

Coping with Discontent in Contemporary Armed Forces: The Dutch Case

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In Western democracies, military personnel rarely resort to actions such as demonstrations, strikes and blockades. Sometimes, such actions are illegal, but even when legally possible, they are often inconceivable. Traditionally, relative passivity on the part of personnel pursuing such a risky, demanding profession was compensated for by a well-secured socio-economic position and prospect of lifelong employment. This arrangement was the basis for the psychological contract specific to the armed forces in Western democracies (Bartle, 2006). Yet, in recent decades, most armed forces there went through budget cuts and deep organizational changes, often with negative consequences for personnel. The Netherlands is case in point. Ever since the 1980s, Dutch military personnel have been exposed to the effects of budgetary retrenchment and private sector modes of operation (Moelker, 2006). Such obviously detrimental changes commonly produce work-related discontent and conflict. This leads to questions about whether and how military personnel can respond to such developments, and whether protest remains inconceivable. This qualitative study focuses on the case of the Netherlands and on the question: how do Dutch military personnel cope with work-related discontent?

It is well-known that military personnel face formal restrictions which may include limitations to free speech, demonstrations, unionization and striking. The extent of these restrictions varies from one country-specific legal framework to the next (Leigh & Born, 2008). Besides formal restrictions, military personnel also work in an organization marked by specific cultural traits such as loyalty, strict hierarchy and discipline, authoritarianism and cohesion,¹ which in the context of a military organization commonly work to inhibit protest and act as informal restrictions.

These restrictions used to be of little importance during periods when there were few reasons to be dissatisfied. In recent years, however, structural changes in the military have caused discontent among military personnel (Heineken, 2009). Scholarly attention to how service members cope with discontent has been limited. The scarce research on discontent within the armed forces typically focuses on unionization within the military (e.g., Caforio, 2006) and turnover issues (e.g., Weiss *et al.*, 2003). As a result, while changes in military organization and the consequences they entail for military effectiveness are thoroughly investigated,² we neither know how military personnel experience these changes, nor how they cope with them – especially in terms of applying protest. This study aims to take a first step towards filling that gap.

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¹ Janowitz, 1960 ; Lang, 1965 ; Boer, 2002 ; Soeters, 2002 ; Kaurin, 2014.

² See for instance: Larrabee, Johnson, Gordon, Wilson & Baxter, 2012.

Coping with Discontent

Social movement scholars note that discontent often fails to result in protest. Wright and colleagues (1990) made the point that aggrieved citizens face basic choices: do nothing, or engage in action; if the latter is chosen, opt for individual or collective action; when the action envisaged is collective, keep it non-contentious (e.g., petitioning or taking part in legal demonstrations), or go for contentious means (e.g., civil disobedience or illegal protest).

Within organizations, discontent has commonly been approached based on Hirschman's classic framework on 'exit, voice and loyalty'. Hirschman (1970) considered two possible reactions of consumers or citizens once they are dissatisfied. They can resort to *voice*, defined as

any attempt at all to change, rather than escape from, an objectionable state of affairs, whether through individual or collective petition to the management directly in charge; through appeal to a higher authority with the intention of forcing a change in management; or through various types of actions and protests" (Hirschman, 1970, p.30).

Voice contrasts with *exit* where "*some customers stop buying the firm's products or some members leave the organization*" (*ibid.*, p.4). The choice between exit and voice is influenced by *loyalty* which can be defined as a feeling of attachment and hope that there is a chance for improvement. Loyalty makes exit less likely but does not remove it because, as Hirschman (p.79) wrote, "*the barrier to exit constituted by loyalty is of finite height*".

Loyalty is not the only factor influencing whether and in which manner discontent translates into action.³ If we consider collective protest, discontent itself matters; but, as the early 1970s resource mobilization theorists point out, discontent alone is a weak predictor of protest, as discontent is ubiquitous, while protest is not.⁴ So, for instance, while the chances of losing a job matter, so do age, education and especially chances of alternative employment.⁵ Feelings of efficacy are important⁶ as those who feel their action is efficacious resort to protest despite repression and the lack of opportunities.⁷ Identification might play a role as well.⁸ However, the willingness to protest may suffer when two identities clash as in the cross-pressure of union member and loyal employee identities⁹ considered in the following.

Furthermore, restrictions on and opportunities for protest play a role. The existence of repression increases the costs of participation and makes collective action unattractive

³ Kolarska & Aldrich, 1980.

⁴ For instance, McCarthy & Zald, 1976

⁵ Farrel & Rusbult, 1982; Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1995; Ng & Feldman, 2009, pp.1065-66.

⁶ Van Zomeren *et al.*, 2004.

⁷ Van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013.

⁸ Klandermans, 2014.

⁹ Oegema & Klandermans, 1994.

