Chapter 8

Discussion
Introduction

This thesis examined how moral competence can be fostered during ethics education in a military context. 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 course trainers work with a virtue ethics approach. The course aims at fostering moral competence of non-commissioned officers who are themselves trainers or instructors in military ethics, or will be in the near future. In this final chapter we will answer the research questions presented in the introduction. We will first present our main findings with regard to: the theoretical foundations of ethics education aimed at fostering moral competence; the challenges of fostering moral competence in a military context; and the effects of ethics training courses in a military context. Next, we will reflect on these findings, present our conclusions and give recommendations for the practice of ethics education as well as set out avenues for future research.

In the discussion of our findings we focus 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. Does this fit in with military culture? A recent report from the Onderzoeksraad voor Veiligheid [Dutch Safetyboard] 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 report states that carrying out the mission had been prioritized over weapon safety and medical facilities. A sense of responsibility to carry out the mission and a ‘can do mentality’ meant that risks were underestimated, and usual checks and procedures were not followed. The report recommends stimulating an organization structure and culture in which leadership is receptive to critical questions of employees, and explicitly criticizes the military can do mentality (Dutch Safetyboard 2017). A ‘can do’ mentality, can be viewed as a mentality focused on the willingness to take on the challenges one is confronted with, without hesitation, doubt or discussion (Soeters 2016). To what extent is the approach to ethics education, aimed at fostering moral competence, feasible in a military context?

Research questions

The following question was addressed in this dissertation:

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

The subsequent sub-questions were examined:
a. What are relevant foundations for ethics education and training aimed at fostering moral competence?
   • What are potential theoretical starting points for ethics education and training aimed at fostering moral competence? (Chapter 2)
   • What is the relevance of Foucauldian ‘art-of-living’ for ethics education? (Chapter 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?
   • What are challenges in dealing with concrete moral dilemmas in a military context? (Chapter 4)
   • What aspects of military culture may influence ethics education in a military context? (Chapter 5)
   • What is the relevance of safety during ethics training and how can an atmosphere of safety be fostered during ethics education? (Chapter 6)

c. What are perceived outcomes of the train-the-trainer course?
   • How do participants perceive the development of their moral competence? (Chapter 7)
   • How do participants perceive the impact of the training on their own training practice? (Chapter 7)

Main findings

What are relevant foundations for ethics education and training aimed at fostering moral competence?

What are potential theoretical starting points for ethics education and training aimed at fostering moral competence? (Chapter 2)

In the second chapter we presented our case study, the train-the-trainer course on military ethics.

In examining the notion of moral competence, we differentiated between six elements: (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. These elements are also described by other authors (Karssing, 2000; Verweij 2005; Sherblom 2012).
Furthermore, we identified three core requirements for developing moral competence. The first is recognition of the moral dimension of a situation. This requires awareness of values that are at stake in the specific situation. These values are always personal, and related to one’s identity. Thus, ethics education aimed at fostering moral competence requires a personal approach. A second requirement is dialogue. In order to become aware of personal values and the values of others, dialogue with one another (and with oneself) is crucial. A third requirement is a learning environment in which participants are challenged to relate ethical theories to actions and concrete experiences from daily work. By actively linking theory to concrete experiences, participants learn to understand the practical meaning of theoretical notions and to contextualize their experience in the light of ethics theories. Thus, we identified three requirements for ethics education aimed at fostering moral competence: virtue ethics, focusing on the development of personal values and identity; ‘the Socratic attitude’, enabling a person to enter in a dialogue; and ‘living learning’, providing tools for reflection on experiences in practice. We will briefly explain how we used each of them as theoretical starting points for the training.

To foster a personal approach to ethics education, we made use of concepts from virtue ethics. This ethics theory is explicitly concerned with the agent, with motive and intention, emotion and desire, as well as with character (Nussbaum 1999: 538). According to Aristotle, particularly in the Nicomachean Ethics, virtuous character is concerned with choice; a choice for the right mean between two extremes (vices), that entail either an excess or a defect of the virtue in question (Aristotle 1106b36–1107a3). For example, a professional soldier can be viewed as someone who has learned through repeated practice to analyze and reflect on aspects of a situation and to find the ‘right mean’ for action among various options, fitting to the specific context. Consequently, in the training we fostered reflection on situations in which choices have to be made, and on personal involvement in these choices.

