Training emotions – military service, exceptionalism and loyalty

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Abstract

The Australian military has been beset by conduct scandals, including bastardisation and sexual abuse cases, resulting in an unprecedented series of reviews and attempts to change the culture. We argue that scandals are not behaviours arising in contradiction to military norms, as often claimed by military institutions, but rather are engendered by training that inculcates obedience and loyalty to one's mates and the institution as key military virtues. This obedience and loyalty can override other ethical concerns, both at home and during deployment. In this paper, we draw on the sociology of emotions literature in order to conceptualise loyalty as an emotion. Qualitative interviews were undertaken with twenty-four retired servicemen. The data from these interviews helps to illustrate how the emotional process of cohesion and bonding takes place in the military through training, proximity and exposure to risk, and through ideals of the military as exceptional. We add to the military sociology literature by explicitly exploring the emotionality of military bonding.

Key Words: Military, emotions, loyalty, scandal

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The Australian military has been beset with scandals since its inception (the first major conduct scandal being in 1913 at the Royal Military College, Duntroon) (Wadham, 2012a), with a recent litany of scandals around abuse, sexual misconduct and bullying/bastardisation (Orme, 2012; Wadham, 2012a;Wadham2012b; Morrison, 2013). Common through nearly all scandals is the process of men bonding against the outsider[1] – be it the soldier who does not 'fit', the civilian, the women in their midst or the enemy. This bonding is deeply rooted in emotional connection, interactional (Collins, 2007) and on-going where men prove themselves to each other (Connor, 2010). We focus on men specifically, due to the male-dominated and homosocial nature of the armed forces. While the topic of bonding and small unit cohesion has been well argued in the military sociology literature (King, 2006; Siebold, 2007; Kirke, 2009), what is absent is the emotional narration of that connection from the soldiers themselves and an analysis of that connection that draws upon the sociology of emotions literature (Turner, 2009).

We examine military loyalty as a way of beginning to engage with the emotions literature (Connor, 2007). Twenty-four retired Australian servicemen who had been deployed in a range of conflicts were interviewed about their experiences and perceptions of loyalty and mateship. Participants were all men. Their ages ranged from 25-70. Most participants had been deployed, and many had been deployed more than once. Deployments included war,

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[1] Koeszegi et al. found, in their study of the Austrian military, that there were high-levels of aggression by women towards other women, and they hypothesised that women in the military are seen as representatives of a minority, and may feel threatened by association with lower performers, and therefore may victimise these women. (2012: 240)

humanitarian efforts and peace keeping from the Vietnam War onwards. Locations included both Gulf Wars, and humanitarian service in the Solomon Islands and East Timor.

Loyalty here is conceptualised as an emotion and is closely linked to ideals of reciprocity and bonding in small units (Connor, 2007; Keller, 2007; Coleman, 2009). Loyalty is relational; it is a function of the connection between people and between people and institutions. As loyalty is a social emotion and linked to relations with others, an individual can experience multiple and competing loyalties (Connor, 2007). Loyalty develops within specific social milieus (Connor, 2007).

Military training inculcates obedience and fast reactions without hesitation. Loyalty to military is engendered through a sense of extraordinariness and differentiation from the values in broader society. The high-pressure, often life-threatening situations encountered during deployment further intensify feelings of loyalty and connection forged around the ideal of the military as exceptional; while it appears 'trite' soldiers must and do rely on each other to survive – creating a deep emotional bond.

An issue with traditional military training is the idea that mass, conscript armies need to be trained (usually bastardised) into aggression and violence, 'blind' obedience to authority and deep communal bonds so that you never let down your 'mate'. Modern armies now need 'smart' reflective engaged soldiers (Smith & Bergin, 2012). This sets up an inevitable clash of training cultures, with the 'old school' view being you need to be bastardised to fight. According to Richard Evans, bastardisation is synonymous with hazing, which he defines as "the practice of established members of a group engaging in systematic and often ritualised abuse of new entrants to that group (2013: 115)".