(Tilly, 1978). Numerous informal restrictions might exist as well, for instance career repercussions¹⁰ or specific norms of behaviour.¹¹ On the other hand, embeddedness in formal organizations or in informal networks fosters action.¹² However, as these factors vary as a function of contexts, the choice of whether and how to protest will be influenced by the situation in which mobilization processes take place.¹³

Understanding Protest in the Military Context

The context of the military organization is influential – beyond what is common for most other organizations. Described as a *total* (van Schilt, 2011) or *greedy* institution (Soeters, 2002), the military impacts the lives of its members tremendously (Lang, 1965). Moreover, because of its roles and organization, it is seen as unique or different from the rest of the society (Boëne, 1990). This uniqueness also has consequences for how personnel can react to discontent. To map these consequences, a rough distinction is in order: between *formal restrictions*, based on the legal framework governing the behaviour of military personnel, and *informal restrictions*, based on the military's organizational culture.

Formal Restrictions

As in all other Western democracies, the legal position of Dutch military personnel differs from the position of other employees, not least regarding what personnel can do during a labour conflict. Importantly, striking is not allowed (Coolen & Walgemoed, 2011, pp.47-49). Freedom of speech is secured – as long as it does not endanger the functioning of the organization or breaches confidential information. In practice, harsh critique on governmental policy is prohibited (*ibid.*, pp.71-72). While Dutch military personnel enjoy freedom of association, this excludes membership in organizations which might harm the military or hamper mission performance. Joining legally recognized political parties and trade unions is not prohibited, but if these organizations engage in illegal behaviour military personnel may not participate (*ibid.*, pp.75-76). Gathering for a demonstration is allowed but not during service hours as the rules regarding striking apply. Demonstrating in uniform is only allowed at events concerning work-related discontent (*ibid.*, pp.77-78).

Informal Restrictions

Max Weber (1978 [1922]) saw the military as an ideal type of bureaucracy – a system of governance typically characterized by a *hierarchical structure* and *adherence to rules* (see also: Lang, 1965). According to Soeters (2002, pp.35, 37), this might lead to *authoritarianism* as a norm – made visible by 'power distance' between different levels of the hierarchy and a tendency to enforce the rules strictly. Although Janowitz (1960) observed that in the post-WWII era the authoritarian commanding style shifted towards

¹⁰ Van Winkle, Rock, Coffey & Hurley, 2014.

¹¹ Marwell & Oliver, 1993.

¹² McAdam, McCarthy & Zald, 1996.

¹³ Van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013.

softer styles, military organization remains authoritarian when compared to civilian organizations. Another trait highlighted by Weber (*ibid.*, pp.1152-1153) was *strict discipline*, a basis on which the formation of the modern military rested, which according to Lang (1965) chiefly concerns respect for orders, acceptance of authority and punishment for deviant behaviour. Soeters (2002, p.39) mentions that in the Netherlands, informal group norms seem more important than the ceremonial aspects of discipline, such as uniforms or military salute. As protest in most cases turns against authorities, traits such as *hierarchy, authoritarianism or discipline* tend to suppress it.

Cohesion or *esprit de corps* is a key military value which plays an ambiguous role if we consider protest. The “we-feeling” is facilitated by military leadership and serves important military goals, such as enhancing morale or overcoming losses (Boer, 2001) ; but it might also play a role in forging protest – as identification with the group is a necessary ingredient for collective action.¹⁴ At the same time, strong identification may prevent protest in situations where group interests are hurt.¹⁵

While Hirschman (1970) saw *loyalty* as crucial in all types of situations, many argue that in the military environment it enjoys an even more central role (Kaurin, 2014). Wheeler (1973) described loyalty within the military as a two-sided relationship and stressed the importance of *inspiring* loyalty, because loyalty cannot be imposed. Traditionally, armed forces used to evoke loyalty by positioning itself as a good employer. This is the very basis of the ‘psychological contract’ (Bartle, 2006, p.23) which, while present in all organizations, assumes a unique form within the military. While military personnel lack certain rights, in return they are cared for beyond what is found in most civilian organizations (Heinecken, 2006). In that way, loyalty poses a barrier to protest in cases of insignificant incidents or pressures – as in the greater picture the employer deserves the loyalty of its personnel.

Empirical Evidence on Discontent in the (Dutch) Armed Forces

As early as the 1970s, Moskos (1977) identified a shift from an institutional towards an occupational model of military profession in which a traditional, divergent military organization started resembling a civilian-like organization in a number of aspects. In the post-Cold War period, this became increasingly visible and many of Moskos’ (1977) predictions materialized. Manigart (2006, pp.331-343) highlights five trends common to almost all militaries in advanced democracies : downsizing, professionalization, increased reliance on reservists, civilians and outsourcing, integration between different branches of the armed forces and also, in Europe more specifically, ‘multinationalization’ of military structures. The Netherlands is a good example of such changes – its armed forces have faced continuous reorganizations and downscaling since the end of the Cold War (Moelker, 2006). This culminated in large scale austerity packages in 2011 and 2012, resulting in the removal of up to one sixth of all positions within the organization.

¹⁴ Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2013.

¹⁵ Oegema & Klandermans, 1994.

For military personnel these developments mean that employment is getting increasingly contract-based, segmented and civilianized (Heinecken, 2006, p.1). For those who manage to keep their jobs until retirement, career and advancement prospects have become increasingly limited. At the same time, Heinecken argues that the increased frequency of foreign operations has led to “*problems of overstretch, undermanning and work-life balance, exacerbating problems of recruitment and retention*” (*ibid.*).

