Soldiers, Work and Emotions – Perspectives from the Sociology of Risk and Uncertainty

Jens O. Zinn
School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Melbourne

Abstract

Since the seminal work of Hochschild (1983) on the emotion management of flight attendants, the early focus on women’s work in the service industry has been broadened. More occupations and different dimensions have been examined. The article contributes to this research using the sociology of risk and uncertainty to advance understandings of emotion management. It argues that the modern distinction between reason and emotion is still central to the feeling rules in many occupations, such as for soldiers who are trained to overcome exhaustion and existential anxiety to function even under extreme and hostile conditions. Two cases will be discussed which show different strategies to deal with emotions. They illustrate the tensions between organizational and societal feeling rules: firstly, the contradiction between the satisfaction of being efficient and reliable as a soldier, and the feelings of guilt and shame that go along with breaking one of the strongest social taboos of the inviolability of the life of others; secondly, the contradiction between the public presentation of soldiering as highly honourable and the chaotic and brutish reality of combat. The article concludes with questions about the price societies and soldiers have to pay for training people to kill.

Key words: soldiers, emotions, risk and uncertainty, emotion work, emotion labour

Introduction

Managing emotions is part of being successful at work, whether as academics, fire fighters, stewardesses, doctors or soldiers. Emotions such as excitement, shame or fear, whether controlled or uncontrolled, displayed, suppressed, or utilised are experienced and learned from our first day of life. We use and manage emotions in everyday life and at work, and how we do so is largely influenced by who we are (our class, gender, ethnicity etc.) and what we are doing (family work, occupational work etc.).

Hochschild’s seminal work The Managed Heart - Commercialization of Human Feelings (1983) has been crucial to sociological research on work and emotions. Positioned in a Marxist framework, Hochschild tried to make sense of how the growing service industry shifts the exploitative mechanisms of capitalism to the realm of women’s work. Identifying ‘emotion labour’ as typically provided by (middle class) women, she identified emotional alienation as the central danger of the then rapidly-growing service industry. However, though emotion work, emotion labour and feeling rules, as well as deep acting and surface acting, have become key concepts, later work has engaged in expanding the original scope of Hochschild’s work. For example, some have introduced different kinds of emotion work (e.g. Bolton & Boyd 2003), while others have examined in increasing detail emotions in organisations.
Typical critiques of Hochschild’s work addressed the focus on commodification of emotion and how market pressures influence emotion work (e.g. Bolton & Boyd 2003). The feeling rules of many professions are primarily driven by rationales other than profit, such as help (social work), health (doctors, nurses), or national security (soldiers). Substantial emotion management is not the sole preserve of women and the service industry, as Hochschild originally assumed, but is also undertaken by male employees in male-dominated occupations and professions, such as bouncers, firefighters, rescue workers and soldiers. However, the feeling rules in such occupations differ from the feeling rules typically applied in the female-dominated service industries. They focus more on controlling one’s own emotions than on shaping the emotions of others. Accordingly, emotion management of soldiers differs from Hochschild’s assumption that it is mainly done as the public expression of a specific emotion to shape feelings in others (e.g. in customers to increase profit). Instead, the idea of rational warfare implies that soldiers are able to control their emotions to follow orders under extreme conditions and even to sacrifice their own life if operationally necessary (Jolly 1996; Bourke 1999). Therefore, soldiers are trained in controlling, suppressing, and channelling emotions such as fatigue, anxiety and aggression in a way that is functional for a mission.

One of the key issues in managing emotions results from differences in ‘feeling rules’ and displayed feelings (‘surface acting’). Hochschild highlighted how market pressure can reduce the available time for ‘deep acting’ necessary to adapt real feelings to the organisation’s feeling rules while the resulting emotional dissonance has been identified as a source of lower job satisfaction and increased stress (Wharton 2009, 160). The problem of differences between feeling rules and experienced feelings is crucial to many occupations, though they might not always result from economic pressure. Instead, I argue that combat soldiers – whose primary task is to fight on the ground facing an enemy (Royal Marines, Infantry) – exemplify how displaying the right attitudes to other soldiers or the enemy can be important, but the internal management of emotions is essential to their performance.

Furthermore, I suggest distinguishing feelings regarding their intensity and how deeply they are rooted in one’s personal self. Feelings of a low intensity may be used as a kind of advisor to reflect on our inner states, while intense feelings tend to overwhelm us (Lowenstein et al 2001). Military training might directly aim to alter the self in the first place to enable soldiers to control intense and deeply rooted feelings that can potentially endanger operational functionality. In this context, Hochschild’s distinction between ‘surface acting’ and ‘deep acting’ doesn’t go far enough. She states that the employees’ attempt to comply with feeling rules of an organisation or profession by ‘deep acting’, push their ‘“real self” further inside, making it more inaccessible’ (Hochschild 2003, 34). But we get little sense of the effects of employees’ attempts to deal with high intensity emotions, which constantly try to break free and require continuous efforts and training to be kept in check (Jolly 1996).