Our key argument is that military training is designed to engender cohesive units, automatic obedience and adherence to military norms. Adherence to military norms overcomes

reluctance to perform violent tasks that would contradict civilian morality. The combination of training, group loyalty and tightly formed bonds in high-pressure situations can work to override moral imperatives. In these situations, loyalty to mates may triumph over ethical concerns and there is a risk of malfeasance or abuse and concealing information about crimes in order to protect mates (Connor, 2010; Wadham, 2012b, 2013).

Given that emotion drives social action and we do things because of how we feel (Haidt, 2001; Prinz, 2007), it is not surprising that the military focuses on changing how soldiers *feel*. Loyalty is deployed in the military setting because it motivates soldiers to act in a particular way. It is one of the structural responses to the individual problem of enabling killing. A continuing weakness in the field of research is the lack of empirical investigations into the lived experience of loyalty by military personnel generally (Powell & Gilbert, 2008) and in particular within the Australian context. Given the primacy of 'mateship' and the ANZAC tradition in the ADF, the experience of Australian soldiers may be qualitatively different from other militaries, even those with like traditions (Canada, UK). This research engages with former serving ADF personnel on their lived experiences of mateship and loyalty in combat.

Subjects were recruited via adverts disseminated through former-servicemen organisations (typically via email/newsletter) and then snow-ball sampling. Data was initially collected by a research assistant who was naive to the study's purpose but familiar with the military (had been operationally deployed themselves) and military sociology. Analysis of the data was an inductive analysis (Patton, 2002) allowing themes and patterns to emerge from the data, but through an iterative process. The iterative process involves multiple interpretations and reinterpretations towards a stable understanding of the core meanings or "themes" that emerge. Analysis is an inductive process allowing themes and patterns to emerge from the data, with an iterative process including a multi-loop system where transcripts were critically

analysed by both researchers then brought together to distil relevant data. Specifically, the two authors independently read and coded the de-identified transcripts looking for themes and patterns. We combined the analysis and discussed differences in interpretation and understanding between the researchers. These themes become the basis for confirmatory evaluation of the interviews. It is important to note that the aim of the process is to find explanations of the data rather than achieve consensus, as, ontologically, there is no single irrefutable "truth" to be revealed or discovered (Hardcastle & Hagger, 2011). The process of independent identification and cross-checking of themes serves as an important reliability check, and attempts to minimise intrinsic bias in the data analyses that emerges from the inability of the interpreter to separate themselves from the process. As Hardcastle & Hagger (2011) note, the collection and interpretation of the data is influenced by the researcher's prior knowledge. Epistemologically this "researcher" bias occurs in all research, as the decision of what question to ask or how to ask it derives from the researcher's accumulated experience rather than being something that occurs outside. This bias was a particular challenge in the research as the second author's key theoretical work (Connor, 2007; Connor, 2010) is being tested via the interviews. To allow for a risk of confirmation bias, the first author, while very experienced in interview based research and inductive analysis (Noack-Lundberg, 2013), was completely new to the field of military sociology. We report on three themes in this paper, training, bonding and military exceptionalism and explore the emotionality of these. Pseudonyms are used for all subjects.

Training

The intense, often life-transforming process of military training was described by many of the interview participants. Training worked both to instil military ideals, including loyalty and

obedience and an automatic response to commands. Participants used words like 'bred into', 'knocked into' and 'moulded' to describe their training. As well as being a process of learning skills, training serves as a process of acculturation to military norms.

Nigel: military loyalty overall, for me, that would be the almost instilled discipline

Tim: it was always ... like, yeah, all the training that you do to a certain point, it's exactly that, it's a build-up and it's training so you know what you're supposed to do and how you're supposed to react. …. And you'd revisit the training exercise and you'd go over it again until you all got it right. And it just became ... well, it comes back to instinctive obedience.

Steve: I think because you go through similar experiences and if I look at someone else in the Navy without even talking to him, I know, I already know what they go through. So I'm already part of I guess in one way their life's experiences. Because I know what they go through. And because everyone goes through the similar thing. You go through the whole recruitment discipline, training, being yelled at, all of that sort of stuff. And I can look at somebody in uniform and go, "I already know part of your life, without even speaking one word to you." Someone in the street, I'd have no idea.