Heinecken (2006, p.2) adds that the clash between a deteriorating labour position and increasing operational demands causes more interest in representation and unionism. Moskos (1977) argued that with the shift to a more civilian-like occupation, military personnel will look for the same kind of representation and protection as civilians. Further, Heinecken (2006) argues that the rise of individualism may have similar consequences.

Recent empirical research into these claims is scarce. In her international comparative study of middle-ranking officers, Heinecken (2009, pp.493-494) found that the introduction of private sector practices changed the way officers perceive their profession and their relationship with their employer. Traditional values like selfless service, loyalty and commitment became undermined. Officers stopped trusting military leadership to defend their interests and started considering other possibilities such as unionization in situations where this was previously not the case.

Unlike Great Britain and the United States, where attempts to unionize met fierce opposition, the Netherlands allows trade unions for military personnel (Moelker, 2006, p.181). The role of these unions is twofold. First, they negotiate with the employer over a range of employment issues, and engage in public pressure either through media or even protest actions. Second, they provide legal assistance to individual members who file complaints or face punishment (Moelker, 2006, p.177). The right to join military trade unions is exercised fervently : no other sector in the Netherlands labour force has maintained unionization levels of around 80%. Still, Hummel (2014) notes that because striking is forbidden, trade unions lack effective pressure tools.

Dutch military personnel can also influence the policies of their employer through co-determination bodies (MCs)¹⁶ to which members are democratically elected. Issues of consultation include work safety and organization, service hours, living and work climate, reorganization, social and financial policies, and other issues falling within the responsibility of commanding officers, though with a clear exemption for operational issues (Moelker, 2006 ; *Staatsblad*, 2008).

Finally, some instances of protest by Dutch military personnel (Moelker, 2006) have been recorded. In the 1970s, low-flying planes above The Hague in protest against austerity caused enormous scandal (Kromhout, 2011). More recently, the media reported spontaneous actions against austerity measures, but also large street demonstrations organized by trade unions (e.g., *Reformatorisch Dagblad*, 2011). Still, academic attention

¹⁶ MCs: Medezeggenschapcommissies.

to these events has been minimal ; consequently, knowledge on who participated in these types of events, or on their motivations, is lacking.

The behaviour Hirschman named *exit*, e.g. leaving the organization, is well researched – obviously because it has direct influence on military capabilities. International research shows that the overall satisfaction with military life is strongly linked to the likelihood of staying in the armed forces. Adequate facilities, pay, amount of leisure time, quality of leadership, job satisfaction and deployments all play a role (Weiss *et al.*, 2003). In the Netherlands, job and career insecurity was found to increase turnover intentions.¹⁷

From Discontent to Protest? Uncharted Territory

In sum, we could say that possible causes of discontent among military personnel have been well identified. Existing literature points to both long-term organizational changes and austerity measures. Few studies focused on how service members experience these changes – and which aspects pressure personnel the most. Even less is known about how military personnel cope with discontent. There are fears that loyalty is eroding but definitive evidence is lacking. Moreover, while ‘exit’ has been extensively researched, the literature barely touches upon behaviour we can describe as ‘voice’. In what follows, we report a study that attempts to get a better understanding of work-related discontent and labour conflict in the Netherlands military. Dutch military personnel have access to several avenues to express their voice. But do they indeed resort to these avenues and what influences their decision to do so? Furthermore, how is this decision affected by perceptions of the formal and informal restrictions they face?

Method

This study encompassed 24 individual in-depth interviews – six per service : Army, Air Force, Navy and Constabulary. Interviewees included 21 men and 3 women, 8 officers, 14 non-commissioned officers and 2 privates; the average age was 44 years. The interviews were held at 13 locations in the Netherlands, mostly at neutral places such as cafés in order to assure privacy (though a few took place at participants’ working places when they themselves found that more convenient). The length of interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 2 hours, with the average slightly above one hour.

The recruitment of interviewees occurred through three major military trade unions (ACOM, AFMP and MARVER).¹⁸ Their ‘people on the ground’ spread the word about the research and a small article appeared in union magazines and websites. While recruitment was primarily directed at union members, information by trade unions is commonly shared and reaches the whole unit. Hence, several non-members participated as well. While we made sure to include a wide variety of individuals – male and female, younger and older staff in different ranks and positions –, interviewees were not perfectly representative of

¹⁷ Van Eetveld, van de Ven, van den Tooren & Versteeg, 2013.

¹⁸ Trade unions – ACOM (Christian signature), AFMP (Secular signature) and MARVER (Constabulary union aligned with AFMP).

Dutch military personnel : they were older, higher in rank, and among them union- and co-determination officials were overrepresented. For this type of study, however, exact representativeness was not crucial. The primary goal was to capture as much variation as possible and discuss different opinions which exist within the armed forces – *not* to make conclusions about the quantitative incidence of certain opinions. Hence, while limited, the sample of 24 interviewees offered us enough space to achieve variety in terms of socio-demographics and experiences, also confirmed by saturation in terms of new information which occurred after conducting roughly two thirds of the interviews.

