Warriors, warfighting and the construction of masculine identities

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Abstract

This paper explores some of the cultural, institutional, and discursive ideologies and practices involved in the conceptualisation of the modern ‘warrior.’ In particular, this report highlights the nexus between institutional practices which employ a specific rationality of (hegemonic) masculinity and their relevance to individual identity formation. In doing so, I argue that representations of the modern warrior are sites for contestation as they invariably draw upon particular expressions of masculinity to the exclusion of ‘Others,’ while simultaneously providing opportunities for the creation of a more inclusive masculine and warrior identities informed by evolving operational exigencies.

Key words: warrior, masculinity, identity, warfighting, Army

Introduction

The warrior spirit, or ethos, remains an essential part of Army history, culture and doctrine, and is recognised as playing a crucial role in hardening/preparing soldiers for battle. However, the resoluteness of this ethos and of the warrior identity itself has been contested by a series of social, political, and organisational transformations that have challenged the very definition of war and its closely related counterpart, the soldier. War has become a more chaotic and complex undertaking, comprising of a diverse array of actors ranging from more traditional soldiers to guerrillas, militias, warlords, and terrorists (Kiszely, 2008). Moreover, we have witnessed significant changes, not only in the methods of warfare due to technological innovation, but also the nature of warfare itself through increased military participation in state building, law enforcement, peacekeeping and counterterrorism.

Cognisant of these issues, I examine some of the cultural, institutional, and discursive ideologies and practices involved in the conceptualisation of the ‘warrior’ and ask, ‘how are warrior identities constructed, and what ideologies, technologies, and raison d'etre are employed in this process? I also explore the extent to which socially constructed notions of the warrior coalesce with notions of masculinity. In doing so I argue that representations of the modern warrior are sites for contestation as they invariably draw upon particular expressions of masculinity which alienate ‘Others,’ while simultaneously providing opportunities for the creation of more inclusive masculine and warrior identities due to evolving operational exigencies.
Warriors

In its most common usage, the warrior is “a person...distinguished in fighting...a hardy, courageous or aggressive person (Hastings, 2005: xi). In order to remain effective in combat, the Army needs its members to see themselves as fighters, and enact this view through a desire to close with, and kill an enemy.

Army culture is governed by a (moral) code of conduct that regulates the behaviour of personnel. Non-compliance to orders incurs sanctions or penalties that may appear harsh in comparison to civilian standards (Winter and Woodward, 2003). Similarly, the conduct of the warrior is also highly regulated by a code that also provides a moralistic framework for behaviour (Poole, 2001). This code separates the actions of warriors during warfare from the non-legitimated use of violence inflicted on and by others within civilian populations. Warriors do not indiscriminately take life without reason. Warriors ‘kill’ rather than ‘murder.’ Furthermore, they kill for a purpose – usually for a ‘just’ or greater cause rather than personal gain. Hence, warriors approach killing in a highly disciplined manner insofar as they must “learn to take only certain lives in certain ways, at certain times, and for certain reasons” (French, 2003: 3). In this sense, the term ‘warrior’ conveys moral superiority.

The term warrior, however, has been appropriated by civilian groups to describe a variety of social events and actors. There are ‘weekend warriors,’ a term used to describe: a group of surfers tackling big surf around the globe; a club for recreational musicians and singers who meet to form a band; as well as people who drink and party hard on weekends (Urban Dictionary, 2012). Walking or Road warriors refer to fund raising walking and running groups. Most often, the term warriors is used in reference to sport, describing players or competitors, or names of sporting clubs – with injured players becoming wounded warriors.

Shifting meanings of warrior

Within a military context, the warrior concept is not inviolate, undergoing several transformations in response to larger historical, societal, and technological transformations. During the American Civil War, for example, warriors were those men who displayed fearlessness in battle befitting the uniform they wore. Here, combat presented the ultimate test of masculinity/manhood, closely aligned with notions of bravery, honour, valour, sacrifice and patriotism. The societal impact of high casualties however meant that nexus between death and honour lost its salience (Linderman, 1987: 8 cited in Daddis, 2001).

