Chapter 4

The implications of the work in the OPT for the soldiers: emotional, physical and cognitive dimensions

‘There’s a very clear and powerful connection between how much time you serve in the Territories and how fucked in the head you get. If someone is in the Territories half a year, he’s a beginner, they don’t allow him into the interesting places, he does guard-duty, he’s not the one to … all he does is just grow more and more bitter, angry. The more shit he eats, from the Jews and the Arabs and the army and the state.’ (BS Hebron)

‘The check posts are terrible, you curse everyone. It’s a difficult experience, mentally, you don’t see your home, you get pissed off, and you get orders from people that you wouldn’t even talk to on the street.’ (2)

As the soldiers quoted above make clear, there seems to exist a strong relation between the work arena of a soldier, the operational dynamics, such as the period of time he serves there, and his ‘mental state’ or emotional state, as I will call it here. After a while you get ‘bitter’ and ‘pissed off’ as these soldiers describe it.

This state is a complex one and so are the processes that lead to it. I will, therefore, divide these processes that lead to a condition of moral numbness or a lack of moral competence into three separate dimensions: the emotional, the physical and the cognitive. Within these different dimensions, Israeli soldiers go through processes that result in a more general state of numbing. This state of moral numbing, I will argue at a later stage, greatly influences the behaviour of soldiers and their moral decision-making. Here I will discuss the implications and the characteristics of the arenas described in the previous chapter on all three dimensions, each dimension having its own different dynamics and different ways that lead to processes of moral numbing in the soldiers.
4.1 Anger, boredom, frustration and more: the emotional dimension

‘Mentally, mentally, you’re hot, August, ceramic vest, helmet on your head, and why? Because of them. Because of them, and they stand in front of you, it’s not because of them … and this goes through your mind.’ (29)

As mentioned in the introduction to this part, emotions are an important part of the culture of human beings that we, anthropologists, investigate. Emotions have a distinct influence on the way people act within and react to the circumstances they find themselves in, just as these circumstances can be said to influence the emotions felt by people. Especially in this case, where the moral behaviour of soldiers is analysed, emotions play an important role. Anger, frustration and all the other emotions that come into play during the work in the OPT at least partly guide the behaviour of soldiers.

Here the descriptions given by the soldiers themselves of the way they feel are used when speaking about emotions. In anthropological work on cultures different from the one of the researcher, it can be difficult to establish what is actually felt by a person, as the words he or she uses cannot be unambiguously translated into an emotion as the researcher knows it. In this case, where the informants speak the same language as the researcher, some utterances about emotions and the way someone feels can, however, be used more or less directly.

Within the interviews, Israeli soldiers usually divided the effects of the work at checkpoints into two categories: the physical hardships (koshi phyzi) and the mental or psychological hardships (koshi mentali or nafshi). Within this latter category (psychological hardship), emotions find their place. This emotional dimension will be discussed here. Emotions can vary from feeling angry, bitter, homesick, frustrated and unmotivated, to feelings of tension, loneliness or feeling worn out. All these emotions are part of a more general emotional state called attrition or shkhika. I will discuss this state and the particular emotions of soldiers it entails within the different arenas of work described in the previous chapter.

Shkhika sums up the negative influence of the work soldiers perform on their emotional or physical state. Here the former will be discussed. Such influences vary from arena to arena and include weather conditions, lack of sleep and the monotony of the work. These factors can lead to emotions of frustration, boredom and irritation, for example. These emotions can all be grouped under the label ‘emotional attrition’ and they can be of great influence on the way

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55 This does not mean that the researcher understood the language of the informants at all times, especially when slang or professional jargon was used.
56 Of course, for this text a translation from Hebrew into English is necessary.
soldiers behave and make their (moral) decisions in the field. Y. Dar, S. Kimhi, N. Stadler and A. Epstein show how this is not unique to the ‘Al Aqsa Intifada’, but was already observable in the first Intifada (2000: 299). Not all emotions will be discussed here, however, only the ones that are clearly shared by the soldiers while they serve within specific arenas within the OPT.