Justin: There's a culture. There's a culture of it which, you know, was sort of bred into me, you know, knocked into me as a young soldier, especially in a regular battalion, but it's a one-in-all-in. Your mates are everything, you stick through thick and thin. Right or wrong, almost, you stand by your mates.

… I think that once you've been in the military for a while, that's something that … I don't know what the word is, I don't think it's instilled in you. I think that it's actually distilled out of you, if that makes sense. I think that capacity for loyalty is inside

everybody, and the military brings it out of you. It's not like they punch it into you

with a syringe; they manage to find it within you and drag it out of you.

Barry: they're trying to mould somebody from a snotty-nosed long-haired civilian

into a reasonably presentable soldier within six or eight weeks, or however long it is,

with a whole batch of new skills that are totally foreign to him.

A fundamental problem for the military is actually getting soldiers to fight and kill the enemy (Collins, 2008). Fukuyama (2004) noted this dilemma and argues that the purpose of the military training regime is to emotionally bond soldiers. This interdependent bond is forged by the deployment of socialisation techniques and systems comparable to those that Erving Goffman (1991) labelled total institutions, and that Susie Scott (2010) refashions as reinventive institutions. The role of this socialisation process is to separate soldiers from their previous social milieu and inculcate a new way of understanding the world. McGarry et al., also drawing on Goffman's work, describe this process as the 'mortification of the self' (2013: 11). Central to this is loyalty, obedience and the subsuming of one's individual desires for the needs of the greater cause. Military norms come to override civilian norms (McGarry et al., 2013: 10). Those who do not conform to expected behaviours and comply with military values are excluded or stigmatised (McGarry et al., 2013:11). Zinn highlights the importance of 'emotional control' in the military and the development of a 'professional attitude' that contradicts civilian norms and allows for killing to take place (2012:4). The quotes illustrate the idea of training for obedience but also cohesion – developing a deep connection to others. Training draws this from the soldier, with an emotional undertone driving the connection.

A Special Bond

Loyalty to military mates was seen by most participants as an important form of loyalty. This loyalty was framed as a kind of reciprocity, in the sense that the participants were prepared to

'do anything' for their mates and this usually included putting their life on the line, although this was made more explicit in some interviews than others. The special bond was also seen to be due to working in close proximity and in unusual and life-threatening circumstances.

> **Pete**: I think that there is some mental process that goes on in a soldier's mind which bonds him to the people who are around him. Something that we don't really understand, how it kind of you know I, if you, I mean if I saw a pretty girl I'd fall in love with her because something is going on in my head, or, neurons or whatever it is. I think there's something similar happens to combat soldiers.

> **Dean**: A mate who is a civilian, he matter of fact would not put themselves in harm's way to help you. A mate within Defence would.

> **Dylan**: once you're deployed and things are real, you know, that loyalty is very much amplified as everything else, every other emotion is.

Loyalty and the feeling of a special emotional bond can work to enhance group cohesion and affect unit performance. However, the identitarian logic (Wadham, 2013) that underpins military loyalty can lead towards a lack of empathy toward those designated as 'other' or outside the group:

> This institutionalised identity is enforced through the creation of a highly instrumental and literal subjectivity, the ideal of which expresses a rapacious singularity of purpose: there is only one way of being in the world, one Truth, one humanitas, one future, one nation, one subjectivity. You are either with us or against us. This is the idealised version of hegemonic masculinity, divorced from nature, emotion, woman and the savage; the captain of one's fate and the master of one's soul. (Wadham, 2013: 229)

A special bond is forged through competition with others and a sense of differentiation from

those constructed as deviant and 'legitimize the application of violence against deviants' (Koeszegi et al 2012: 7) Koeszegi et al, in their study of bullying in the Austrian army, argue that maligning out-group members and framing them as different works to construct the in-group as special and 'exclusive.' They also posit that this process works to train in-group members to dehumanize those outside this group and facilitates the legitimation of violence against an enemy in combat situations (Koeszegi et al 2012:7].