Within the Australian context, the Army draws upon the ANZAC legend for its inspiration in modern times. In many respects, the ‘digger’ is the military equivalent to the Australian bushman. Diggers are often characterised as those readily adept, courageous, and daring amateur soldiers whose acts of heroism in Gallipoli culminated in the symbolic birth of the Australian nation (Howe, 1995). These diggers, in turn, came to symbolise ‘Australian-ness’ – synonymous with Australian qualities of larrikinism, mateship, and ‘a fair go’ (Donoghue and Tranter, 2011).
Several authors have examined the connections between military, national, and masculine identities invoked by ANZAC or similar legends. Nagel (1998) notes the symbiotic relationship that exists between nationalism and masculinity, and thus the gendered content of nation building. She states:

…like the military, most state institutions have been historically and remain dominated by men. It is therefore no surprise that...masculinity and nationalism articulate well with one another, and the modern form of Western masculinity emerged at about the same time and place as modern nationalism (1998: 249).

The culture of nationalism resonates with masculine cultural and militaristic themes associated with bravery, courage, independence, duty, and patriotism. Consequently, concepts like warrior and nationalism are intertwined. Both terms refer to goals to be achieved, and a belief in collective commonality, invoking images from past and present, simultaneously implying both unity and Otherness. Authors such as Dandeker and Mason (2001) and Jans and Schmidtchen (2002), for example, note that traditional articulations of warrior not only exclude women, but also fail to include ethnic minorities into their symbolic representation. As a primarily Anglo Celtic construct, ethnic minorities are not part of the ethnic majority which national myths like ANZAC represent. Thus, whilst highly regarded and revered, one of the problems with the ANZAC ethos and mythology is that it ‘cannot divest itself of its nationalistic, militaristic tradition nor of its class-based, race-based, ethnocentric and male-centred origins’ (Howe, 1995: 309).

Throughout World War II, the warrior spirit was personified by acts of ‘heroism’ wherein courage was understood as endurance or perseverance in the face of adversity. Australian and American commentators have noted the shift within the Army from the traditional warrior ethos to an ethos of professionalism (Jans and Schmidtchen, 2002; McCausland and Martin, 2001).

In response to the complexities of the modern battle space, others have extended the definition of warrior to incorporate notions of human and intellectual capital as in the case of the ‘warrior scholar.’ Such warrior scholars are not only culturally, socially and politically aware and technically competent, but also adept at operating in different roles, managing people and crisis (Efflandt and Reed, 2001). Having a cultural framework which generates a conducive environment for the development of deep and critical thinkers, and challenging ideas, is central to growing these scholars. Palazzo (2012) contends that such an environment does not exist within the Australian Army, or the ADF for that matter. He argues that a sense of ‘anti-intellectualism’ pervades the Australian Army, and the broader Australian society. Within the Australian Army context, anti-intellectualism takes the form of a ‘preference for ‘doers’ over ‘thinkers’ (Palazzo, 2012: 9).

When looking at the relationship between war’s instrumental and existential aspects, Coker (2002) argues that war today lacks the human intimacy and values of the past. In this respect, the traditional war machine of the First and Second World Wars is a romantic and antiquated idea. War, Coker suggests, is now a completely instrumental endeavour designed to meet political ends. Today’s modern war machine involves a
competition between rival technologies, and as such, a disconnected and impersonal affair wherein responsibility for human action becomes blurred.

With the privileging of science and technology over humans, Gray argues that the human factor in modern warfare has become less significant, even redundant, all but for the integration of humans into “cyborgian (human-machine) weapon systems” (2003: 216). In this sense, war has become cyborged, predicated on closely interconnected human-machine relationships. Within this context, both authors intimate the potentiality for soldiers to become technicians, and ‘technowarriors’ emotionally divorced from the battlefield. To prevent this from occurring there needs to be a balance between the technological and human dimensions of warfare. This balance can be achieved through the adoption of technological innovations that support, rather than supplant the warrior.