Given the qualitative nature of this study, we were looking for the views and the opinions of the interviewees about the specific context of the Dutch military. To achieve this goal, we opted for in-depth interviews as combining structure with flexibility.¹⁹ This ensures that relevant issues have been tackled while participants have the full freedom to present their views and introduce issues which they deem important. While a list of topics was prepared in advance (see Appendix, p.17 below), the conversation mostly took a natural course with researchers broadly moderating the interviews and listening to the participants' own stories. We asked the interviewees about positive and negative experiences regarding their work, reactions to any discontent they may experience, the role of trade unions, the possibility of leaving the armed forces altogether, and finally loyalty and pride related to their work.

Privacy, an important issue in a military setting, was guaranteed by separating personal data from other items. All but one respondent allowed us to record the interviews. The audio recordings were transcribed²⁰ and then analyzed using the Atlas Ti Software.

Results

Discontent within the Dutch Armed Forces – Weighing the Pros and Cons

Working in the Dutch armed forces means living with the two sides of the same coin – enjoying an inspiring, dynamic job with quite a few benefits that other citizens do not have, and at the same time feeling insecure due to the sweeping changes within the organization.

Interestingly, participants highlight the value of immaterial incentives such as the adventurous side of the job: *“It is a safe way to discover the world. You have your bed, your food, people who can help you. But you have still wandered all over the world!”*. Also, the social aspects such as collegiality and group spirit matter a lot: *“Within the military you really do it together”*. Camaraderie is often described as a basis for success *“We do it together, we get the planes off the ground quicker than Americans... Trusting each other, helping each other... If I call for help, then I know somebody will come”*. When

¹⁹ Legard, Keegan & Ward, 2003.

²⁰ Interview transcripts include 23 fully transcribed interviews and one document with written notes directly recorded during the interview where no audio recording was made due to privacy concerns.

these immaterial incentives disappear, feelings of disappointment and worry for the future of the organization arise.

Material incentives matter as well. This includes benefits which can still be enjoyed in the old-fashioned way, e.g. easily accessible health care, or breathing space provided to deal with personal problems : *“In a commercial company, they won’t tell you to work half a day for some time, arrange your stuff back home and then come back in three weeks or so...”*. While some interviewees note that civilian jobs pay more, they also understand that life “beyond the gate” is not perfect: *“If I look around, all my nephews have fixed-term and flexible contracts, that is a bit less secure than in the military”*.

Often, interviewees stated that they came to talk about issues worrying them, but also stressed that they did not want to be overtly critical. This positive stance coexists with a realization that their organization is facing a series of threats. These threats can be grouped in three major trends: (1) the push for efficiency, professionalization and private sector management; (2) a weakening of the armed forces due to political choices; and (3) a shift from personalized and warm social relations towards impersonality, harshness and individualism.

From Traditional Military to Business-Type Organization

Changes in the organization seem to cut both ways. Service members themselves do see the necessity for a more *efficient* organization which does not waste taxpayers’ money as in the past: *“Before, we never used to speak about financing, things just got bought”*. Some think that the changes should even go faster in order to keep up with commercial technological and organizational state-of-the art practice. Furthermore, there are several positive effects of *professionalization*, e.g. increased attention to safety, service hours regulations, and rules in general.

However, somewhere along the road the push for efficiency seems to have gotten out of control – *“At one point you reach a limit, you cannot go on and on”*. For example, some rules seem to produce just the opposite of their original purpose – aircraft mechanics who are not allowed to replace a bulb, or outsourcing to save money in one place that entails higher costs elsewhere. We have heard complaints about increased workloads occasioned by sick leaves when no one is available to step in. Also, the increasing number of both minor peacekeeping missions and major operations as in Afghanistan, which caused increased pressure on both personnel and materiel.

Downsizing the Armed Forces

The second change concerns austerity and continuous downsizing. While the 2011 reorganization is described as a big shock, surprisingly, interviewees do not seem impressed by it. For those longer in service, it is just another reorganization in a row – *“I cannot even count how many reorganizations I have been through”*; or *“If we are finished with this round, the next one will follow soon”*. And indeed – before we even

completed analysis of the interviews conducted in the late spring of 2013, new austerity measures were announced.

The present study shows that two of the main negative aspects of continuous downsizing are perfectly identified. First, it is irresponsible and dangerous for the country's security. Second, there are social consequences such as job insecurity, postponed retirement age limits, salaries falling far behind commercial standards, and most notably a shift from lifetime employment towards fixed-term contracts.

From Personal to Impersonal

Individualization is one of the complaints we have very often encountered: “*Before, we used to drink a beer or watch a movie in the communal room, today this space is empty*”. Interviewees understand that individualization might be a consequence of broader social trends. However, they see it as particularly dangerous because, as highlighted earlier, collegiality and group feeling are considered very important. It is not surprising that are perplexed by what they describe as a “*rat race*” – unhealthy competition between colleagues, or the increased lack of job dedication, individualized forms of behaviour which cannot be reconciled with the nature and goals of a military organization.

