Chapter 5

*Moral dilemmas in a military context. A case study of a train-the-trainer course on military ethics*

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Abstract

Moral competence is important for soldiers who have to deal with complex moral dilemmas in practice. However, openly dealing with moral dilemmas and showing moral competence is not always easy within the culture of a military organization. In this article, based on analysis of experiences during a train-the-trainer course on military ethics, we will describe the tensions between military and personal values on the one hand and the challenges related to showing moral competence on the other hand. We will explain these tensions and challenges by elaborating on various aspects of the military organization, such as being a soldier, group bonding, uniformity, hierarchy, lack of privacy and masculinity. Furthermore, we will demonstrate how moral competence can be addressed and fostered during the training by introducing specific interventions.

Keywords: moral competence, moral dilemmas, military organization, military ethics, train-the-trainer course, theme-centred interaction

Introduction

The fact is: we simply need clear mental frameworks. This is the way we work, we cannot constantly engage in reflection; 75% of what we do as soldiers is set in stone. (Participant in the train-the-trainer course on military ethics)

We have established a number of frameworks, that’s our strength. We should not undermine those frameworks. (Participant in the train-the-trainer course on military ethics)

In professional practice, soldiers regularly face situations in which they must decide what is the right thing to do and what is not. Often these situations contain a moral component involving a clash of values. A decision can sometimes only be reached if one abandons certain values that at the same time deserve to be upheld. In such a situation, we face a moral dilemma. Although moral dilemmas will continue to emerge, dealing with moral dilemmas and moral questions in general can be trained and the moral competence of soldiers can be fostered (Baarda & Verweij, 2006).

Consideration for ethics, and fostering moral competence in particular, is especially important in the armed forces. Moral competence can help soldiers to deal with moral dilemmas in a responsible manner. Exercising violence is rarely without controversy and a democratic society requires the armed forces to deal responsibly with the monopoly of the legitimate use of violence granted to it by society.

Another important reason for devoting attention to ethics and moral competence is the internal moral damage soldiers might suffer if they fail to deal with moral challenges
they encounter (Drescher et al., 2011; Litz et al., 2009). ‘The critical elements to moral injury are the inability to contextualize and justify personal actions or the actions of others and the unsuccessful accommodation of these potentially morally challenging experiences into pre-existing moral schemas’ (Litz et al., 2009, p. 705). The nature of the warrior’s calling places him or her in peculiar moral peril. ‘The power to kill with impunity and possibly even to dominate entire foreign cultures could certainly corrupt character and promote hubris’ (French, 2004, p.7).

Nevertheless, military ethics is not a contradiction in terms. ‘Being a soldier does not mean to sell out [...] one’s ethical values’ (Toner, 1993, p. 33). Soldiers have a legal obligation to refuse illegal and unethical orders. History has shown that it is essential that a member of the military uses his or her moral competence to recognize an illegal or immoral order when he or she receives one. ‘Clear-cut violations of the law have to be dealt with unequivocally. However, moral competence is most needed in “grey” areas, where the law is insufficiently clear, silent, outdated or perhaps even contradictory’ (Baarda & Verweij, 2006, p. 1). ‘The issue of how to strike a balance between discipline and respect for the chain of command, while maintaining moral competence at the same time remains topical’ (Baarda & Verweij, p. 3).

Tensions exist between the culture and characteristics of the military organization on the one hand and efforts to foster reflection and moral competence on the other. While soldiers are invited to consider, reflect and question their actions, they are at the same time required to operate in a working environment focused on taking action and following strict orders and policy guidelines. Within the armed forces thinking within a framework of legality, hierarchy, standards, regulations and obligations is of paramount importance. In a previous publication, we therefore consequently qualified ethics education in a military setting as a ‘challenge’ (Wortel & Bosch, 2011, p. 31). We are not the first to draw attention to this difficult relationship between ethics education and the military context (Bordin, 2002; Fonsberg, Eidhamar, & Kristiansen, 2012; Olsthoorn, 2010; Robinson, de Lee, & Carrick, 2008; Wakin, 2000). In this article, we take a closer look at what constitutes these challenges. We will examine whether and how reflection can be improved and moral competence can be fostered. As a case study we do this within a train-the-trainer course in military ethics. We will examine how the tensions between the military organization and moral competence unfold in day-to-day practice, and which interventions within the course can address these tensions.

Before doing so, we start with a description of the notion of moral competence and a characterization of the military context.

**Moral competence**

Based on literature which focuses especially on competence in organizations (Karssing, 2000; Sherblom, 2012; Verweij, 2005), we describe moral competence with the following
six elements: (1) becoming aware of one’s own personal values and the values of others; (2) the ability to recognize 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 (Verweij, 2005; Wortel & Bosch, 2011).

Reflection is important for each individual element of moral competence (Abma, Molewijk, & Widdershoven, 2009; López & López, 1998).