A shift in the ideology of the war machine also has implications for traditional representations of warrior and masculine identities. Social trends like technological and organisational rationalisation have contributed to the erosion of the warrior image and its association with heroic masculinity. As discussed earlier, the warrior is constructed around and through physical capabilities associated with close combat. The above trends however have resulted in creating greater distance between the soldier and means of destruction (French, 2003). Or as Ignatieff similarly observes, technological innovation and modern weaponry has increased the ‘moral and geographical distance between warrior and prey’ (1999: 157) separating individuals (warriors) from the results of their actions.

Nonetheless, the changing methods of warfare with their increased emphasis on technologies for surveillance, digitised information systems and information collection, has opened the door for more women to work in these fields, in the process expanding their roles within the military. Technology and its utilisation is gender neutral, and consequently, the ‘digital gender gap’ in this domain is closing. Significantly, servicewomen can gain valuable leadership roles through their involvement with information technology (IT) (Brower, 2002: 62). Consequently, technology has the potential to reconfigure the gender identities of soldiers and warriors, leading to a ‘redefinition of war’s masculine nature’ (Gray, 2003: 220). Indeed, technology has spawned a new enemy – cyber warriors engaging in attacks against domestic and foreign governments (Nauert, 2012). In response, military and security institutions have recruited their own cyber warriors (often computer hackers) to tackle cyber warfare (Srivastava, 2012).

Thus, the term warrior is far from static, acquiring new meanings that reflect changing societal and military expectations of soldiers, as well as the shifting nature of modern warfare.

Creating warriors

The idea of the readily adept amateur soldier who displayed proficiency and heroism, exemplified in the ANZAC myth, has led to the belief in the ‘natural fighting abilities’ of men (Jans and Schmidtchen, 2002). This belief has since been proliferated by a series of authors who associate the warrior (and corresponding patterns of
behaviour) with a ‘normative’ or ‘essentialist’ form of masculinity which is understood as being an expression of, or determined by, biology. In this respect, abilities to engage in ‘war fighting’ or ‘warriorhood’ are governed by the possession of specific ‘traits’ such as aggression, physical or mental toughness, tenacity, and bravery, which are frequently sex-specific in application and thus coded as masculine (Gutmann, 2000; Ricks, 1997).

These essentialist theories of masculinity have been critiqued by a number of sociologists on the basis that they tend to ascribe or ‘fix’ an individual’s identity and behaviour to anatomical or genetic difference, and thus fail to account for creativity or individual agency, in the process, denying possibilities for change (Buchbinder, 1994; Connell, 1995).

In general, cultures of hegemonic masculinity pervade most military organisations and institutions. Hegemonic discourses of masculinity within military settings frequently employ an action typology in order to define masculinity. Masculinity is something men do, an accomplishment, or performative act, with the physicality of men’s bodies playing a crucial part in how they come to understand gender and warrior identities (Higate, 2003). Militarised masculinity as a discourse is reinforced by valorising traditionally-ascribed ‘masculine’ tropes, such as rationality, stoicism, bravery, and aggressiveness in the military, and discouraging characteristics that could be considered feminine (Tacey, 1997).

Militarised masculine identity construction is facilitated through the articulation and inculcation of institutional, collective and social values during training. Training is a period of intense identity construction, one that aims to disconnect recruits from their previous (civilian) identities so they can develop new masculine and warrior identities that are aligned to institutional expectations and goals. As Kovitz explains:

…military masculinity has less to do with men’s essential characteristics than with what they seem to represent in relation to the military’s mandate. The military’s need to segregate its members from civilian society and to develop and sustain in them a solidarity…” (2003: 6).

Thus, ‘solidarity’ is achieved through a process of social integration which entails the formation of a social identity which emphasises the commitment of an individual to a group or collective (Durkheim, 1964).