As a prerequisite for engaging in a dialogue with regard to a moral question or moral dilemma, with each other (and with themselves), we identified the Socratic attitude (Kessels, Boers & Mostert 2002; Saran & Neisser 2004; Kessels 1997). 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). Fostering such abilities is considered an important ingredient of training moral reflection and deliberation.

To create a process of living learning, we used a pedagogical method known as Theme-Centered Interaction (TCI) (Cohn 1976; Jaques & Salmon 2007; Stollberg 2008; van de Braak 2011). To promote a ‘living learning’ process within a group, trainers seek to create a dynamic balance among four factors that arise in groups in learning situations: the task, 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 (Cohn, 1976; Schneider-Landolf, Spielmann & Zitterbarth 2009). This method served as a tool to foster personal moral learning.
What is the relevance of Foucauldian art-of-living for ethics education? (Chapter 3)

This chapter explored the notion of ‘art-of-living’ in the work of Michel Foucault. By means of a concrete example taken from our case study, we also examined the relevance of working with this approach in ethics education.

We have shown that 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 behavior of individuals by techniques of control 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. It can be used in ethics education to foster participants’ insight in themselves in their concrete situation, to become aware of the power relations which they are part of, and how these power relations influence situations and the prioritization of values. Such reflections are helpful in reaching a morally responsible decision (i.e. a decision that takes the different points of view of the stakeholders in question into account). According to Foucault, power relations imply the possibility of ethics, of choice and of modifying these power relations through freedom practices. Soldiers may be produced by power relations, but at the same time room can be created for freedom practices, since soldiers can be challenged to think for themselves, to become aware of tensions between values and to consider alternative options.

We have shown how participants can become aware of existing power relations, which opens the door to the possibility of individual empowerment. 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 in order for participants to engage in freedom practices and adequate decision-making. Soldiers can be stimulated to think about the meaning of values and to form their own morally responsible judgment.

Ethics education focusing on awareness of and reflection on power relations and active self-formation within existing power relations can offer an opportunity for organizations and their employees to understand how they have come to believe what they value. It can help them understand their own values as well as those of others. Finally, it assists employees in active reflection and decision making when faced with complex moral dilemmas in their daily practice.
What are challenges in fostering moral competence by means of ethics training in a military context, and how can these challenges be met?

What are challenges in dealing with concrete moral dilemmas in a military context? (Chapter 4)

A number of Dutch soldiers deployed to Afghanistan have returned with stories about *bacha bazi*, dancing boys or *chai boys* (tea boys)—dolled-up boys who run errands for people such as police and army commanders in Afghanistan. This practice, in which an adult man has a sexual relationship with a preadolescent boy is called *bacha bazi* (Persian for “boy play”). Due to the fact that some of their local counterparts may be involved in this practice, Dutch soldiers report they are faced with a complex situation. On the one hand they want to denounce this abuse and feel a responsibility to protect civilians, in this case the young boys. On the other hand they have to maintain good relationships with their local partners. The focus in this chapter was on how Dutch military personnel act when faced with these situations.

The findings show that although military personnel feel that values clash in the case of *bacha bazi*, they are not clear whether, for them, this is a moral dilemma and what action they should take. Most respondents argue that it ‘is a custom there, a fact of life, it is their culture’ and ‘you have to put your Western views aside.’ Soldiers came to see the custom, initially perceived as strange, as a normal event, a phenomenon also known as mission creep. In their words, ‘we practically never talked about it, you get used to it.’

The hesitation to consider the confrontation with *bacha bazi* as a moral dilemma or the normalization of *bacha bazi* can be regarded as an example of moral disengagement (Bandura 1990) or keeping a moral distance. This is a passive response strategy; to relativize the situation at hand (Whetham 2008). However, the danger of moral blindness lurks. We have shown that the ability to recognize that there are ethical 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.