The related complaint about the shift towards *market sector management* has several facets. First, service members are left to sort out their problems on their own and are shocked to find out that the responsibility for their future is now entirely in their own hands. Second, internal communication has become bureaucratic, entailing a constant need for phone calls to central offices about problems concerning payments, contracts and overheads. Third, the organization is seen as being harsh, forcing people to leave and making use of “naïve” young adults while not offering them a perspective. This in particular is seen as asocial, given the sacrifices some of these young adults make. Finally, the rotation system where most personnel apply for a new function every three years causes much frustration. While a few interviewees appreciated the dynamism brought by rotation, most described it as bad for the organization and personnel alike due to the loss of specific knowledge, disarray in certain services and the ensuing never-ending stress.

Restrictions

In the previous section on discontent, we saw that while changes in the organization bring a few positive developments, their influence is seen as overwhelmingly detrimental. When coping with the consequences, military personnel face a number of formal and informal restrictions.

Formal Restrictions

Prohibition of strikes is the most important formal restriction mentioned. The lack of this powerful ‘pressure tool’ is seen as bad for their bargaining position: “*We are not allowed to strike, so politicians can rob us, and snatch from the Defence (budget) as they please.*” Those working for the Constabulary talked about the imagined possibility of striking, which would have a powerful impact on the society: “*We could shut down the*

airport in a moment. But then you would hurt the passengers. You could apply this heavy measure but that would be counterproductive.” Some express a wish to be allowed to strike : *“I actually think we should have the right to strike and that the judge should always be able to assess whether a strike would harm the public interest.”*

Interestingly, formal restrictions were exaggerated few times, when interviewees erroneously mentioned that protests or demonstrations are not allowed. Possibly, the informal norms are so strong that they feel formal, but one might also wonder about the quality of information and knowledge on exact rules governing labour relations.

Informal Restrictions

Informal restrictions play a far more important role than formal restrictions. The analysis of interviews brought up four major sources of informal restrictions: (1) hierarchy, (2) possible repercussions, (3) feelings of helplessness, and (4) loyalty.

Hierarchy. “Annoying hierarchical situations” were mentioned as the very *cause* of work-related problems. They may involve conflicts with superior officers which are difficult to resolve: *“If that guy has been around so long and everyone knows it, even the general, who can expect me, as a young lieutenant, to make a formal complaint?”*. More directly related to protest, others mention that superior officers use their influential position to prevent opposition, often by simply advising not to do certain things. Hence, the independence of trade unions is seen as their key strength. Namely, the fact that most union officials are not serving military personnel anymore frees them of the same hierarchical structure which inhibits serving personnel from taking action.

Repercussions. During the interviews, references to potential repercussions in the form of reprisals from superiors were often heard. Two different opinions crystallized in interviewees’ discourse.

The first came from trade unions or MC officials. While being aware of potential repercussions, they see their activities within MC or trade unions as *beneficial* for their position by providing them with a network, specific knowledge and important experience. Additionally, these activities foster good working relations with their commanding officers and bring respect.

The second opinion refers to the fear of potential negative consequences, due to activism or showing opposition, when it comes to the frequent personnel rotations (thus job applications), especially in the context of an ongoing reorganization – so that antagonizing superiors may backfire: *“Nowadays, with 12 guys applying for a function, they can say you don’t match the profile. That’s not the reason. The reason is that you have a big mouth. But you can never prove that...”*. Apparently, these are not only imagined fears. Lower commanding officers unofficially warn of a ‘cross against your name’ which will be memorized by successive superiors. Others cite examples of commanders who refused to implement austerity plans which they perceived as inadequate, and got replaced by those willing to oblige.

Helplessness. The lack of any real influence is commonly mentioned: “*You have two circles, one big and one small. Inside that small circle you have influence, and inside the big circle you have only involvement... I am inside that big circle, I don't have any influence*”. Interviewees agree that the opportunities for change are small: “*You can keep kicking a rock, but if they don't want to move, you won't see any improvement*”.

Despite a general feeling of lacking influence, specific tools for action such as union activities and MCs are also considered. For these particular mechanisms, views are more nuanced, but the general conclusion seems to be that: “*It is a tanker...you cannot just make it move left or right, not with the MC and not with the AFMP*”. However, some do believe that up to a certain degree, success is possible: “*I always say, if we [the union] were not there, then they [at the ministry] would just suit themselves. Nowadays, the situation only gets worse! We cannot avert the austerity measures but we were able to make some changes in the way they are conducted...*”.

Loyalty. In general, loyalty is seen as immensely important. In fact, interviewees often spontaneously mentioned it. There seems to be a consensus that loyalty is two-sided: “*They take good care of you, and you are there if you are needed. I always say before the missions, I have eaten well for 30 years, and if I have to go on a mission, I will go, regardless of the danger.*”

What do military personnel mean when they refer to loyalty? In essence, “[...] *doing things which are asked of you, things which are not part of your own job or a normal day's work, you just do them*”. Apparently, this has to do with the so called “*can-do mentality*” which means that tasks are completed regardless of the difficulties: “*Never heard anyone say, no way! Or, we are not doing this... We'll solve it, or we do it this way or we do it that way*”. Still, loyalty is not uncontested. While the organization tends to count on loyalty, it sometimes fails to grant recognition for it: “*They know we will never strike, we are not allowed to. But that also gives responsibility to the other side, and they don't necessarily fulfil it.*” This is illustrated by the practice of breaking certain rules or regulations (such as working time regulations) in order to get tasks done. Superiors silently accept the practice but do not support their inferiors if things go wrong: “*You should have said no. How can I say no when the task needs to be accomplished?*”.