Emotional attrition at the checkpoint

The concept of attrition is a very central one in the discourse of soldiers. When asking soldiers about how they felt when standing at a checkpoint or during guard-duty, for example, most if not all answers included the word ‘shkbika’ or ‘shokhek’. Yoel, a former commander from the tank division, emphasizes the effects attrition can have on a soldier, effects strong enough to make a soldier ‘go crazy’:

‘It’s the shkbika, the shkbika, the shkbika during the operational period of the service [kav], about 4 months, you do eight-eight-eight-eight or four-four or twelve-twelve or six-six, and sometimes because some mistakes we have eight-two, guard eight hours, get down for two, guard for eight hours again. During twenty four hours. It happens. In those four months you acquire a huge repertoire of songs, that you know how to sing, you develop hobbies that you never thought were possible, and there are people that to deal with it shoot, or something, and there are people that go crazy. Not after four months, but after a year, a year and a half.’ (20)

The emotions that arise here are those of boredom because of the hard routine of the guard shifts and a feeling of frustration that can even result in violent outbursts by a soldier. Eviatar mentioned how attrition caused by work at the checkpoint could make soldiers act in irrational ways. Sometimes they start to see suspects where there are none:

‘For the first 2 weeks It’s ok, you stick to the rules, but after a while, you guard 8 hours every day, you don’t sleep enough, you are tired, you are worn out, the situation finishes you, physically and mentally and then comes the suspicion, people react in a non-rational way.’ (5)

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57 In Hebrew the word attrition (shkbika) has a related verb form.
58 Yoel is referring to hours of duty and hours of rest respectively (for example 8 hours guard-duty, 8 hours off-duty and then 8 hours of guard-duty again).
A former soldier from the Givati Brigade, Offir, who served at many checkpoints, emphasizes the difficulties of the long hours and the routine, characteristics that are, as we have seen, typical of work at the checkpoint. He, furthermore, asserts how commonly shared those emotions were during his service:

‘The difficulties for the soldier were the mental problems in his head, to cope with the days, the hours, the routine. That was what the soldier went through. Everyone went through it, at least those that were with me.’ (6)

Other features of the work at the checkpoints that contribute to the processes of emotional attrition, apart from the routine and the long hours mentioned before, are the continuous line of people making pleas, the discussions and negotiations about the right to passage through the checkpoint and dealing with daring youngsters. These issues frustrate and anger the soldiers and contribute to their attrition.

As the soldiers control the passage through the checkpoint, people come to them continuously with pleas to let them through, with explanations about visits to the hospital or the doctor’s or about needing to get to work. This is especially true when the soldiers are not behind glass but standing in direct contact with the Palestinians who are passing through the checkpoint. The Palestinians want to go through to continue their daily business and the soldier on duty has to decide whether or not to let them do so, based on his own deliberation and on the rules set by his commanders. Sometimes he will listen to the reasons given by passers-by, sometimes he will check something and sometimes he will even refuse to listen altogether. This behaviour is often arbitrary, then, which can also be seen as an effect of emotional attrition. The continuous pleading often frustrates the soldiers and makes them angry. The ‘wearing down’ of soldiers is at times even used as a conscious strategy by the Palestinians to get through a checkpoint after being denied passage: ‘you have to simply wear them [the soldiers] down by not giving up’ (Hammami 2006: 25).

In footage taken by the IDF at the Hawara Checkpoint on the outskirts of Nablus in 2004, Israeli soldiers negotiating with Palestinians can be seen getting more and more aggressive, both verbally and physically. In the explanations given by the soldiers for their behaviour, it becomes obvious that they act out of frustration and anger and from a desire ‘to teach them’ (the Palestinians) how one should behave at the checkpoint and who is in charge. This footage will be discussed in more detail in Part 3 of this study.