What aspects of military culture may influence ethics education in a military context? (Chapter 5)

As indicated in the third chapter, openly dealing with moral dilemmas is not always easy in a military context. In the fifth chapter we describe the tensions between military and personal values, on the one hand, and the challenges related to showing moral competence, on the other hand.
The moral dilemma with regard to the bacha bazi phenomenon in Afghanistan, described in the fourth chapter, is again referred to in this chapter. Several participants of the training experienced a tension between the perception of themselves as a 'human being' and as a 'soldier.' The 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 military law, which implies that they carry out orders unquestioningly, especially in combat situations.

Participants reported that specific aspects of military culture influence this tension. They mentioned 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 makes 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 as this could simply be interpreted as being weak or vulnerable.

What is the relevance of safety during ethics training and how can an atmosphere of safety be fostered during ethics education? (Chapter 6)

A particular challenge for ethics training courses, especially in a military context, is how to foster an atmosphere of safety within a group. In chapter six, we examined how safety dynamics works and how an atmosphere of safety can be fostered during ethics training.

We showed that during ethics training courses a safety paradox may occur, which involves a tension between honesty and being critical, on the one hand, and openness to other perspectives and values, on the other hand. Honesty may result in expressing conflicting or colliding views, which may challenge mutual openness between participants. Subsequently, we discussed how trainers can foster safety during ethics training.

Research shows that safety is an important precondition for a dialogical, reflective and interactive approach to ethics training courses (Smith & Berg 1987; Knapp & Sturm 2002; Tucker, Nembhard & Edmondson 2006; Molewijk, Abma, Stolper & Widdershoven 2008; Abma, Molewijk & Widdershoven 2009; Wortel & Bosch 2011; Stolper, Metselaar, Molewijk & Widdershoven 2012; van der Dam 2012; Solum, Maluwa, Tveit & Severinsson. 2016). However, safety is precarious and can be threatened. During ethics training courses participants are invited to engage in dialogue and reflection as well as to be vulnerable and honest about their own considerations. That said, this invitation for openness can lead to paradoxical effects. Honesty can lead to a collision of perspectives and values, resulting in less mutual openness towards other perspectives leading to a decline in safety. 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. These situations, while challenging, offer an unforeseen opportunity to learn during the training. Indeed, dealing constructively with other perspectives, conflicting values and remaining able to learn can be seen as a key element of ethics education.

**What are perceived outcomes of the train-the-trainer course?**

**How do participants perceive the development of their moral competence? (Chapter 7)**

In this chapter, we analyzed the experiences of course participants who were interviewed 6 to 12 months after they had participated in a train-the-trainer course on military ethics.

Participants mentioned 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. They stated that it is now easier for them to discuss their experiences, to actually name the values that were under threat and indicate why they made certain decisions. Participants experience that this vocabulary assists them in putting an uneasy gut feeling into words, and in identifying the values that are under threat. This enables them to start a constructive discussion and to take action when they recognize a moral dilemma.

What participants remember clearly from the course are realistic examples of moral dilemmas experienced by their colleagues. These examples served as a motivation for reflecting on moral issues. Participants also reported a growing awareness of their personal moral values and the moral values of others. They recognized understanding another person’s moral values as an important element of moral competence. This implies that they were capable of empathizing with someone else and of identifying the personal values of the other person that are at stake in specific situations. By including the other person’s values in their assessment, their view was broadened. Moreover, participants reported having the ability to recognize the moral dimension of situations, to analyze a moral dilemma and justify a choice, and to communicate and act on this judgment. They also cited concrete examples of these abilities.

**How do participants perceive the impact of the training on their own training practice? (Chapter 7)**

The participants indicated that after the training they teach ethics courses with more self-confidence. They reported making use of examples of dilemmas discussed in the training and making use of the Socratic attitude in exercises. With regard to their own teaching, participants noticed a change from more conventional teaching (such as using PowerPoint Presentations and a focus on the teacher and no or little interaction) to coaching and
interactive teaching. They were 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, were said to provide the participants with guidance in their own classes. Participants stated that they now ask their students to reach conclusions themselves instead of suggesting or teaching what the conclusion should be.