Others note that over time, changes within the organization affect loyalty as well. It starts eroding and resembling manners which they describe as typical of civilian organizations – “*There are also guys who say, at 17:00 it's done and I am going home.*” This lessening of the traditional mentality endangers the performance of tasks, since working extra hours or days is common. Older interviewees ascribe this new, uncertain loyalty to the younger generations: “*For them, it is just a job*”.

Coping Strategies

What do personnel do in the face of discontent? Just as expected in theory, the most obvious reaction is to do nothing: “*Within the military, you always have to swallow stuff, you shouldn't be whining, you're a soldier!*”. Some interviewees actually accuse others of

remaining silent when they should speak up, in particular the higher-ups who adhere to the illogical moves of politicians: *“The people who still really put up with everything are the higher officers....otherwise it’s the end of their career”*. It is not clear whether and how far organizational changes modify the habit of remaining passive. Some claim that staying silent is no longer the norm: *“You can do everything, but if you touch somebody’s money, they will speak up”*. Others note that reorganizations temporarily cause people not to complain, in order to protect their jobs. Due to specific rules, older personnel still enjoy the old protective status and cannot be laid off – all of them noticed that they can speak up more easily: *“I am protected, nothing will happen to me, and then it’s easier to fight”*.

Voice

When people decide to speak up, they can do that individually or collectively. Our results suggest that most complaining is done individually. The first step is often to simply process an informal claim up the chain of command: personnel talk to their commander about an issue and then it gets resolved or goes to the next higher level. The next, common step is filing an official complaint – for instance regarding a promotion, application for a new position, salary or pay supplements. In order to get assistance for these individual complaints, they often turn to a collective tool: trade unions.

Trade Unions

While unions conduct both individual and collective representation of interests, it is actually the individual kind which gets the most attention. According to a trade-union activist we talked to: *“It is in 90% of cases individual interest representation. People who feel mistreated by the organization. Maybe even 95%... Our members are not really concerned about collective representation. It is only, hey boys, I am treated unfairly, I was refused a position, I did not receive a supplement...”*.

Concerning involvement in the union, a large majority sees membership as a norm, a natural step when joining the military: *“It is as if it was a part of your employment contract”*. Still, some activists worry that the norm of being a member of the union is fading. Given the individual focus, the biggest threat is the competition from commercial legal assistance – as confirmed by a young non-member who cited commercial insurance as a reason not to become a member. Others mention lack of understanding of the unions’ collective role: *“Lots of people have no idea what exactly the union is doing”*. For many, membership in the union is the only form of voice they resort to. This is logical, as they can avoid repercussions while still supporting union representatives in their struggle.

There is much scepticism about what unions can achieve: *“A few years ago retirement age went from 55 to 60. The military does that often, unilaterally forcing things. And the unions...at the end they cannot [do much], except stopping the consultations. That won’t keep the minister awake in the night”*. In 2013, however, the unions found themselves in a more powerful position than usual. While their cooperation was necessary

to conduct reorganization, a conflict emerged over the so called WUL issue.²¹ Unions stopped consultation with the Ministry, effectively delaying the reorganization. For some personnel, this meant a prolonged period of insecurity. Still, the unions could count on wide support – *“I am glad that they are not giving in”*. During the interviews, we heard that whole units filled in the official complaint letter provided by unions, members and non-members alike.

However, mobilization for more demanding forms of participation such as a demonstration is more difficult. One of the union organizers said: *“I asked the union to send ten buses, and I managed to fill one and a half. The issue was higher retirement age. My colleagues had to take a day off. How is it possible that they didn’t do it ? Bunch of idiots”*. According to others, taking a day off makes a big difference – if the unions reach an agreement with the officers to protest during work time, mobilization is easier.

Co-Determination Bodies (MCs)

MC members among our interviewees highlighted the collective nature of the MCs – *“Look, the MC is not for individual cases, the MC is for the collective, so if there are four, five or more guys coming with something, you take that. If there are two of them, then that is not yours to deal with”*. MC members have a positive, but balanced image of their influence. They are able to fix certain things and exert some influence, but only up to a point, and not always successfully: *“Sometimes you do and sometimes you don’t [achieve something]. It also depends on your relationship with the commander”*. MC members complain about the difficulties they face when it comes to recruiting new members, especially skilful ones:

Everyone knows that it is important, and everyone knows where to find the MC if it’s necessary. But if you ask them to come because we need members, then they don’t dare or they won’t apply or they are afraid that it will damage their career.

Interviewees who are not active within the MC seem to be more sceptical and barely informed:

Yeah, we do have one here. I know an old colleague who is an MC member. I don’t really know much about it ; I see it as something officially required by the management...they are obliged to establish one. Do they really have such a crucial function ? I have no idea...