The six elements influence each other and at times presuppose each other. All six are important when it comes to fostering moral competence. Drawing on the philosophical, hermeneutical body of thought (Gadamer, 1960; Widdershoven, Abma, & Molewijk, 2009 & Widdershoven & Molewijk, 2010), it can be asserted that moral competence arises from experience. After and in the course of an experience, individuals can reflect upon their personal convictions and values and examine a situation in dialogue with others in order to ultimately make a judgment, for which they can be held accountable. These various elements constitute a non-linear dynamic entity (Figure 1).

![Figure 1. Moral competence](image)
The military organization

Every organization (aiming at fostering moral competence) has its own characteristics, which influence not only personnel, but also interactions in the workforce and in the end the way moral competence can be fostered. Therefore it is important to acknowledge the organization’s key characteristics. Some key characteristics of the military organization are hierarchy, uniformity and group bonding (Caforio, 2006; Segal & Burk, 2012).

To gain an understanding of an organization’s characteristics, it is important to recognize why the organization was created or established (Schein, 2004). Numerous aspects of a military organization are rooted in the word ‘defense’. It refers to resistance, protection, covering, security, guarding and safeguarding. A military organization is engaged in defending the territory of its own country and that of its allies, protecting and promoting the international rule of law, and stability. It additionally supports the civil authorities in enforcing the law, in disaster relief efforts and in providing humanitarian aid, both at home and abroad. All of these tasks involve the deployment of military capability. The use of violence, sometimes in an atmosphere of secrecy because of security reasons, typifies the military organization and the people within it (Soeters, Shields, & Rietjens, 2014).

In this article, we will examine the following questions: (1) What are the tensions between military and personal values, and how can these be explained by the culture and the characteristics of the organization; and (2) how can these tensions be addressed while aiming at fostering moral competence? Before discussing the research method, we first outline the context of the case study below.

Context of the study: a train-the-trainer course on military ethics

The train-the-trainer course on military ethics is a nine-day course organized four times a year by the Netherlands Defense Academy. The aim of the course is to train participants (i.e. military personnel of the Netherlands Armed Forces) to become ethics trainers in their own military work environment and at the same time foster their own moral competence. The topics covered are: views on ethics (utilitarianism, deontology and virtue ethics), integrity, the effects of power, undesirable behavior and sexuality in the organization, the blurring of moral standards, making moral judgments, law and ethics, ethics and emotions, and military ethics in daily teaching and working practice.

The course runs over three non-consecutive blocks of three days each, giving the participants the opportunity to put the knowledge and experience acquired into their work practice in between the blocks.

1 The train-the-trainer course on military ethics was developed at the direction of the State Secretary for Defense (Quadrennial Defense Review 2000) and designed by the Faculty of Military Sciences (FMW) of the Netherlands Defense Academy (NLDA).
The course participants are mainly non-commissioned officers who already teach military ethics to military personnel or plan to do so in the future. Two trainers (the first two authors) are present throughout the whole course. They follow and supervise the individual participants in their personal development (by providing individual feedback), intervene in the group process and, where necessary, translate the academic content into military practice.

During the course, the six elements of moral competence mentioned above are of fundamental importance, combined with insights from virtue ethics, the Socratic method and the notion of ‘living learning’ (Wortel & Bosch, 2011).

Virtue ethics focuses on developing virtues, spurring the individual to think critically. It is not something you can teach people by drumming or drilling it into them (Osiel, 1999). To make people aware of their personal values and virtues, they need to engage in dialogue with each other and with themselves. This is done by means of the Socratic dialogue in which the developing of a Socratic attitude in the dialogue is highly beneficial for the participants. Critical questions can serve to confront people with their own thoughts and may reveal blind spots. A Socratic dialogue begins by making time and room, by temporarily setting aside your own ‘strategic’ attitude in regular communication and by developing an open and curious, not-knowing attitude. This attitude creates distance from your own fixed goals and solutions. It detaches you from your pre-defined problems, including their presuppositions that preoccupy us all (Brownhill, 2002; Kessels, 1997; Kessels, Boers, & Mostert, 2002). In this way it is possible to actually critically think things over, reconcile ideas and examine what you stand for (Heckmann, 1981; Knezic, Wubbels, Elbers, & Hajer, 2010; Nelson, 1929).