> **Barry**: it was easy to get … to lull them into a cohesive team. Because I'd say that my soldiers were better than his soldiers. He'd say, "Oh no they ain't. Mine are better." And they go out of their way then to prove that you're right.

This bonding, while seen as essential for operational effectiveness also creates the social circumstance for the commission and concealment of malfeasance.

Differentiation / the military as exceptional

Bonding was often conceptualized as occurring on the basis of proximity and reciprocity within small units, more so than directly due to a broader allegiance to the military as a whole or to the Australian nation. However, an ideal that cemented the bonding was the ideal of a shared culture or values. Men who joined the military felt that they bonded with other military men partly due to being a particular kind of person, one who many felt was unlikely to be found outside of this context. Many felt that civilians would not only not understand working in life-threatening situations, but they would also not relate to the ethic of service and protection; they would not be willing to risk their lives for others and would not put themselves in harm's way for a higher cause such as protecting the nation. The willingness to sacrifice oneself in pursuit of higher causes was highlighted, but also there was a sense of military men as higher or more evolved types of people.

> **Tim**: A relationship that you have in the military exceeds a civilian relationship

tenfold. A prime example would be, you know, like I ... and I don't know whether it's just military, like within the military, or it's military personnel but all military personnel have the same mindset and share very similar attitudes.

you know, without sounding like a crusty 70-year-old man in an RSL, I wonder whether or not our society is still generally peopled with people like that. That I'm not the odd one out, that everyone else would rather somebody else go and do the hard job. So I take pride in my motivation; would be that as a nation Australia gets a lot of benefit from its position in the world and we've got an obligation. When the time comes and someone has to go somewhere to do a shit job, Australian citizens can't, or shouldn't, be afraid to stand up and say, "Well, it's my turn to go. If it's my turn to do the shit job, I'll go and do it." Having said that, now that I've done it, I'd definitely consider myself differently; I feel differently about myself with my place in this country, because I went and did that; like I'm in a club. Does that make sense?

Chris: I was very impressed with that [the discipline at his workplace after leaving the military] because that was my biggest worry about getting out was being ... working with a bunch of lazy long-haired people who don't turn up for work and all those sorts of things and all the scary tales I'd been told by other guys who've paid off about the worst thing about working as a civilian is you never know who's going to turn up on the day.

The comments above demonstrate that there are values seen to be particular to the military. In Tim's quote it is evident that he sees self-sacrifice as a virtue particular to the military. Chris' quote also shows that discipline and hard-work are seen as hallmarks of military institutions. This conception of likeness with in the military, or sharing 'the same mindset' and 'very

similar attitudes', as described by Tim, fosters a sense of the military as exceptional and of military men as ideal men, which helps to further cohesion. Courage, loyalty and obedience are commonly seen as military virtues (Sandin, 2007). Vonthoff claims that in Australia, self-sacrifice is particularly highly valued over individual heroic acts and the ideal of self-sacrifice is inextricably bound with the ANZAC legend (2005: 36). This ideal of self-sacrifice came out strongly in the interview data, as is demonstrated in Tim's quote.

Our analysis indicates that military men tend to value loyalty and mateship particularly strongly. This sense of loyalty and unit cohesion is enhanced by a strong sense of exceptionalism, a feeling of shared values, and a clear distinction drawn between the military and civilians. Military personnel are trained to act automatically, obey commands, and protect their mates. The training process within the 'total institution' (Goffman, 1991; Scott, 2010) works to reshape new recruits and mould their character in line with military norms and virtues. The strong bond helps sustain those serving under dangerous conditions, who become reliant on each other and entrust each other with their lives. However, the downside to this group cohesion is that loyalty to mates may override other values and ethical concerns, as the automatic reaction may be one of obedience and protection of one's mates. The risk of malfeasance in this situation may be compounded by military norms where those in the military are strongly defined in opposition to outsiders, outsiders are seen as 'lesser' beings, and military masculinity is upheld as an ideal. In this paper we focused on emotions and the development of loyalty during service and deployment. It has been found that emotional bonding changes on leaving the service (Zinn, 2012; Patulny et al., 2014) this is an avenue for further research on changing emotional experiences over time.

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