59 These youngsters are also known as ‘habab’; young men that hang around waiting for some action, fun and/or trouble.
However, boredom and frustration are not the only emotions experienced by soldiers at checkpoints or during guard duty; soldiers also often emphasized their feeling of insecurity and fear. Work at checkpoints that were open and where the soldiers stood in direct contact with the passing Palestinians was especially accompanied by feelings of tension and of being ‘sitting ducks’:

‘I didn’t like these checkpoints, but…’ (Q: ‘Why?’) ‘also its boring, also you are like a duck in a shooting range, if I was a terrorist with some experience, there would be no soldier that would survive the checkpoint, it would be enough to look at a checkpoint for a month, to know exactly how many soldiers, where they stand, you see it, everyone knows it, they are less alert, [they want] to pass the time, enough, when we are released from duty. When you do a checkpoint non stop for half a year, it’s wearing out, it finishes people, a terrorist that tries to hit a checkpoint usually succeeds, usually.’ (23)

However, as this soldier says, this tension or alertness dwindles as time goes by and as soldiers spend more and more time at the same checkpoint, doing the same work. They become less alert, less afraid and increasingly bored.

Tension and fear: emotions during arrests and ‘straw widows’
Most of the emotions of fear and tension were reserved for operations such as arrests and the occupation of ‘straw widows’. Risks here are higher due to the inherent uncertainties of the situation. In these work arenas of the Israeli soldiers, the emotions that came with uncertainty and insecurity were plentiful, as the following quotes show:

‘It was the first time I made a [straw] widow by myself as a commander of a force. That’s a very scary thing, especially when you’re in Balata, which is one of the more hostile refugee camps there are, it was a house with a lot of families.’ (BS 45, translation EG)

Talking about his first experiences in the OPT, this former soldier from an elite unit of the paratroopers says:
'In the beginning it’s scary, there were a few bombings in Jerusalem last year, they put us inside Bethlehem in neighbourhoods that have the name to be enemies, when you go in you know that for sure there will be shooting, for sure there will be incidents, for sure this and that. So there I remember we got in and it was really very scary. In the end there was nothing, we did the arrest as we should have done and all, but when we got out of the cars and ran to the house, then my heart was really pounding, you look everywhere, you are ready, it was really scary.’ (16)

As these examples show, we cannot lose sight of the fact that some of the work Israeli soldiers perform within the OPT is dangerous and carries risks to their safety. As the quote in the beginning of this chapter made clear, soldiers who find themselves in a state of restlessness can also experience a high degree of tension. This state is reached when tension is always present. Danger can be anywhere and can come from any side. Danger comes from the enemy but there is also pressure to perform well in front of the commanders and pressure from the home front, both of these also playing an important role:

‘It’s wearing you out, because you almost don’t have time to rest, also in your rest time you work, all the tensions you have around you, from the settlers, from the commanders, tensions from home, you are under tremendous tensions from all directions all the time.’ (26)

Interestingly, while some soldiers did relate their feelings of fear, many others said that to their own surprise they did not feel any, even if, looking back at past experiences, they could not imagine not feeling afraid back then. It seems that at the moment of action, fear is not much of an issue for soldiers who have been socialized not to feel or even think about it. Yariv, who had just been released from the elite section of the Nahal Brigade a few months before our interview, remembers:

‘Most of the operations are routine, they’re routine already. The first operation I was in was in Jenin and then the adrenaline flowed.’ (Q: ‘Was it fear or adrenaline?’) ‘Adrenaline, not fear, you don’t even think about fear. I don’t know. There was a month and a half full of operations, six operations where wanted men were killed or wounded within a month and a half. And then our team commander asked us if we were afraid … we don’t think about fear, every time, if the operation is of size you
have a pre-briefing of about two-three days, you just have more adrenaline, not more
fear. Not fear. I don’t know.’ (25)

Offir puts into words how being part of a ‘bigger whole’ or system, like the military, can
make you feel strong and fearless:

‘the IDF makes you not be afraid of anything, you can do everything, everything is in
your head, the fear is psychological.’ (Q: ‘So there wasn’t any fear?’) ‘What do you
call fear?’ (Q: ‘For example at night or the feeling that you might get hurt’) ‘When
you’re inside the system you are not conscious of what you do, you have confidence
in what you do, you are a body, a certain surrounding, and you are serious on
everything, you don’t think twice. You are very decisive, concentrated, if you don’t
have then its better that you’re not there.’ (6)

Thus, emotions of real fear are not particularly acute in the experience of soldiers. Being
part of a system such as the military empowers the soldiers and does not give feelings of fear any
room to surface. While in action and carrying out their mission emotions of fear seem to be
repressed, as we were able to see in the above quote about Operation Defensive Shield where
‘adrenaline flowed’60 but where no fear was felt. Tension, however, is present in any uncertain
situation soldiers find themselves in. Both emotions can be grouped as forms of emotional
attrition experienced by soldiers during their service in the OPT.