Ideally, a learning environment offers an opportunity to link theory, one’s own actions in the group, day-to-day practice and reflection on all of these elements. The modern didactic principle of ‘living learning’, which is used during the training, meets all of these conditions (Callens, 1983; Cohn, 1989; van den Braak, 2011). Living learning invites participants to make contact with and to express one’s own thoughts and feelings about the material. Working with themes, based on theme-centred interaction, stimulates the living learning process. This method has some similarities with care ethics. In care ethics it is deemed important that the trainer needs to know the participants well enough to understand their motivations and needs. This enables the trainer to develop caring relations and an ethical climate in which participants feel safe enough ‘to take the risks that real learning requires’ (Rabin & Smith, 2013, p. 168). The main risks for participants are to be (morally) judged and treated as weak or an outcast among the participants (or by colleagues in the organization at large). Therefore it takes courage to be open about one’s opinions and emotions when facing moral dilemmas.
Method

Our research method is based on qualitative research in which we use the data from a train-the-trainer course on military ethics as a case study. Below, we describe the participants in the case study group, our work procedure during the research (including the data analysis), the informed consent procedure and, lastly, we reflect on our own role as both trainers and researchers.

Participants

The group comprised 14 participants from the four armed forces Services (i.e. the Army; the Navy; the Air Force and the Military Police Corps), ranging in rank from Sergeant 1 to Major. Four servicewomen and 10 servicemen attended the course. The two trainers (the first two authors) are women who are not military personnel, but civilians working for the NLDA. Another servicewoman attended the course in order to become a trainer in the train-the-trainer course on military ethics herself. Ages within the group varied between 26 and 48. The participants themselves were military ethics trainers or were involved in developing ethics courses. More than half of the group had been asked by their superiors to attend the course, the other participants applied for the course themselves.

Informed consent

The participants of the train-the-trainer course were informed about the fact that part of the training experiences also functioned as research. It was made explicit that the experiences were processed anonymously. All participants gave oral informed consent.

Procedure and data analysis

To preserve the sense of openness and security of the group, the first and second author opted not to work with tape recordings but with detailed notes. The first author drew up thick descriptions from specific moments based on the initial notes of the whole training (Denzin, 1989; Geertz, 1973):

> Thick description refers to the researcher’s task of both describing and interpreting observed social action (or behavior) within its particular context [...] thick description leads to thick interpretation, which in turn leads to thick meanings of the research findings for the researchers and participants themselves, and for the report’s intended readership. (Ponterotto, 2006, p. 543)
By reading through the thick descriptions of the first author and then discussing the thick descriptions based on the notes taken by the second author, as well as the notes from a trainer-trainee who shadowed the course, further additions were made to the initial thick descriptions. This enabled us to add different perspectives. These occasionally gave ‘rise to other interpretations and information to capture thoughts, emotions and the web of social interactions among the participants’ (Ponterotto, 2006, p. 542).

The first two authors looked at situations within the notes, which exemplified ‘critical incidents’, that is, ‘events that either highlight the normal operation (i.e. one that exemplifies what is central to the social context) within the organization, or events that contrast sharply with it (i.e. one that identifies the boundaries of the context)’ (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993, p. 103). The course was designed with the aim of fostering participants’ moral competence. Whenever any one of the six elements of moral competence was at stake and a participant indicated that the moral competence step to be taken was problematical in a military context, a critical incident was constituted. The data were then analyzed for greater understanding of how elements of the military context influenced moral competence (Chell, 1998). Working inductively with the data, the first two authors initially independently coded the data. Both authors identified six aspects of the military context which seemed to influence whether moral competence can be fostered or not.

**Reflection on our own role as trainers and researchers**

The first two authors have been trainers for the train-the-trainer course on military ethics since 2006. By taking a critical look at the course and examining the tensions between reflection, moral competence and the military context, the aim is to continuously improve the course and further foster participants’ moral competence. These two authors also wish to gain a greater understanding of the moral dilemmas involved in working in a military organization. Our approach followed the tradition of action inquiry: ‘Action inquiry is seen as the cyclical process whereby knowledge is created in and for action’ (Ellis & Kiely, 2000, p. 83). Since the first two authors acted as both trainers and researchers during the course, the research method was guided by the principle of participant observation (Erlandson et al., 1993; Yin, 2003).

As authors and trainers, the first two authors were aware that they formed part of the context of the topic we researched (Gadamer, 1960; Schön, 1991). Schön describes this as a process of reflection-in-action and refers to the importance of ‘double vision’ (Schön, 1991, p. 164). By this, he means an attitude where you act in a specific way of attributing meaning to the situation while remaining conscious of the fact that other meanings can also be attributed. In other words, that it is important to continue to reflect on your own interpretation of the situation, approaching it not dogmatically but remaining open to the possibility of looking at the situation from a different perspective (Widdershoven & Molewijk, 2010). Reflection about
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The roles of being researcher and trainer was further stimulated through the interaction and critical reflection with the research group (i.e. the other authors).

Describing and identifying the characteristics of a military organization is complex and potentially controversial as other people may take an entirely different view. By highlighting certain aspects within situations, the trainers change those situations and new meanings emerged (Schön, 1991). For example, by introducing theory on power by Michel Foucault (Foucault, 1977), the participants also became more aware of power dynamics within the group.

