Summary

Military personnel encounter moral dilemmas during deployments and in their working environment at home. We define moral dilemmas as situations in which a choice has to be made between two actions, embodying different values. Dealing with moral dilemmas requires moral competence. There is a growing awareness of the need to address ethics during training in the armed forces. This dissertation provides insight into how moral competence can be reinforced by means of ethics education.

Our research is based on a qualitative research approach allowing us to reflect on experiences and learning processes during ethics education as well as to develop and improve the theory and practice of ethics training and education. The train-the-trainer course on military ethics, developed by the Faculty of Military Sciences of the Netherlands Defense Academy, was used as a case study for this research. Within this case study, in each chapter, we use different sources of data: semi-structured interviews with participants; participant observation and detailed notes by trainers. In the studies presented in this dissertation, we use a specific notion of ‘moral competence’ that includes six different elements. We assume the following elements to be relevant in fostering moral competence: (1) The awareness of one’s own personal values and the values of others; (2) The recognition of the moral dimension of a situation and identify which values are at stake or are at risk of violation; (3) The ability to adequately judge a moral question or dilemma; (4) The ability to communicate this judgment; (5) The willingness and ability to act in accordance with this judgment in a morally responsible manner; and (6) The willingness and ability to be accountable to yourself and to others.

The following research question and sub-questions were addressed:

**How to foster moral competence by means of a train-the-trainer course on military ethics?**

(a) What are relevant foundations for ethics education and training aimed at fostering moral competence? *(Chapter 2 and 3)*

(b) What are challenges in fostering moral competence by means of ethics training in a military context, and how can these challenges be met? *(Chapter 4, 5 and 6)*

(c) What are perceived outcomes of the train-the-trainer course? *(Chapter 7)*

In the second chapter, we present our case study: the train-the-trainer course on military ethics. We identify three requirements for ethics education aimed at fostering moral competence. First, virtue ethics, focusing on the development of personal values and identity. Second, the ‘Socratic attitude’, enabling a person to enter into a dialogue. And third ‘living learning’, which provides practical tools for reflection on experiences.
To foster a personal approach to ethics education, we make use of concepts from virtue ethics. This ethics theory is explicitly concerned with the agent, with motives and intentions, emotions and desires. In the training, we aim to foster reflection on situations in which choices have to be made, and on personal involvement in these choices.

As a method for engaging in a dialogue with regard to a moral question or a moral dilemma with each other (and with themselves), we identify the Socratic attitude. This entails the ability to listen carefully, to postpone one’s judgement and to ask questions (instead of engaging in a debate where the primary concern is to convince the other).

To create a process of living learning, we use a pedagogical method known as Theme-Centered Interaction (TCI). Trainers seek to create a dynamic balance among four factors that arise in groups in learning situations: the task, or the course objective or theory which is presented (the IT), the group (the WE), the individual (the I), and the context (the CONTEXT). In this approach, participants connect theory with their own point of view and their experiences in practice. This method serves as a tool to foster personal moral learning.

In Chapter 3, we explore the notion of ‘art-of-living’ in the work of Michel Foucault. By means of a concrete example taken from our case study, we examine the relevance of working with this approach in ethics education. We show how participants can become aware of existing power relations, which opens the door to the possibility of individual empowerment. Participants recognize Foucault’s concepts of ‘normalization’ (e.g. judgements about what is considered normal and what is not) and ‘disciplinary technology’ (e.g. the production of the desired behavior of individuals by control techniques such as hierarchical observation, normative judgements and examination) within the military organization. One of the examples mentioned in this chapter is a participant reflecting on internalized disciplinary power in terms of military values, such as loyalty to the organization and a ‘can do’ mentality. The Foucauldian notion of art-of-living aims at fostering awareness of power relations, and at empowering people to use space for ‘freedom practices’, to actively choose and act upon certain values. This approach can be used in ethics education to foster participants’ insight into themselves with regard to their concrete situation, to become aware of the power relations which they are part of, and to see how these power relations influence situations and the prioritization of values. Even though freedom to shape one’s own life is not self-evident, ethics education based on Foucauldian art-of-living can assist in fostering awareness of existing power relations and assist participants to engage in freedom practices and morally responsible decision-making.

Chapter 4 examines the moral dimension of the military context by reflecting on a specific moral dilemma faced by military personnel deployed to Afghanistan. This moral dilemma is known as the ‘dancing boys’, ‘bacha bazi’ or ‘chai boys’ phenomenon. The practice entails sexual relations between men in positions of power and young boys. Due to the fact that some of their local counterparts may have been involved in this practice, Dutch soldiers reported
that they were faced with a complex situation. The moral dimensions (and the related values) of these situations were not always recognized by Dutch soldiers. We show that the ability to recognize that there are moral aspects worthy of consideration in the situation one is confronted with (also referred to as ‘ethical sensitivity’) is not self-evident. In fact, this can be considered a challenge for dealing with and responding to concrete moral dilemmas in a military context. In order to deal with moral dilemmas, one first needs to recognize the moral dimension of situations.