Emotions and their effects
All emotions discussed above, such as boredom, frustration, anger, fear and feelings of tension,
can be called numbing emotions as they have a numbing effect on the moral professionalism of
soldiers. Emotions that are apparently not numbing, such as fear and tension, can also have a
numbing effect on one’s moral effectiveness. The moral behaviour of soldiers will be discussed in
the next chapter; here it is enough to emphasize the relationship between emotions that arise out
of the nature of the work Israeli soldiers perform within the OPT and their subsequent
behaviour.

Because soldiers are bored, frustrated, tense or afraid, their behaviour is less deliberated
and can, thus, be harsh or humiliating towards the Palestinians they are confronted with. This
behaviour can be verbal but it can also become physical as testimonies and reports of human

60 Adrenaline can signify that a person is afraid; in this interview, however, I understood it to mean excitement.
rights organizations show. A 24-year-old Palestinian man, who was detained at a checkpoint and abused by soldiers, reported the following:

‘After that, the two soldiers grabbed me by the shoulders and dragged me to the checkpoint, about thirty meters. While they dragged me, they hit and kicked me. At the checkpoint they bound my hands very tightly with plastic handcuffs. I heard the first soldier shout in Hebrew but didn’t understand what he was saying. Another guy who was being held there told me, “Lie down on the ground.” While he was talking to me, the first soldier hit me in the legs, and I fell on my face. Another guy tried to wipe the blood from my lips, but the soldier shouted at him. He mumbled that he was sorry he couldn’t do something to help. Ten minutes later, the two soldiers picked me up by the shoulders and threw me into a concrete cell, about two meters long and one meter wide and then left.”

This testimony gives us an example of the sometimes harsh behaviour of Israeli soldiers. From the statement of this Palestinian, the frustration and anger of the soldier involved can be felt: even though he has been restrained, the Palestinian man is still hit and shouted at.

4.2 Hot, cold and tired: the physical dimension

At the outset of this section, it is important to note how closely related the physical dimension of military work is to the above discussed emotional dimension. Attrition can also be expressed in physical terms. Physical characteristics of the work that soldiers perform and the places they perform it in, influence the way they feel, both emotionally and physically, and therefore influence their actual behaviour. Winslow has already mentioned in her study on the Canadian airborne in Somalia how ‘environmental stressors have an impact on soldiers’ health … and [that] climate can affect group cohesion and attitudes toward out groups’ (1997: 225). Especially the monotone landscapes soldiers serve in, but also the lack of comfort compared to what they are used to back home and their inability to escape the physical environment, influence the group (ibid.).

Another physical aspect of the work of soldiers is that of their own bodies and dress and the embodiment of their emotions. The bodies of soldiers, as Foucault (1995) has noted, are made docile by the military and for this reason discussing the way bodies play a role within power

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61 This testimony was collected by the Israeli human rights organization, B’tselem, www.btselem.org as accessed on 24-05-2007.
relations and communication, for example, is important in understanding the experiences of soldiers.

In her work on the misconduct of Canadian soldiers in Somalia, S. Razack shows how the soldiers emphasized the cruelty of the circumstances they found themselves in: the heat, the dust and the Somali youths who irritated them and drove them to the limits of their patience (2000). In the previous section, the emotions of irritation, frustration, tension, boredom and fear that can arise from such circumstances were discussed. Now it is time to look at the physical side of the military experience of Israeli soldiers within the OPT. The experiences of the Canadian soldiers Razack talks about are in many ways comparable to the situation of Israeli soldiers at the checkpoints; the soldiers have to face all weathers, dust, mud and, as mentioned before, the continuous pleas of passing Palestinians. Hammami writes about how this is viewed from the Palestinian point of view: ‘[w]e know when the soldiers look at us in line, what they see are pushy, uncivilized animals who create chaos, and lie - yes, this is the physical reality they have created by their presence’ (2006: 26).