The trainers of the train-the-trainer course on military ethics also reflected on their own actions and the fact that their actions during the course also influenced the process. Their own history and place in the military organization play a key role in this. Owing to the fact that they have been working for the Netherlands Defense organization as non-military personnel for some time (nine years and 20 years, respectively), they have, to an extent, been shaped by the organization. The first two authors feel involved with the staff, speak their language and understand military customs and statements. Yet as non-military personnel, they will both also remain, partly, outsiders.

Results

We will describe two critical incidents in which tensions existed between showing moral competence on the one hand and being part of the military context on the other. We will analyze these critical incidents, focusing on concepts which may explain the tension between military and personal values. Next, by focusing on the second critical incident, we describe a specific intervention method through which these tensions can be addressed and moral competence fostered.

Critical incidents: a human being or a soldier?

The first incident demonstrates a tension between being both a human being and a soldier. The second incident describes an intervention during the course to address this tension, with the aim of fostering the moral competence of the participants.

First critical incident

The tension between being a human being and a soldier came up when discussing the topic of bacha bazi. We linked this topic to the blurring of moral standards and discussed
it, knowing that several participants had encountered it during their overseas deployments (stated during the intake interviews prior to the start of the train-the-trainer course).

Some of the Dutch soldiers deployed to Afghanistan returned with stories about dancing boys, flower boys, rent boys or *chai boys* (tea boys)—dolled-up boys who run errands for people such as police and army commanders in Afghanistan. They are also forced to perform sexual services (in Persian *bacha bazi* literally means ‘boy play’) (Aroussi, 2011; Carpenter, 2006; Leatherman, 2011; UN High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2012).

This session was themed around: ‘A confrontation with *bacha bazi*: which values are at stake and what is my judgment?’ A guest lecturer held a presentation during the course and the participants asked questions. One of the participants wanted to share his personal experience:

This was the biggest dilemma that I faced during my deployment to Afghanistan: this [the *chai boys*] conflicts with everything you stand for. A village chief wanted us to build a water well. When I went to him I saw a small boy walking out of his hut. I say walking, but he was barely able to walk. It was crystal clear what had happened. I wanted nothing to do with it [i.e. he did not want to go back to the village chief—authors’ note]. But my platoon commander told me that I had to go back to the village chief and comply with his wishes. He was not willing to discuss it. I knew that this was part of the job. You need to adapt to a culture and simply learn to deal with it. It’s not our culture or religion, so it should just be allowed to happen. It all sounds OK when you’re reading about it in the brochure or information about overseas deployments, but it’s not something you can grasp at that stage. It’s absolutely impossible, improbable and disgusting. When I returned the boy had gone. So in the end I carried out my orders. I still have difficulty with this [participant had tears in his eyes].

Recalling his own experiences, another participant said:

*One Afghan proudly showed me explicit images on his mobile phone [i.e. sexually explicit images of young boys—authors’ note].*

Does that fall within your sphere of influence?

*No, if you can’t exert any influence it’s no longer a dilemma. I’m doing a “pain versus gain” analysis: if I might be able to get information about IEDs [Improvised Explosive Devices], the gain wins from the pain. I am a political asset. Information about an IED could potentially save the life of my colleagues.*

A colleague from the Navy asked:

*How far do you go in order to get information that might save the life of a Dutch soldier?*
The participant answers:

*I don’t know, I’ve never encountered a situation in which gaining information that possibly could save the lives of Dutch soldiers did not take priority.*

We invited the participants to state which values were at stake in this situation and to make a judgment with regard to this dilemma and to investigate that judgment in a group discussion. The participants were invited not only to reflect on their personal values, but also on their personal responsibility.

When expressing judgments, most participants stated that this practice might conflict with everything you stand for personally, but at the same time you’re in Afghanistan with a goal—‘You’re there as a soldier with a duty’. And ‘safety of your own troops take priority’. One participant appreciated the scope for dialogue on this topic, but explicitly stated: ‘But it also raises questions about whether you’re a human being or a soldier. I’m more than a soldier. I have doubts about the work I do; as a human being can I stand by the work I do?’

**Second critical incident**

The example on bacha bazi does not stand on itself. The tension between being a human being and a soldier also came up several times during the course itself. We have also recognized it as being an issue of importance in several other courses on military ethics within the NLDA. Participants sometimes experience a tension between military frameworks, a situation in which you are a soldier and receive clear instructions—versus the questions ‘who am I?’ and ‘who do I want to be?’

During a theoretical module of the course we looked at military ethics from three different angles and discussed utilitarianism, deontology and virtue ethics. In our discussion on virtue ethics, in which we also asked participants questions about which virtues they find important and which they would like to strengthen, one participant asked:

*Is it really possible to develop virtues as a soldier? As a human being I want to, yet in some situations I have to be a soldier.*

Another participant chimed in, stating:

*When coming face-to-face with the enemy, can I still be a human being?*

Other participants said:

*Sometimes you simply have to do your duty*
Occasionally, you have to put being a human being on hold and adapt your mindset to being a soldier.