In Chapter 5, we identify several challenges and tensions that are at play during ethics education in a military context: challenges related to fostering moral competence and tensions between military and personal values. Several participants of the training experience of tension between the perception of themselves as a ‘human being’ and as a ‘soldier’. Participants state that they view themselves as ‘political assets’—soldiers carrying out their duty. As soldiers they have taken an oath. This oath stresses loyalty to the head of state and adherence to military law. According to several participants, this implies that they carry out orders unquestioningly, especially in combat situations.

The thick descriptions based on detailed notes made by the trainers, show that participants describe specific aspects of military culture that influence tensions between fostering moral competence and the military context. These aspects include: being a soldier; group bonding; uniformity; hierarchy; lack of privacy; and masculinity. Adapting one’s mindset to being a soldier with a duty or viewing oneself as a political asset may make it more difficult to acknowledge one’s personal responsibility. Group bonding and hierarchy may impede military personnel from asking critical questions. Uniformity may make it difficult to recognize other people’s values. Lack of privacy leads to pressure to conform to the group standard and leaves little room for individual reflection. Finally, the masculine ideal of the ‘warrior hero,’ who is in emotional control or preferably without any emotions, does not make it easy to engage in reflection and doubt, as this could simply be interpreted as being weak or vulnerable.

In Chapter 6, we examine the relevance of safety during ethics training courses and investigate how an atmosphere of safety can be fostered. By means of the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) we analyze a specific critical incident in which safety was threatened. Safety can be viewed as an important precondition for a dialogical, reflective, and interactive approach to ethics training courses. At the same time, safety is precarious and can be threatened during ethics training courses. We show that a safety paradox may occur during ethics training. This involves a tension between honesty and being critical on the one hand and openness to other perspectives and values on the other. Honesty may result in expressing conflicting or colliding views, which may challenge safety and mutual openness between participants. Approaching this paradox as a dynamic process requiring time and reflection in the here-and-now may assist to foster safety in those situations in which participants or trainers
experience threats to safety. We argue that these situations offer an opportunity to learn during the training. Dealing constructively with other perspectives, conflicting values and remaining able to learn can be seen as key elements of ethics education.

Chapter 7 examines the perceived outcomes of the train-the-trainer course. We show how participants view the development of their moral competence, as well as the impact of ethics training on their own training practice. Participants assert that they acquired a new vocabulary that helps them to both rethink moral dilemmas they experienced in the past, as well as enables them to more easily recognize moral dilemmas in the present. This enables them to start a constructive discussion and to take action when they recognize a moral dilemma. Participants report a growing awareness of their personal moral values and the moral values of others. They recognize understanding another person’s moral values as an important element of moral competence. This implies that they are capable of empathizing with someone else and of identifying the personal values of the other person that are at stake in specific situations.

With regard to their own teaching practice, participants notice a change from more conventional teaching (such as using PowerPoint presentations, a focus on the teacher and no or little interaction) to coaching and interactive teaching. They are more aware of the significance of maintaining a listening and questioning attitude in order to stimulate reflection and deliberation as part of a virtue ethics approach to ethics education. Particularly exercises in the Socratic attitude, aimed at fostering a learning attitude, are said to provide the participants with guidance in their own classes.

In Chapter 8 we reflect on the findings of this thesis, focusing on the question of whether training soldiers to be ‘reflective soldiers’, to engage in autonomous, critical thinking and to foster active reflection on their practices and moral dilemmas is feasible in a military context. A recent report from the Onderzoeksraad voor Veiligheid [Dutch Safety Board] with regard to the death of two Dutch soldiers in Mali and the subsequent public debate on this incident indicates that this is indeed a challenge.

The studies in this dissertation show that fostering reflective practice and moral competence assists participants of a train-the-trainer course on ethics to recognize the moral dimension of their daily practice and to form their own morally responsible judgements. Our research shows that fostering moral competence is not always easy in a military context. Asking critical questions, recognizing (one’s own and other people’s) values, reflecting on moral issues and being able to resist peer pressure can be challenging. We offer practical ideas to show how these challenges can be met.

We argue that within the limits imposed by membership of the armed forces, soldiers remain individuals who can construct their own ‘self’. However, developing oneself within a military context is not self-evident; it demands not only reflection, but also evaluation, training and education. A participative, learner-centered approach to ethics education that
places an emphasis on learning by experiences and learning in the here-and-now can play an important role in this ongoing learning process of both soldiers and their organizations.

We recommend further developing and implementing ethics training courses that address moral sensitivity as an important aspect of moral competence and training participants accordingly. In order to be effective, ethics education should acknowledge power relations and aim at understanding and learning to deal with the ways in which these relations influence values, moral sensitivity and decision-making. In order to stimulate a culture in which leadership is receptive to critical questions from employees, interventions fostering openness and dialogue may be helpful. Next to ethics education, other contexts can be relevant for practicing openness and dialogue, for instance more inclusive ways of policy-making and (operational) teams that prepare and evaluate actions in order to learn from errors.
Ethics education in the military

Summary