Conceptually, this article suggests examining soldiers’ emotion management through the lens of the sociology of risk and uncertainty, and thus applying a modernist framework (compare for an overview: Zinn 2008). Central to our understanding of modernisation has been the dichotomy of reason and emotion, which constantly reappear in different configurations, such as in the dichotomous distinctions of culture and nature, male and female or rational risk calculation and metaphysics. These dichotomies shape the modern dream of controlling the inner (body, emotions) and outer nature (social and natural environment), and are still strong
when societies, organisations and individuals manage risks and uncertainties in everyday life. Since there is now evidence that emotion and reason are systematically connected and interwoven rather than clearly separate (Power and Dalgleish 2008), Turner and Stets (2006) have argued against this distinction on ontological grounds. However, this article suggests that on an epistemological level, the reason/emotion dichotomy is still one of the most powerful socio-cultural orientation in present day societies, which continues to significantly structure, for example, risk regulation, gender roles and occupational behaviour.

In order to overcome deeply rooted emotions and to ensure efficient functioning in combat, soldiers require intense training, refreshment and reinforcement (Katz 1990; Ben-Ari 1998). As Jolly (1996, 48) already suspected, despite all such attempts to secure high performance standards, the experience of being a soldier has several de-institutionalising effects that follow some soldiers out of active duty. I focus here on two aspects: the contradictions between the feeling rules of the military and society; and the contradictions between official presentation of the job in the media and the experienced reality on the job. The article concludes with the question of how the overcoming of deep emotions as a prerequisite of efficient performance might impact upon individual behaviour and wellbeing.

Learning Emotions

The following two case studies are taken from an explorative study ‘The Biographical Management of Risk and Uncertainty-British Veterans’ which was carried out from 1st May 2007 to 31st November 2008. The study applied a biographical narrative approach in examining the experiences of 14 British ex-servicemen from different generations and positions, but mainly from lower ranks (Zinn 2010). This approach was chosen to give the interviewees as much space as possible to outline and express their experiences from their own perspective and to allow detailed analyses of a wide range of dimensions to better understand individual managing of emotions (Jenkins et al. 2011).

While the experiences of the soldiers—here called ‘Albert’ and ‘Jo’, - in professional training and military culture were typical for the Royal Marines and the Army, their responses were quite different, and were a reflection of their earlier biographical experiences. As with many soldiers, both Albert and Jo are from lower middle class or working class backgrounds (Dandeker et al. 2003) and experienced what is usually understood as a ‘troubled family’ context. Both went through a military training that aims to select the best candidates, capable of dealing with high pressure and physical and psychological challenges. However, when they talked about their life, they emphasised different aspects of their strategies to deal with professional experiences.

Feeling Rules – Organisation versus Society

Training soldiers is mainly about learning to effectively kill others, whether at long, mid or close range, but emotionally, close contact with the enemy is more challenging (Grossman 2009). Confrontation with the consequences of their action and the possibility of being killed themselves is quite imminent. Traumatic experiences are regularly linked to intense close range experiences of high danger or killing of others (Grossman 2009, Bourke 1999). Training to kill is quite a challenging task since it contradicts both the fundamental
values of democratic societies and most religions where the sanctity of human life is considered inviolable. Such values become deeply engraved during socialisation processes or, as Bourke (1999) claims, are part of human nature. There would be less natural instinct to kill than not to kill.

In the first case study, Jo expressed a strategy that follows the modern orthodoxy and could be called *dichotomic control*. It is characterised by the clear distinction between reason and emotion, where one side controls the other. He describes how he has been trained to control [his] adrenaline, to control [his] emotions. When you shoot or you take a shot, take 3 breathes, first, second, third. The third you squeeze back on the trigger, eye, rear sight, foresight, target, yeah? And by the time the round has hit the target then you can breathe your third breath out and that’s it. It doesn’t matter how excited I can get about something. I’ll still have a 48 to a 43 depending on what I’m doing. We switch off our emotions. Our target isn’t a human being anymore, it’s just a target. All it is is a piece of paper with a photograph on it. That photograph might be walking across, yeah, and that photograph’s gone, end of story.” (Compare for similar narrations by Israeli soldiers: Ben-Ari 1998, 45)

What he describes as his professional attitude does not exclude showing empathy, but for Jo his professional attitude comes first, which includes fulfilling the task and bringing his comrades back home alive.