The program of the course was adjusted in order to discuss this tension, which seemed to be relevant for several individual participants. We used the method of living learning in order to formulate a theme which would encourage the participants to reflect on the tension. The working format of using an inner and an outer circle to some extent offers an opportunity to experience the intimacy of a small group and to share delicate, personal information.

The trainers introduced the following theme: ‘Being and continuing to be a human being as a soldier: what have I retained, what have I let go and what has it brought me?’ We worked in the format of an inner and outer circle, with four rounds in which participants from one of the four armed forces Services sat in the middle to discuss this question. We began with the Navy. The participants in the outer circle remained silent and wrote down their observations, associations and any questions.

Participants in the first group stated that they had joined the Navy when they were young and some had lost the group of friends they had had before becoming soldiers. One participant said:

**Certain things were forced down your throat.**

Another added:

**What I learned is tolerance; 100 men in a dormitory certainly affects you.**

And:

**You don’t always have room to be your own person, you’re always required to work in a system where your own opinion doesn’t really count.**

After about ten minutes, a group from another of the armed forces’ services took the places in the inner circle. Participants in this group stated that, ‘the mold you’re cast into does affect you’, and that personal values ‘are modelled on the organization’. They also stated that the organization provides security. The majority said they had thought they ‘would stay with their employer until the end of their military service, but that this has now changed due to reorganizations.’

Participants also indicated that they had sacrificed a lot, as having been deployed abroad meant they had seen very little of their families. When the next armed forces’ service was in the inner circle, a participant stated that, as a soldier:
But that she had:

... to let go of my emotions, and for a very long time pushed them aside [silence ... tears]. We didn’t do emotions. I did have difficulty with the way I was treated.

There was a moment of silence. One participant stated that he was rather shocked by this and was unsure about how to react to her emotions.

When the last group took their seats in the inner circle, one participant said:

Working for Defense provided me with more security. I was forced to stand on my own two feet from a young age and do everything for myself. But I was forced to give up my freedom, with all of those rigid structures. I feel I haven’t been able to shape my own career.

Another participant stated that he was particularly proud of his job as a soldier and said that ‘everyone should envy me’. In the plenary round following the sessions with the inner and outer circles, one participant characterized it as ‘surprising’ that ‘everyone has such a personal take on it.’ He hadn’t expected that the other participants would have different views of ‘being a soldier’.

Crucial aspects of military practice

Analyzing the two critical incidents back and forth within the research group, we found aspects which are essential to military practice and lead to moral tensions. These aspects seem to both influence participants’ way of dealing with moral issues and dilemmas and create moral challenges. The aspects also seem to be related to the ability of showing and fostering participants’ moral competence. The following elements appeared specifically relevant: being a soldier, group bonding, uniformity, hierarchy, lack of privacy, and masculinity. We first describe these aspects, and then show how they were addressed in the training.

Being a soldier

The participants stated that they view themselves as political assets—soldiers carrying out their duty. Both in the first and second critical incident, they make a distinction between being a soldier and being a human being.
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Soldiers have taken an oath, which stresses loyalty to the head of state and military law. Also the military requires that soldiers carry out orders, especially in combat situations. However, as mentioned above, at the same time it is required from soldiers to think for themselves and refuse illegal or immoral orders.

Viewing oneself as a political asset can be interpreted as a self-protective decision, a psychological process by which the soldiers adaptively hide behind the military identity: ‘an adaptive response to cope with one’s [...] immoral treatment of others’ (Bastian et al., 2013, p. 157). Even if you personally are not the aggressor, it is easier to justify that you cannot do anything about it, as you are there to carry out a different task based on the idea that you are first and foremost a soldier.

The idea that one is a soldier first and a human being second may offer some kind of protection in executing tasks, but it may also encourage the blurring of moral standards: ‘moral agency is manifested in both the power to refrain from behaving inhumanely and the proactive power to behave humanely’ (Bandura, 1999, p. 193). According to Bandura, moral disengagement not only arises as a result of sanitizing language and advantage comparison, but also as a result of a ‘disavowal of a sense of personal agency’ (Bandura, 1999, p. 193). Identifying oneself as a soldier with a duty to carry out your orders, implicates a risk of displacement of responsibility (Bandura, 1999). As such, soldiers may not feel personally responsible for their actions.