Participants of the train-the-trainer course do experience ethics as a challenging topic in a military context. Ethics is considered intangible or even boring by their students, and trainers are aware that fostering moral competence may be a challenge within the context of a military organization in which group bonding, loyalty, uniformity and hierarchy are important.

We conclude that, although challenges in ethics education remain, participants regard the train-the-trainer course as contributing to their moral competence, both as military ethics trainers and as soldiers.

Discussion

Is fostering moral competence really feasible in a military context?

In the introduction we argued that the ability to reflect, to ask critical questions, to recognize the moral dimension of situation and the ability to resist peer pressure are valuable characteristics in a military context. Ethics is regarded as foundational to the military profession and organization: ‘It sets the environment of trust between a nation’s military and the government and the people it serves that allows military members to serve as true professionals’ (Cook 2015: p.104). Ethics education includes empowering people to say ‘no’ when it is legally and/or ethically appropriate (Robinson 2008; Coleman 2013).

Our findings show that asking critical questions, recognizing other people’s values, reflecting on moral issues and being able to resist peer pressure - all important aspects of fostering moral competence - are not easy in a military context (cf. Cook 2013). Several specific aspects of military culture (i.e. being a soldier, group bonding, uniformity, hierarchy, lack of privacy and masculinity) appear to create a challenge with regard to showing moral competence.

One may argue that these aspects of military culture will always remain part of the military context. Soldiers indeed need to be trained for specific situations, such as combat, in which they have to be able and willing to take on the tasks that are set to do without much hesitation. It is likely that military organizations will always remain excellent examples of how disciplinary power works. Indeed, one slowly becomes ‘a soldier’, an identity which is transmitted by and reproduced through structures of the organization on a day to-day basis. Disciplinary mechanisms and institutional processes lead individuals to regulate their own
conduct, turning them into self-disciplining subjects. As Foucault argues, under the panoptic gaze an individual ‘becomes the principle of his own subjection’ (Foucault 1977: 202–203).

This raises the following question: To what extent is ethics education aimed at fostering moral competence really feasible in a military context?

As Foucault suggests in his later work (1984a; 1984b; 1985; 1988; 1997) individuals create their own selves and realize their desires through discipline. That is, ‘individuals/groups can free themselves from the overarching disciplinary power of knowledge and realize their own desires in a framework of self-discipline and self-knowledge of their own making’ (Starkey & McKinlay 1998: 231). Soldiers are not merely political assets (soldiers carrying out their duty) without agency. Within the discursive bounds imposed by membership of the armed forces, they remain individuals who can construct their own self. As such they ‘may shift the limits that define who they are, modifying and reconstituting themselves in other ways’ (Thornborrow & Brown 2009: 359). However, constituting oneself within a military context is not self-evident, it demands not only reflection, but also evaluation, training and education. Ethics education can play an important role in this ongoing learning process of both soldiers and their organizations.

In order to stimulate a culture in which leadership is receptive to critical questions of employees, techniques fostering openness and dialogue may be helpful to assist employees experience the possibility of choice with regard to moral issues and to become aware of alternatives in decision-making. Ethics education that pays attention to the person who is confronted with the moral question or dilemma, can play a crucial part in achieving this goal. Next to education, other contexts can be relevant for practicing openness and dialogue. For instance, more inclusive ways of policy making (Romme 1999; Bushe & Marshak 2009; Powley, Fry, Barrett & Bright 2004), and (operational) teams that prepare and evaluate actions to learn from errors (Catino & Patriotta 2013). Our findings show that employees asking critical questions and engaging in freedom practices is not self-evident. As de Beauvoir maintains, the freedom ‘to will oneself free’, the will and ability to deal with doubt, uncertainty, and the willingness to stand up for certain values is rather difficult (de Beauvoir 1947: 133).

We aim to encourage a participative, learner-centered approach to ethics education that places an emphasis on learning by experience, reflection on experiences, direct engagement, interaction and learning in the here-and-now. In this way, soldiers will be stimulated to think for themselves, to become aware of tensions between values, to foster their moral competence and to form their own morally responsible judgment.