Public Demonstrations

During the interviews, the 2011 demonstration of around 6,000 (both civilian and military) Defence employees was mentioned several times. While the turnout was seen as satisfactory, opinions about the effectiveness of such a demonstration were divided. Some

²¹ WUL – Wet uniformering loonbegrip –was supposed to be a budget-neutral tax simplification measure which unintentionally produced income decreases for military personnel of up to 5%. This issue caused huge friction between the Ministry of Defence and military trade unions.

see such large manifestations as proof of the support for the trade unions, while others think that it does not upset the Minister as it has no real consequences.

Occasionally, spontaneous collective action was mentioned. When budget cuts threatened their unit, lower-ranking officers spread flyers to inform the public about the importance of the unit: *“We wanted to promote our unit as military personnel, but we were not allowed to. So we went there without uniforms. Luckily we had a commander who gave us a day to do it...”*. In this particular event, while protesting in uniform was not allowed, officers had a facilitating role in organizing protest – mobilizing their personnel and arranging a day off. In this case, the hierarchy facilitated rather than prevented protest.

Exit

Lifetime employment in the armed forces is becoming less common (Soeters, 2002), which generates resentment. Our analysis confirms that. We talked to a female marine who left the organization shortly before we interviewed her, due to the ‘up or out’ system which makes exit mandatory for those who fail to rise in rank. For her, even though she quickly found another job, this was tough : she felt hurt when she had to leave after years of faithful service and several missions abroad. It was a harsh example of how new rules clash with loyalty and attachment to the organization.

Apart from such examples of involuntary separation, however, interviewees commonly consider exit as a free choice. In fact, a majority of personnel we talked to considered leaving at one point, often after they were disappointed or experienced a conflict: *“The military was everything for me. The thought of not serving in the military was horrible and unthinkable ; it was not an option... At some point, things happen, you have a conflict...That was the point when I had to think, if this is not it, if we are not going to have a happy marriage we have to separate”*. Many refer to colleagues who are leaving or consider leaving, often motivated by forthcoming budget cuts: *“There were people who always thought, I join the Army, maybe I can stay until my 60th birthday, but due to the budget cuts you see that people are reconsidering and using the possibilities to leave. Look, if you wait too long, you won’t be getting a civilian job either”*. Several interviewees mention joining the police force as the next best option, citing similar culture.

When considering exit, the opportunities in the “civilian world” are commonly assessed. Some see civilians as better paid and having less demanding jobs while others value the remaining benefits and the adventure military personnel enjoy. Sometimes, the adventure became problematic once their personal situation changes – *“If you have a family with small children, you are not keen on going on a mission for half a year or moving to another place every three or four years”*. Numerous reasons not to leave the organization are cited as well – being close to (low) retirement age, lack of skills necessary for civilian jobs, or a strong affective engagement with the armed forces. Even when exit is a choice, it often takes a big clash or a prolonged period of problems before the attachment and loyalty to the organization eventually pale into insignificance. Then, personnel start making calculations and weighing the pros and cons of leaving the organization.

Discussion and Conclusions

This qualitative study explored how Dutch military personnel cope with work-related discontent. We focused on the origins and nature of discontent, the restrictions personnel have to overcome when coping with it and their actual behaviour in terms of voice and exit.

Results show that while military personnel value their jobs, they are deeply concerned about the organizational changes which they see as irreconcilable with the traditional way in which military organization operates. Analysis identified three main aspects of these changes: the shift from a traditional military organization to one aping the private sector, continuous downsizing, and the change from a personal to an impersonal organization.

Military personnel highlighted several restrictions which prevent them from protesting against the detrimental developments they may experience. Among formal restrictions, service members see the ban on striking as crucial. It denies them an important pressure tool and diminishes the leverage exerted by trade-unions' activities. This in turn causes personnel to feel helpless despite collective representation of interests by the unions. The strict hierarchy and threat of career repercussions matter as well. Finally, loyalty is seen as a key military value which encourages personnel to continue as faithful serving members in spite of difficulties, and thus to abstain from protest. While often referred to, loyalty seems contested. Interviewees feel that loyalty to the organization is not being returned anymore. Second, personnel increasingly identify civilian-like behaviour among their colleagues, often related to the rising individualization.

In spite of restrictions, military personnel can resort to different types of voice, chiefly through labour unions. Interestingly, when discussing unions, most personnel refer to individual issues. Collective representation seems delegated to officials. We also found that processes of individualization might be clashing with the unions' collective nature and threatening their role by removing the norm of membership and introducing economic calculations and free-riding. Finally, while personnel see many reasons to stay in the armed forces, most considered leaving or even looked for another job at one point in their careers, often after experiencing a major conflict or a disappointment.

Our findings have multiple ramifications for the way we understand coping with discontent in the armed forces. Changes like the shift towards a "civilian" (business sector) organizational model and downsizing have been thoroughly discussed in the literature.²² Personnel we interviewed provided numerous examples of how the focus on efficiency and downsizing caused hardship and insecurity. Interestingly, this study also reveals that there is an important immaterial side to organizational changes, characterized by individualization, harshness, and a bureaucratic approach to personnel's issues and problems. Personnel fear that these trends may endanger the unique values crucial for fulfilling the tasks of the

²² See Moskos, 1977 ; Moskos, Williams & Segal, 2000.

military organization. Given the nature of these immaterial pressures, we expect that they are difficult to pinpoint and therefore also to cope with, certainly in terms of protest.