One can ask the question whether soldiers would be better off without the ability to make judgments, if that ability renders them powerless. Verweij (2010) argues that powerlessness is the result of a self-dialogue, leading to doubt: Is this something I should do? What are the consequences for me and other people? Verweij asserts that it is precisely such self-dialogue that makes a person a human being. Without it, one may lose touch with oneself and lose one’s humanity (Verweij, 2010). In addition, soldiers may risk internal moral damage if they fail to deal with moral dilemmas they encounter (Litz et al., 2009). Being aware of one’s personal moral values and the values of others, independent of the question whether one should follow these values, may make soldiers more sensitive to the moral dimension of situations. It may also strengthen their ability to communicate and justify to themselves and others why they choose to prioritize and act upon a specific value (Litz et al., 2009).

**Group bonding**

The element of group bonding is important, as can be seen from statements in the first critical incident: ‘The safety of our own troops take priority;’ ‘I’m doing a “pain versus gain” analysis: if I might be able to get information about IEDs (Improvised Explosive Devices), the gain wins from the pain. [...] Information about an IED could potentially save the life of my colleagues.’
In a military organization, training, learning, working, and often also living, takes place in groups. Soldiers have to develop confidence not only in themselves, but also in their own team. Operational deployment requires teamwork. Military training works to develop both horizontal and vertical cohesion (Kirke, 2009; Winslow, 1999). Horizontal cohesion involves liaising with colleagues and entails questions such as: What are the members of this group willing to do for one another? How can we as a team cross the finish line all together? Vertical cohesion involves allegiance to the commander. A good relationship between the superior and personnel and the provision of good information is crucial for ensuring good collaboration, and mutual trust is vital. Military operations involve operating in a team in extremely tough and perilous situations, in which every member depends on the other. Group loyalty is a central value in such situations. This does not primarily concern loyalty to personal or other principles or values, but rather ‘loyalty towards others, a group, an organization or a nation’ (Olsthoorn, 2011, p. 69).

During the course most participants do seem to recognize the moral dimension of the situation, the values of carrying out one’s duty as a soldier and loyalty to one’s colleagues (gaining information on IED’s might save their lives) are considered to be most important for the majority of the participants.

Uniformity

Since the values of carrying out one’s duty as a soldier and loyalty to colleagues are of such vital importance, one may ask to what extent the values of others, in this case the human dignity of the young boy, are really recognized. There is a serious risk of not recognizing the moral dimension of situations. This risk can be further increased due to the uniform character of the organization.

A uniformed profession, such as that of a soldier, not only literally means learning to wear a uniform, but also pertains to a uniform for the inner self. Personal and group development therefore feature prominently. Socialization generally takes places in a boarding school context. For example, in the Netherlands, officers’ training programs comprises more than four years of internal training. Upon entrance, the self is, through the socialization processes, at least partly, mortified (Goffman, 1961) and substituted by military morality. Which unit, specialization or Service soldiers belong to is clearly signaled time and again. Each military unit has its own rituals and practices, with the traditions of the unit being conveyed through initiation rituals.

More diversity in units could make a difference. A study of American troops in Somalia in the early nineties showed, for example, that mixed units (in terms of race and gender) were more empathetic with local population than homogeneous units (Miller & Moskos, 1995).

Uniformity may lead one to believe that everyone shares the same thoughts regarding certain situations. This can make it difficult to recognize other perspectives, or values, and
therefore it could affect the moral competence of soldiers. Being able to recognize values of others is crucial in order to recognize the moral dimension of a situation.

Hierarchy

Military organizations have a strong hierarchical structure with a distinctive ranking system that is linked to a command structure. Military action involving arms deployment requires an organizational model with a clearly defined structure, leadership and planning. Whilst in recent years flexible organizational formats offering room for self-management by the individual soldier have increasingly been sought, it is a rather bureaucratic organizational model that predominates in military organizations (Kramer, 2007). In a military hierarchy, it is always clear who is the commanding officer authorized to impose punishment if necessary. If an individual soldier has failed to observe the rules, they may face a penalty or even sentencing by a military court for more serious offenses. The hierarchical structure of the organization clarifies statements such as: ‘Sometimes you simply have to do your duty’ and ‘my platoon commander told me that I had to go back to the village chief and comply with his wishes. He was not willing to discuss it. I knew that this was part of the job’. Moreover, asserting that one simply has to execute a task seems to presuppose that as a human being one no longer has freedom to make choices and take responsibility for those choices.

Due to the ranks system, everyone’s place in the organization is clear and it is clear who is in command. This structure impedes the lower ranks from critically questioning a person occupying a higher rank. It is presupposed that you will obey your superior and, moreover, it is felt that there is not always room to broach the subject of moral dilemmas.

Lack of privacy

In addition to these concepts, a lack of privacy in the military also seems important. Because soldiers undertake many group activities, they generally have a limited amount of privacy. Soldiers being in close physical proximity characterize military missions and exercises. Furthermore, everything they do (or don’t do) whilst carrying out military operations is often also observed in real-time via audio and video recordings, and is always retrospectively evaluated in-depth. In other words, the individual soldier has scarcely any ‘room for manoeuvre’ and few opportunities to even temporarily escape the observation of colleagues. This also means that the ‘gaze of the other’ (Hale, 2008, p. 322) is ever present.