The discussion above highlights the extent to which masculine ‘traits’ are socially constructed. Indeed, such traits are designed to improve the organization’s operations as they assist in constructing a soldier who is able to go to war and perform various duties perceived necessary for military operations. However, the expanded role of military operations into Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW) (Franke, 2000), such as humanitarian and peacekeeping roles, has led to a re-evaluation of the warrior and warfighting. These roles necessitate a greater breadth and depth of competencies, including the application of soft and hard power (Kiszely, 2008) – an amalgamation of warrior and un-warrior like attributes such as compassion, tolerance, empathy and emotional intelligence (Australian Army, 2007).
Female warriors

Recent changes to defence force policy has increased opportunities for servicewomen to engage in ‘direct combat duties.’ Debates surrounding the expansion of women’s roles within military organisations, and the perceived effects their increased participation has on organisational structures, cultures, and operational capabilities, are frequently articulated in essentialist terms. Opponents argue that women’s innate physiological inferiority in terms of strength and endurance, as well as the added ‘incapacitating’ effects of menstruation and childbirth, make them ill-suited to combat roles. The recent proposal for female participation in frontline roles draws on this discourse, with the legitimacy of women’s serving capacity strongly caveat under the proviso that they meet the demanding ‘physical requirements’ necessary for such roles. In tandem, concerns over the maintenance of selection standards also feature (Dodd, 2011). In this respect, the current discourse surrounding the exclusion of Australian women into front line combat roles de-emphasises equity related concerns in favour of an emphasis on operational effectiveness (with related reduced physical capacities viewed as potential threats to effectiveness). According to the Review into the treatment of women in the Australian Defence Force (2012), providing female soldiers with the full combat experience increases their promotional opportunities, and enables them to “prove themselves a ‘real’ soldiers…cementing their authority as leaders” (Febbaro, 2003 cited in Australian Human Rights Commission, 2012: 304).

The inclusion of women into front line combat roles is one thing. Having female enlistees willing to apply and undertake these duties is another. As one ‘female digger’ reported in an interview with Patrick Lion for the Daily Telegraph:

I’m sure there is a minority of women who are capable of killing but I don’t know any who would be up for it. It’s not the norm” (Lion, 2012).

Other female personnel interviewed voiced their concern regarding women’s increased vulnerability to rape and torture while on operations. One noted that meeting the required physical standards meant that women would “almost [give] up everything that it means to be a woman – including having children.” (Lion, 2012)

The impact of violence, threats of rape and torture, bullying, balancing family and career here are framed as women’s issues, rather than issues affecting all personnel irrespective of gender.

Thus, the discourse surrounding female warriors draws to the fore the relational character of masculine and warrior identities which are often expressed in essentialist terms. However, the relational character is not solely confined between the sexes. As masculine identities themselves can be viewed as being hierarchically organised (Connell, 1995), these configurations take on greater significance within a hierarchical organisation such as Army. Here notions of rank would intersect with masculinity, suggesting the possibility of Commissioned Officer and Other Rank masculinities. Additionally, these expressions of masculinity would conceivably differ in their expression according to functional roles, giving rise to infantry, signaller, engineer corps, and Special Operations identity formations.
Conclusion

I have argued that warrior identities are socially constructed – evolving and acquiring renewed significance as a consequence of historical, social, and technological transformations. At the organisational level, warrior identities are shaped by a code of conduct governing and regulating the behaviour of soldiers. More significantly, the expanded role of the Australian Army into military operations other than war, in conjunction with technological innovation, has implications for the conduct of warriors, as well as traditional notions of warfighting. Thus, these transformations necessitate the acknowledgement of there being multiple warrior identities, or warrior(s) (plural).

I have also argued that warrior identities are ‘made,’ or constructed, through indoctrination into military cultures and participation in established practices like training. In turn, cultures of military masculinity shape this training process. Indeed, warrior identities are produced in accordance with an organisational rationality which favours expressions of hegemonic masculinity so that soldiers can meet operational imperatives. Thus, the inculcation of the warrior is both a discursive and instrumental process achieved through the performance of specific tasks, and exposure to institutional norms, values and cultures that are coded masculine. Military masculinity is therefore not a fact of nature or monolithic, but a socially constructed identity that is shaped in accordance with other considerations such as rank, function, corps, and warfighting abilities.

References