This study confirmed that when deciding how to cope with discontent, military personnel face a number of specific restrictions. In fact, the results show that the shift to a more civilian-like organization has not been followed by a similar shift regarding restrictions on protest. Bearing in mind that Dutch military personnel only face relatively mild formal restrictions – for instance, personnel can unionize freely (Moelker, 2006) –, we found that informal restrictions play an important role in inhibiting protest. In particular, interviewees fear career repercussions and have little faith in the influence exerted by the trade unions and co-determination bodies. Conversely, in line with the argument advanced by Hummel (2014), such scepticism does originate in the formal prohibition of striking. Finally, as often emphasized in the literature (Kaurin, 2014), loyalty is a crucial notion within armed forces. Our study shows that personnel describe loyalty in conventional terms – as a reciprocal tie between employee and employer (Wheeler, 1973 ; Heinecken, 2009). More specific to the Netherlands, loyalty is related to the “can-do mentality”, a perception that a solution can always be found, regardless of the difficulties (Soeters, 2002). Unlike other restrictions, loyalty, which needs to be inspired (Wheeler, 1973) is proving more difficult to maintain in a changing environment. In agreement with Heinecken (2006), some personnel think that fading loyalty might lead to more protest. However, in the Dutch context, this claim needs further empirical testing as the same processes of diminishing loyalty and rising individualization might undermine support for unions and their activities as well.

Indeed, with formal and informal restrictions firmly in place, eroding loyalty may not automatically produce more collective protest. Even though Hirschman (1970) barely considered the option of doing nothing (or withdrawing good will) while remaining within the organization, Kolarska and Aldrich (1980, p.44) argue that “silence” is the most common reaction of dissatisfied members – it requires little effort and is related to loyalty, but also apathy and inability to voice dissatisfaction. Our results show that passivity is widespread and that military personnel see silence as a norm. At the same time, they disagree as to whether this particular norm will survive in light of the recent changes. When personnel do resort to voice, it is usually individual. Collective voice, such as demonstrations or petitions, remains rare and difficult to organize, even though legally possible in the Netherlands.

Exit, an individual form of behaviour, seems to be commonplace. Still, our results show that it is often an emotionally difficult step, as personnel see exit as parting with a way of life. Subsequently, we found that some aim to mitigate this loss by joining the police force which is considered to have a similar organizational culture.²³

This study aimed to take a first step towards a comprehensive understanding of how military personnel cope with work-related discontent. Its focus was on personnel and

²³ On values among uniformed professions, see : Soeters, 2002.

their opinions, and less on organizational developments, an approach which has rarely been employed up until now. For those concerned with the welfare of military personnel, such a study may bring more insight into the consequences of pushing towards a more civilian-like organization and the way personnel cope with it.

Many questions remain, which could not be resolved in a study of this scope and design – a large-scale survey and representative sample would be better suited for the provision of conclusive answers to a number of issues. For instance, except where almost all interviewees expressed the same sentiment, we refrained from statements about the frequencies of certain opinions. Furthermore, we could not say much about how military personnel react to specific types of discontent, nor how their sociodemographic backgrounds and other specific circumstances influence their behaviour. Finally, as we deal with an organization in flux, the task remains to assess the impact of change on service members and their behaviour. Are we, as some of our interviewees fear, witnessing the advent of a *nine-to-five* soldier ?

Appendix: List of Interview Topics

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| 1. | To begin, can you tell us a bit about yourself ? |
| 2. | When did you start serving in the Armed Forces ? |
| 3. | Why did you decide to serve in the Armed Forces ? |
| 4. | Could you tell us a bit about your average day at work ? |
| 5. | What do you think about serving in the Armed Forces ? |
| 6. | If you consider your current job, which things are you most satisfied with ? |
| 7. | Are there also things which are less good ? |
| 8. | Who or what caused that ? |
| 9. | Which possibilities are there to address the issues you are unsatisfied with ? |
| 10. | How were things within the Armed Forces in the past? |
| 11. | How do you think things will develop in the future ? |
| 12. | At the moment there is a major re-organization within the Armed Forces. Did you notice it and what do you think about it ? |
| 13. | Have you ever considered leaving the Armed Forces ? |
| 14. | What was the reason for that ? |
| 15. | Do you know any colleagues who left the Armed Forces? Do you know why they left ? |
| 16. | Have you ever contacted your trade union ? Why or why not ? |
| 17. | What do you think about military trade unions ? |
| 18. | Would you recommend other people to apply for a job at the Armed Forces ? |
| 19. | The term “loyalty” is often used within the Armed Forces. What does it mean for you ? |
| 20. | Imagine you are at a birthday party and other guests say negative things about the Armed Forces. What would you do ? |
| 21. | Are you proud to serve in the Armed Forces ? If so, what in particular makes you proud ? Are there moments when you are ashamed of the Armed Forces and why ? |
| 22. | It is sometimes said that military personnel need to make more sacrifices than those working for a civilian company. Do you agree and could you explain why or why not ? |
| 23. | Is there anything else you think we should know or you want to tell us ? |

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