This lack of privacy makes individuals more dependent on the group. Making a critical remark could have serious repercussions if the group fails to accept it. This may hamper individuals from being willing and able to act according to their own judgment and rather conform to the group norm.
Masculinity

Military organizations can still be identified as masculine institutions because they are predominantly populated with men, but also because the military practices construct all kind of different meanings of masculinity (Barrett, 2001; Connell, 1995; Kovitz, 2003; Woodward & Winter, 2007; Sasson-Levy, 2008). The figure of the ‘warrior hero’ is one of the dominant symbols of military masculinity (Duncanson, 2009; Morgan, 1994). This symbol refers to toughness and stoicism, which can be associated with values such as independence, the willingness to take risks, aggression and rationality (Barrett, 2001; Godfrey, Lilley, & Brewis, 2012; Hopton, 2003). The ideal of the ‘warrior hero’ has a lot of profound consequences for the mutual interaction in the military.

One specific element of the ideal of the ‘warrior hero’ is to be ‘in emotional control’. Sasson-Levy states: ‘Militarized masculinities seem particularly ‘obsessed’ with emotional control’ (2008, p. 307). Male and female soldiers alike frequently endorse the norm that ‘real men don’t cry’, which hampers the display of insecurity and vulnerability and can hinder reflection during the training as well as in the military daily practice.

The statements of a participant in the second critical incident illustrate this element of emotional control: ‘I had to let go of my emotions, and for a very long time pushed them aside’ and ‘We didn’t do emotions. I did have difficulty with the way I was treated’. This could be interpreted as an example of what Woodward and Winter (2007, p. 74) call ‘a masculinizing strategy, where women and men comply with the masculine norms and adopt masculine discourse and practice’. The subsequent inconveniency and hesitation that the other participants showed in their reactions to the silence and tears of their colleague can also be related to this ideal of being in emotional control. One of them stated that he was ‘rather shocked by this and was unsure how to respond to her emotions’.

Addressing crucial concepts and fostering moral competence

We have examined how the tensions between the military organization and moral competence unfold in day-to-day practice. Below, we will introduce a specific intervention method through which these tensions can be addressed.

The topic of bacha bazi was first mentioned by individual participants during intake interviews. The trainers decided to link this topic to three specific elements of moral competence: the ability to recognize the moral dimension of a situation and identify which values are at stake, the ability to make a judgment and to communicate this judgment. The theme was formulated as: ‘A confrontation with bacha bazi: which values are at stake and what is my judgment?’ When the participants stated which values were at stake, the tension between being a human being and being a soldier was explicitly mentioned by individual participants. One participant stated: ‘it [the confrontation with bacha bazi] raises questions
about whether you’re a human being or a soldier’. As outlined above, crucial aspects of military practice (the context) seemed to be of importance here.

In order to make the participants aware of and reflect on this apparent tension, the trainers introduced the theme: Continuing to be a human being as a soldier: what have I retained, what have I let go and what has it brought me? During the discussion of this theme, participants showed awareness of the role of military values.

‘What I learned is tolerance; 100 men in a dormitory certainly affects you’. And: ‘You don’t always have room to be your own person, you’re always required to work in a system where your own opinion doesn’t really count’, ‘The mold you’re cast into does affect you’, and that personal values ‘are modelled on the organization’.

To foster expression of and reflection on the tensions participants experienced, several techniques were used. By discussing issues in an inner circle, with the outer circle watching, an opportunity was created to experience the intimacy of a small group and to share delicate, personal information. Notwithstanding limitations—the inner circle participants obviously being aware of the outer circle—this technique has the advantage that all participants hear the information which is shared, and they can use the others’ input for their own development process (Klein, 2013, Söderhamn, Kjøstvedt, & Slettebø, 2014). This format encourages a learning process, mutual trust and a safe learning environment (Smith & Berg, 1987).

The outcome of the intervention made participants aware of differences between military and personal values. Several participants stated that the session was surprising, since they had thought that the majority would hold the military view. The participants found it ‘unusual that things were perceived differently’. The participants also concluded that they should be more aware of and express their emotions, although this can be difficult in a masculine context. Participants stated that, ‘Soldiers are more diverse than I always assumed’, and ‘I have to get out of my tunnel vision.’ This intervention mostly addressed the aspect of uniformity.

In order also to address other aspects of military practice and the tensions between the military organization and moral competence, other themes could have been introduced.