I will focus here on aspects connected to what Israeli soldiers call ‘physical hardship’ in relation to their work in the OPT. Furthermore, communication and body language will be discussed as both issues are related to the physical aspects of work in the OPT.

Physical attrition: checkpoints

The soldiers at checkpoints are often exposed to harsh weather conditions such as wind, rain, snow and scorching sun in summer. The open checkpoints, in particular, are difficult working arenas from this point of view. Not much scholarly work has been done on the effects of heat and cold on the performance of soldiers, but from the stories of soldiers who have served during various conflicts and wars it becomes clear that they are influential. J. Kobrick and R. Johnson (1991) mention S.L.A. Marshall’s work (1947) in which he observed ‘men ceasing to function in both extreme heat and deep cold, although they were physically unharmed’ (1991: 223).

From the material collected for this study, it became clear that weather conditions and other physical elements of their work influenced the degree of physical attrition experienced by soldiers. Nir relates:

‘It’s difficult, it’s not easy and not … it’s hot and cold and in all weathers you are there.’[Speaking about work at the checkpoint] (14)
A soldier from a paratrooper unit relates his experiences in the cold region of the Southern Hebron Hills where he was posted for four months:

‘In that period we would do 10 hours of back up duty on the patrol routes and then we would go up for guard-duty, and then we would do shifts in the headquarters. We would “grind” our asses off there. And all this in the winter. You probably know what the winter is like in the Southern Hebron Hills, it’s snow and it’s a crazy wind and it’s cold and we would be pitiful … we got winter overalls [hermoniot] and Canadian shoes, but the platoon commander said that Canadian shoes and winter overalls weren’t operational because it’s makes you cumbersome and you can’t move … its horribly cold, and from all this “grinding” [thkina] and boredom, yes you are cold, so you stop a truck that comes through the checkpoint and tell them: now you stop here, you are the shield against the wind, because the truck blocks the wind, and now you stop here and be my wind shield. Like that we hid behind him for like half an hour - okay you can go now, yalla, go. And that was it, those were the checkpoints.’ (BS 36, translation EG)

Furthermore, as we have seen in several of the previous quotations, fatigue is a very important physical condition that strongly influences soldiers’ behaviour. A severe lack of sleep is what almost every soldier complains about and mentions when speaking about his military service. S. Williams shows in one of the few sociological studies on sleep how it ‘is intimately bound up with emotion, trust and ontological (in)security’ (2007: 153). Fatigue should be considered in a similar way when analysing soldiers’ behaviour.

A popular Israeli saying, usually used when referring to reservist duty, is that once a man dons a uniform he immediately becomes hungry, horny and tired. Military service is, then, closely associated with bodily functions and needs. The above saying points to the need for food, sleep and sexual relations. The body of a soldier is thus very central to his soldiering experience. As a former soldier quoted before said: ‘you’re always tired, you’re always hungry, you always have to go to the bathroom’.

Communication

Communication can be conducted on several levels. It can be verbal but most communication is, in fact, established through eye contact or gesturing, making the body a very central part of it. Contact between two strangers usually begins with a look and is then followed by speech. That is,
if both parties speak the same language. Verbal communication between Israeli soldiers and the
Palestinians is often very problematic; most soldiers do not speak Arabic and most Palestinians,
except for those who have worked within Israel or who have spent time in Israeli prisons, do not
speak Hebrew. Miscommunication can lead to misunderstandings, for example when a soldier
tells a person to stop and the person does not understand what he is saying and thus carries on
walking. This, in turn, can lead to a reaction on the part of the soldier which can eventually lead
to violence by the soldier, verbal or physical, directed against the Palestinian. The following
examples show how (mis)communication plays a role in the relationship between soldiers and
Palestinians:

‘I would tell my soldiers 90% of the world’s conflict is from a lack of understanding,
90% of this lack of understanding is because of lack of communication and 90% of
communication is through speaking. So if you cannot speak with the population, you
start from a point that is not equal. The joke in the army is that why do I need to
speak Arabic, I have my gun. In our company someone made a dictionary of spoken
Arabic with all kinds of sentences, we copied and distributed it in the section. It
didn’t help much, but a little.’ (5)

‘The point in what I’m saying now is there specifically was a miscommunication
between us and them. Many times they had a permit, but you would take him, treat
him as a suspect, bind him, you blindfold him, while all he did was go to work and
you hold him with you at the checkpoint for hours and if he falls on a good guard in
the gate [šijen gimel] he will also get it, that’s what would happen.62 There were a lot of
things like that.’ (BS 45, translation EG)

To this we can add the fact that soldiers minimize their communication with Palestinians
as much as they can, as we have seen before. At checkpoints such as Qalandia and many other
places, like DCOs,63 for example, the communication between Israeli soldiers and Palestinians is
indirect (through megaphones), making it almost exclusively one-sided in the form of orders and
short sentences. The soldiers are not physically present, being hidden from the public by walls or
dark glass.

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62 The Hebrew letters šijen and gimel stand for ‘ša’ar’ and ‘gader’ or fence and gate, used for any gate of a military base
or settlement.
63 District Coordination Office of the IDF, where all permits are issued for the Palestinian population of the OPT.
Zanger states that the proceedings at the checkpoint can be seen as speech acts that follow a pre-determined protocol incorporating utterances such as ‘ID’, ‘permit’, ‘Where are you going?’ and ‘Where did you come from?’ (2005). These short sentences, usually ending in a question mark, are uttered again and again, hour after hour, day after day, without ever developing into full conversations.

Communication or the lack of it is also a way for soldiers to ‘other’ the Palestinians, to emphasize their otherness and the distance between ‘them’ and ‘us’. When the communication between parties is short and impersonal, or even non-existent, ‘otherness’ is enhanced and reinforced.

![Palestinian arrestee in military vehicle (photo: courtesy of Breaking the Silence)](image)

**Figure 16**
Palestinian arrestee in military vehicle (photo: courtesy of Breaking the Silence)

**Body language**

‘[They seemed bigger] not only because of their age but mainly because of the many gadgets that swelled them up and bulked up their bodies, bodies that, when their owners are in their other world, the private one, the intimate one, are maybe even skinny’.  

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64 From a letter to a soldier in Hebron by an activist from MachsomWatch. The letter was translated from Hebrew by George Malent and published in the Occupation Magazine, see [http://www.kibush.co.il/show_file.asp?num=26608](http://www.kibush.co.il/show_file.asp?num=26608) as accessed on 11-07-2008.
An important thinker on the issue of the body and embodiment was M. Mauss. This French sociologist extensively studied bodily techniques and the way they were passed on from generation to generation (1979). Such bodily techniques include ways of swimming and working but also ways of giving birth or expressing dominance over others. The way our body performs certain actions is culturally ingrained in us, Mauss asserts.

Foucault, whose work on discipline has already been discussed before, has done influential work on the body as well, especially on the control of the body through the internalization of rules and habits (1995). Both Mauss’ and Foucault’s work make us realize the importance of looking at bodily behaviour and its meanings. As Foucault has specifically shown in his work, this is especially true concerning soldiers and their ‘docile bodies’. These bodies, I argue, can, in their turn, also keep power structures intact.

The uniforms they wear and the weapons they carry materialize the power that soldiers have. Their body with its ‘adornments’ is a central tool in emphasizing this power; it makes clear who they are, how strong they are and it also makes a clear distinction between them and the Palestinian civilian population around them.

Because of the uniforms soldiers wear, often only their faces and hands are visible for the other to see. This also has its effect on the communication between both parties. Most important, here, is the inequality between the two; on one hand, the dominant soldier in uniform, on the other, the Palestinian civilian who is in the role of the submissive, the one who has no choice but to do as the soldier says. The division of power is a clear one.

Not only the uniforms and the weapons are important here, body language is also a tool used by soldiers to emphasize their power. Accompanying the speech acts mentioned before are gestures that tell people to ‘come forward’ or ‘stay back’ or ‘go home’. Even though the means of communication are few, the power of the soldiers is established by them at all times.