Obviously, for instance during combat, there are situations when executing orders under high pressure and limited time makes engaging in reflection impossible. In such ‘split second’ situations it seems strange and even inappropriate to expect soldiers to engage in a dialogue and reflect on what action should be taken. In these kinds of situations, soldiers need to put their training into practice and take on their assigned tasks without much hesitation. However, in many situations, during deployment as well as in peacetime, time and space are available to reflect on previous actions, to prepare for future actions and to
learn from experiences. In these situations, we need soldiers who are trained in such a way that they are able to critically reflect, recognize different perspectives and values, and form their own morally responsible judgement. As there will never be a rule or guideline that covers all future events, we will constantly need to reflect and review our existing guidelines and policies (Wakin 2000; Kramer 2004; van Baarda & Verweij; Robinson et al. 2008; Lucas 2015). Reflection on rules creates room for thought about the question as to whether certain rules are adequate or should be changed.

Our findings suggest that it is possible to foster Foucauldian freedom practices by working with techniques fostering reflection. Listening and dialogue enable us to question the ‘normalicy’ (Clegg, Courpasson and Phillips 2006) in the military organization, to acknowledge its power, and to investigate alternative options.

Conclusions

In the studies presented in this dissertation we focused on a train-the-trainer course on military ethics for the Dutch armed forces. We elaborated the foundations of ethics education, investigated challenges in ethics education in a military context, and put forward suggestions on how to overcome these challenges with regard to ethics education. Finally, we explored the perceived impact of the ethics train-the-trainer course and identified several aspects that remain challenging.

While ethics training courses aimed at fostering moral competence imply dealing with challenges related to military culture and an atmosphere of safety in the group, our findings indicate that during ethics training courses these challenges also offer opportunities to discuss moral issues and develop moral competence. The key to unlocking these opportunities seems to lie in embracing instead of avoiding these challenges. In doing so we can progress towards a better understanding of moral competence in practice. In fact, discussing these challenges can help participants to recognize concrete moral dilemmas and conflicting values.

Our findings indicate that the train-the-trainer course, through fostering reflection and dialogue on different values and stimulating the Socratic attitude, contributes to the development of moral competence. Participants state that by acquiring a new vocabulary, they more easily recognize moral dilemmas and are able to see and put into words which values, including the values of others, are under threat. The interviews showed that after the train-the-trainer course, participants are more likely to address situations in their daily practice in which they recognize a moral dimension, including those situations that involve their superiors. The fact that the participants in our case study consider the train-the-trainer course important and relevant for their own ethics teaching is an indication of its efficacy.

Our studies support the idea that moral sensitivity, defined as the recognition of ethical aspects worthy of consideration in the situation one is confronted with, is not self-evident.
We therefore recommend further developing and implementing ethics training courses that address this aspect of moral competence and train participants accordingly. In order not to be naive, 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. A Foucauldian perspective provides an opportunity to reflect on these elements and to support employees when faced with complex moral dilemmas in daily practice, and develop a culture of reflection and dialogue in military institutions.

References


Solum E., V. Maluwa, B. Tveit, and E. Severinsson. 2016. ‘Enhancing students’ moral 
competence in practice: Challenges experienced by Malawian nurse teachers’, 
*Nursing Ethics.* doi: 10.1177/0969733015580811

Smith, K., and D. Berg. 1987. Paradoxes of group life, understanding conflict paralysis and movement in 

Starkey, K., and A. McKinlay. 1998. ‘Afterword: Deconstructing organization — discipline 
and desire’ in *Foucault, Management and organization theory, from panopticon to technologies of 

interaction/TCI, 22(2).

Stolper, M., S. Metselaar, B. Molewijk, and G. Widdershoven. 2012. Moral case deliberation in 
an academic hospital in the Netherlands. Tensions between theory and practice. 

study of organizational learning in hospital intensive care units. *Management Science,* 
53, no. 6: 894–907.


Whetham, D. 2008. The challenge of ethical relativism in a coalition environment. *Journal of 
Military Ethics,* 7, 302–316.

Wortel, E., and J. Bosch. 2011. Strengthening moral competence: A “train-the-trainer” course on 
Chapter 8
Ethics education in the military