing and abusive behaviour displayed in those settings, the question arose of how these young people could resort to acting in such ways. Often this behaviour is simply dismissed as ‘unacceptable’ and ‘immoral’, and there it ends. In my opinion, however, this is not enough in an explanatory sense. In order to make real sense of the behaviour of Israeli soldiers when dealing with Palestinian civilians, we need to get to a deeper understanding of the processes that are at play here on several different levels. This research then necessarily focuses on the perpetrators and not the victims, on the strong party not the weak.

Conclusions

Israeli combat soldiers find themselves, while serving as conscripts in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, in situations that are morally ambiguous and problematic. They have to deal extensively with Palestinian civilians and to engage in constabulary tasks, which they perceive as unworthy work for combat soldiers.

In this study I show the way the physical surroundings of the work arenas of Israeli soldiers and their implications have a ‘numbing effect’ on these soldiers on three different levels: the emotional, the physical and the cognitive. Together with issues such as routine and power, these processes of numbing
have a great influencing power on the work of Israeli soldiers and especially their moral competence. I call this a process of moral numbing.

Furthermore, Israeli soldiers were found to use specific moral or discursive strategies, showing aspects of moral disengagement, such as moral justification, euphemistic labelling, advantageous comparison and displacement of responsibility (Bandura 2002). I also tried to show that the moral discourse of Israeli soldiers is often an instrumental one, as they use the ‘language of ethics’, but the motivations for their actions are geared towards a different goal, such as avoidance of punishment or guarding the good name of the Israeli military or state.

The abovementioned issues, I believe, can also teach us about other instances of a-symmetrical conflict outside the Israeli context. Not only do American or Dutch soldiers find themselves in morally ambiguous situations in places like Afghanistan and Iraq, but they are, just as Israeli soldiers, part of a more structural process in which immoral behaviour by soldiers is made possible by the situational circumstances they find themselves in. The issue of collective moral responsibility is then an important one here, taking us beyond the picture of a lone soldier as a ‘rotten apple’.

This study has tried to show in detail and on an empirical level how ‘circumstances’, including cold, heat, fear, stress and frustration, can numb soldiers’ bodies and minds, and with that their moral competency. The ‘sub-culture’ of army life in these unique settings of a-symmetrical conflict also has a dynamic of its own and needs to be taken into account. This knowledge could contribute to more general, theoretical explanations of soldiers’ behaviour in such settings of a-symmetrical conflict, as well as possibly teach other militaries to look further than their focus on ethical training to soldiers or jailing individual soldiers as ‘extreme’ cases and see the problems their soldiers face within a wider socio-psychological context and as a structural problem.