Posture has always been important in any combat situation conducted face to face (see Grossman 1995). In the same way that Dutch soldiers in peace-keeping operations take off their helmets to communicate more easily with the civilian population in places like Iraq or Afghanistan and to show that they are not aggressive (see van Baarda and Verweij 2006: 4–6), Israeli soldiers at checkpoints will hold their guns high, wear sunglasses and stand strong to show the Palestinian civilian population who is in control. The dark reflective sunglasses often worn by Israeli soldiers contribute to the distance between soldier and Palestinian, as one cannot make eye contact through the dark glass (Ben-Ari et al. 2004).

It seems, then, that the senses are blocked as much as possible so as to not see, hear, smell or touch the ‘other’. The less soldiers use their senses in the course of their contact with the
‘other’, it seems, the easier it becomes for them to carry out their work of controlling another people in the practice of occupation.

The way soldiers feel physically – tired, cold, hot or dirty – has a profound effect on their emotions, which are discussed above. Soldiers’ emotions, especially anger and frustration, can be heightened by the level of their physical (dis)comfort as many soldiers interviewed indicated. Furthermore, the way they communicate and use their body to send out messages or to distance themselves from the Palestinians shows the importance of the physical dimension and its implications for the work of Israeli soldiers within the OPT. These, then, are factors contributing to the way soldiers behave and make their moral decisions.

4.3 Unclear categories and uncertainty: implications of the cognitive dimension
The way one sees and understands one’s surroundings and the way one categorizes them belong to the cognitive dimension. Here this principally entails the way Israeli soldiers distinguish between friend and foe and the way they categorize the people they deal with and the work they carry out.

Friend or foe

‘I think your judgment gets a little impaired when every day… when your enemy is an Arab or somebody else who in your eyes … like, you don’t look at him as a person standing in front of you, but as the enemy, and this is the word for him: enemy. He is not a dog, he is not some animal, you don’t think of him as inferior, he simply doesn’t count. Period. He is not… he is your enemy, and if he’s the enemy, you kill him. And if it’s him that you kill, once you’ve killed him, then it seems that there’s nothing worse you can do to him, but apparently there is.’ (BS Hebron)

In the quote above the process of depersonalization becomes obvious. The Palestinian is not dehumanized, but made into an entity or category. As such, he or she is not seen as an individual person anymore; he or she becomes ‘the enemy’ (see Ben-Ari et al. 2004).

The distinction between an innocent civilian and the violent enemy is a very problematic one in the OPT and in other a-symmetrical conflicts. The fact that you do not know who your enemy is heightens the tension of soldiers along with their feeling of insecurity. They can never know if and from where they will be attacked. As we saw in one of the testimonies before, this feeling could be described as a ‘negative high’, a constant sensation of restlessness. The examples
below from interviews with an officer, a squad commander and a soldier make this point more clearly:

‘We already said the occupation corrupts, you are in a situation, the Palestinians are not naïve … very soon the fact that you are with arms, with a jeep, with a uniform, your enemy, the terrorists are hidden inside the population. You can’t see them, you don’t know when they come, you know the population helps them, you know all that, but actually you don’t know anything. In such a situation, everyone is a potential enemy.’ (5)

‘To recognize who is an enemy and who is a friend? You can’t really say until something happens… an operation… it happened often that we would go out in the day time in a village, which is the most scary that can be, from every side there can be a terrorist, they can shoot, there you really can’t say who is who, you just have to open your eyes all the time, be ready, its much more scary and more dangerous.’ (16)

‘at a checkpoint there is the danger of explosives. With all the humanity… if explosives pass then… that’s the ambivalence at the checkpoint. You can call it ambivalence. The two-sidedness you can call it. On one side most are innocent … on the other side in that population there consists of people that are abusing this; I’m not saying this in a political way but as a soldier.’ (11)

When the distinction between an innocent passer-by and a possible terrorist is unclear for a soldier, one mechanism to deal with this is to treat everyone as a potential attacker and thus as the enemy. Seeing a whole population as hostile can easily lead to the harsh treatment of innocent people and to unnecessary violence against them. This can be seen as what Miller and Moskos (1995) have called the ‘warrior strategy’ that soldiers adopt in order to deal with their unclear position vis-à-vis the ‘other’. This reaction, in part, also arises from feelings of fear and stress. Processes of ‘othering’ or making another person into a negative ‘other’ are, then, triggered by feelings of insecurity caused by the difficulty of distinguishing between friend and foe.