Another follow up theme on bacha bazi for this group of participants could be: Acting as a human(e) soldier? A necessary contradiction? Participants could discuss personal experiences in small groups and share conclusions in a plenary session. In such a theme, both the aspect of being a soldier as carrying out one’s duty as well as the element of moral

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2 This is a variation of the ‘fish bowl method’, in which representatives from the entire group or subgroup talk about a theme (such as the results of the group session) in the inner circle while the others listen (Klein, 2013, p. 211, n. 11).
competence, which stresses the willingness and ability to act in accordance with one’s judgment in a morally responsible way can be addressed.

As the participants experienced a difference between being a soldier and a human being, it may be worthwhile for them to reflect on this difference. An important element might be to allow human emotions as soldiers. The ability to experience and reflect on emotions is significant for understanding values (Nussbaum, 2003) and recognizing the moral dimension of situations.

By paying attention to four factors: the task (fostering moral competence), the individual participants, the group process and the context, specific themes can be introduced to assist participants to reflect on their moral competence. As such, introducing themes can be viewed as an intervention method within groups. A theme ideally aims at a ‘dynamic balance between these four factors’ (van den Braak, 2011, p. 82) (Figure 2).

Placing too much emphasis on the task, without paying attention to the specific context, the individuals or the group process may result in participants losing interest in the task and not achieving the objective of, in this case, fostering moral competence.

Ideally, information about all four factors should be taken into account by the trainers. Information about the context, in which elements such as uniformity and hierarchy play a role, is just one of the four factors. Information about the individual participants and their specific context can be obtained and analyzed by trainers during the training itself but also through intake interviews. These intake interviews can lead to initial themes. During the training, so called ‘co-directing sessions’ can be organized at the end of each day, in which two or three participants participate, in order to reflect on the training, on what they have observed in the group process and on possible themes which could be introduced. The group process can be linked to the task (fostering moral competence) as well. What happens in the group, in terms of moral disengagement, or the willingness to give feedback to each other, can also be linked to taking personal responsibility. All these elements presuppose a certain flexibility and free space to include new themes in the program of the training itself.

Figure 2 The four-factors model of Theme-centred Interaction
Limitations of the study

A possible limitation of the study is that participants were military ethics trainers or instructors, or were already involved in developing ethics courses. This implies that they are more likely to be interested in moral issues and in reflection than soldiers who take ethics courses as part of their regular training programs.

A second limitation is the emphasis on individual moral competence. Various social psychologists such as Milgram (1974), Zimbardo (2007) and Asch (1956) have pointed out that education concerns not only individual dispositions or individual moral competences, but that the situation in which people find themselves, the institution and the ethical climate are equally, if not more important. In his book *The Lucifer Effect, How Good People Turn Evil*, Philip Zimbardo compares his study with the events in the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq (2004), where US soldiers degraded inmates. Zimbardo asserts that this is not a case of just a few bad people (bad apples) but rather of a situation, an organization, external factors—a bad barrel—that causes people to behave this way. If you give people power without monitoring them, it seems to be a recipe for abuse. For this reason, it seems important to combine strengthening moral competency of individual participants with a training method which also focuses on group dynamics and makes power relations within the group explicit.

Conclusion

Moral reflection is not easy in a military context. Based on our data from a train-the-trainer course on ethics, we conclude that certain characteristics of the organization indeed exert an influence on moral competence in a military context. It is important to address the influence of the characteristics of the military organization in moral education within that context.

In this article, we have examined examples of critical incidents from our case study: the train-the-trainer course on military ethics, in which the tension between being a human being and a soldier is at stake. Aspects of military life which seem to be of influence in this tension are: being a soldier; group bonding; uniformity; hierarchy; lack of privacy and masculinity.

Adapting your mindset to being a soldier with a duty or viewing oneself as a political asset, may make it more difficult to take personal responsibility. Group bonding and hierarchy impede military personnel from asking critical questions. Uniformity makes it difficult to recognize other people’s values. Lack of privacy leads to pressure to conform to the group standard and little room for individual reflection. Finally, the masculine ideal of the warrior hero, and to be in emotional control, does not make it easy to engage in reflection as this could simply be interpreted as being weak or vulnerable.

By discussing situations connected to the existing tensions and the moral dilemmas that arise as a result, the training made the participants aware of different perspectives. It
helped the participants to recognize dilemmas and to understand which values were under pressure. The participants were invited to reflect on their personal values as well as on their personal responsibility. In this way, we endeavored to broaden the reflective process and to foster their moral competence.

Moral competence enables participants not only to view their context differently and to ask moral questions about that context but also to learn to deal with often burdensome moral challenges which are an inherent part of working within a military organization.

In the end, stimulating the moral competence of soldiers by means of paying attention to existing moral dilemmas and moral competence through ethics courses can lead to a gradual change in the military context itself, leaving more scope for reflection on and dealing with moral dilemmas.

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References


Chapter 5 Ethics education in the military


Chapter 6