In an occupational environment where emotional control is crucial to professional behaviour, Albert found a different way to deal with emotions, which could be called *integrated control* in that reason and control are not separated. Contradicting the modern orthodoxy, this approach takes reason to be emotionally supported, and emotions themselves are seen as guiding mechanisms for reason. When Albert spoke about his training and learning experience to become a soldier, he emphasised how he has learned to deal with emotions. He learned that “having fear” is acceptable. In his eyes good soldiers are characterised by the ability to overcome their fear, by *controlled aggression*, for example:

“I can remember my corporal saying to me this…I boxed when I was in the Marines. I did 37 fights and I won the Inter-Championship in the Marines and then fought between the services, the Marines against the Navy, the RAF and the Army and I was never defeated so I was pretty good at this. But I always shook every time. I could never stop my knees and my legs from shaking… I was shit scared and my Corporal just kept saying to me this is the same with any man. If they hide it, they hide it better. Pick your first 3 blows, it doesn’t matter if they don’t work, by the time you’re hit you’ll be angry enough to fight back, and he was so right. And I used that in battle with all my men. There’s nothing wrong with shaking, it will give you clarity.”

*Integration* has another meaning as well. Albert always “trusted his emotions”. For him emotion and reason had to be one. “If something made me angry it made me angry, it was wrong and it needed to be fought against and that’s what I did”. Consequently he described how emotionally disappointed he was when he failed to perform well in his first mission:

“The first person I shot was a girl. We were at a check point when a car bashed its way through and I can remember firing 5 rounds at the driver’s seat, because that was mine, I could fire where I needed to fire and hitting every one of them and getting to
the car 150 meters down the road and opening the door and pulling this person out and realizing it was a girl and not being upset because it was a girl or anything like that but being angry that my 5 rounds hadn’t killed her^4. She was still alive. I can remember distinctly being really, really angry that she wasn't dead and what a bad soldier I was”.

Feeling Rules – Public Presentation versus Experienced Reality

There is an abundance of evidence that soldiers in combat are not primarily driven by honourable motives such as risking life “for Queen and country” (Woodward 2008). Also, the often-presented ideal of efficient and controlled combat activities does not quite correspond to soldiers’ combat experiences. Instead, in life-threatening situations the concerns much more with the preservation of one’s own life and that of one’s buddies rather than anything else (e.g. Woodward 2008). The official presentation of the honourable killing of others does often not fit the experienced reality of combat, the messy, loud, chaotic and brutish reality of war.

Jo explains how he neutralised experiences that might usually cause strong emotions:

“My rounds must have killed females and children alike, yeah, but as far as I was concerned, they’re expendable. If it gets a job done, I could drop in a grenade into a house to clear that house. It wasn’t a problem to me. It got blurry after a while. … But don’t get me wrong, if it was a case of keeping the boys alive and dropping a grenade into a family home. Yeah. But saying that if a little kid was walking out into the street and I knew rounds were coming down I’d be the first fucking arsehole running for the little kid.”

However, he also justifies his ability to deal with the reality of war as being a personality characteristic:

“You need a certain type of mentality. Me personally ‘I’m a cold hearted bastard’. I’ve been called it too many times in my life, you know? There’s no heart inside me.”

This account contrasts with Albert’s report on his experience of shooting a girl; in hindsight he was very ashamed about the feelings of disappointment he had at the time. He, as many other professionals, loved his job and bad performance was a great disappointment. This touches on another dimension of soldiers’ experiences that is often sidelined in the recently intensified reporting on the reality of combat. Many soldiers are not only reluctant to speak about their experiences of war because they have been so horrible and traumatic. There is also good evidence that soldiers thoroughly enjoy combat and killing (e.g. Hedges 2002) what might make it even more difficult to speak about it in a civil context.

Conclusion

This study leaves us with some fundamental questions regarding the price societies have to pay for training some of their citizens to be able to kill others, such as health costs related to mental disorders and trauma such as PTSD, physical disabilities, alcohol and drug addiction as well as problems of re-integrating soldiers into civil life accompanied by violence,
homelessness and suicide (e.g. The Mental Health Foundation 2003, Grossman 2009). What are the consequences for the well-being of soldiers when trained to overcome deeply rooted emotions to kill others? The difficulties of the long de-institutionalisation process of ex-serviceman have been described by Jolly (1996). However, her work hardly touches on the question of whether post-traumatic stress, as well as the kind of atrocities reported in the media, might somehow be linked to the training and the tasks (combat) soldiers perform. Since the separation of reason and emotion has been identified as a socio-cultural myth, the pressing question is how rational attempts to control and change emotions impact on the conscious and subconscious of individuals. The sociology of work and emotions has not yet developed a good understanding of how occupational training might result in ethically undesirable behaviour and (mental) health problems.

Footnotes

1. ‘Emotion management’ refers to the ways of how people accommodate their emotions according to normative expectations of what should be felt (feeling rules) in specific situations.

2. The technological transformation of warfare allows soldiers emotional distancing from combat (Grossman 2009). However, many missions today have much more the character of civil-war where the enemy could be a mother or a child (Kassimeris 2006). Under such conditions distancing becomes difficult and even undesired when sensible dealing with civilians is necessary for the success of a mission.

3. Though there are well known differences between countries that impose the death penalty and those that have abandoned it.

4. Italics within quotes indicate that the interviewee emphasised the words.

References

Dandeker, C. et al. (2003) Improving the delivery of cross departmental support and services for veterans, King's College, London.