**Dirty work at the checkpoint: unclear categories**

As already discussed in the introduction to Part 1, policing work in general, and especially the work at the checkpoints, is basically seen by soldiers as the most dirty work one can do during
service within the OPT. In Hebrew it is called *avoda shehekora* or, literally, ‘black work’. The work is first of all seen as unsophisticated and, therefore, far from the ideal activity of a combat soldier. Elite combat units usually do not participate in work at checkpoints. As discussed in the last chapter, what many soldiers are looking for is ‘action’, anything that will get them out of their routine. The work at the checkpoint is, then, seen as doing precisely the opposite and is, as such, viewed as inferior. Furthermore, this type of work is seen as very difficult work because of its monotonous and boring character, but also because of the uncertainty it entails and the unclear situations soldiers find themselves in throughout their time at a checkpoint.

Dror, a platoon commander who had many soldiers under his command who worked at checkpoints, emphasizes this issue:

‘Bottom line *[tahles]* [work at the checkpoints], it is the “dirty work”, there isn’t much dynamics. You get a certain work habit, everyone his own. It depends on the dynamics of the people you work with at the checkpoint. There isn’t a lot of curiosity. Actually you have seen it all after your first checkpoint … there is no dynamics or excitement. If you find something you’re happy because it doesn’t happen a lot, it’s a matter of luck, of the situation.’ (4)

Adam, however, emphasizes another aspect of the work at the checkpoints: the uncertainty that is felt by soldiers during their work. As a deputy company commander who spent many hours visiting the checkpoints where his soldiers were stationed, he faced many instances where situations were not clear-cut and where he had to make decisions on the spot:

‘I just want to know that no one enters Nablus that doesn’t have anything to do there. The IDF wanted to separate the villages from the cities. So if there is someone from a village, he doesn’t have any reason to go to Nablus. They had doctor’s permits, but we would know exactly where the doctors were and if there was a doctor in their village or the one next to it. The situation is very hard, there aren’t clear-cut answers, there aren’t clear-cut orders.’ (1)

Adam emphasizes here that ‘there aren’t clear-cut answers’ and there are no ‘clear-cut orders’, this creating a situation of not knowing or confusion that is felt to be problematic by the soldiers. If there are no clear-cut orders, you have to make decisions on your own. While commanders are used to doing this, for soldiers it is more difficult and can produce dilemmas as
the last example (where people want to cross the checkpoint to go to a doctor, while the orders are to keep people who do not live there from going into Nablus) shows.

4.4 Conclusion

In this chapter the implications of the arenas examined in Chapter 3 were discussed. I have looked at three different dimensions, the emotional, the physical and the cognitive, to see how the work of soldiers within different arenas influences the soldiers and their behaviour. I have tried to show how processes of numbing within different dimensions are triggered by the effects of heat, cold, uncertainty, tension and fear and how these can affect the behaviour and actions of soldiers.

Within the emotional dimension, soldiers related feelings of boredom, frustration, anger, tension and fear. Within the physical dimension, weather conditions and a lack of sleep, for example, were recognized as influential for the behaviour of soldiers. Furthermore, their bodies and their body language were shown as being important in their relations to and communication with Palestinians in the setting of the OPT. Finally, within the cognitive dimension, the blurred categories of ‘friends and foes’, the difficulties of distinguishing between them and the effect of this on the work at the checkpoint were discussed. All these issues not only influence the behaviour of soldiers in general by numbing them emotionally and physically but can also lead to the numbing of the moral ability or moral competence of Israeli soldiers. I argue that these conditions do, indeed, lead to a general state of moral numbing. In the next chapter this numbing will be discussed in further detail.