Loyal to the End (?) Examining the Meaning of Loyalty among High-Ranking Military Officers

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Introduction

Organizations need co-workers who are committed to common goals and that are loyal to the core values of the organization.[1] The conscious fostering of organizational core values is seen as an important tool in creating loyal co-workers and hence an effective organization.[2] Professions with a strong vocational calling such as medicine (Kallin, 2010), the police (Ewin, 1990; Foust, 2018) or the military[3] have particular demands on loyalty to certain core values, and individuals are expected to adopt these as their own. However, organizational core values can be contradictive (Billig, 1988) and sometimes in conflict with the individual´s own core values which – when incompatible – can in turn cause severe moral stress and mental illness.[4] This implies a need for clarification about what is expected from members of an organization concerning the objectives and manifestations of core values. In terms of loyalty, the military profession is possibly one of the most demanding, expecting individuals to risk their own lives and to kill other human beings for the benefit of the organizational goals. However, since misplaced loyalty can cause destructive,[5] and unethical behaviour[6] with enormous consequences – especially in the military (Winslow, 1998) – there is a need to be clear about what kind of loyalty behaviour is constructive and vice versa. Although loyalty is a concept that seems to be defined in many different ways, the number of studies of loyalty and its meaning are quite limited - especially in military research.[7] The overall purpose of this study is to broaden understanding of the meaning of loyalty within the military. Because important core values of an organization are set – or strongly influenced[8] – by its leaders,[9] the aim of this study was to explore how high ranking officers in the Swedish Aarmed Forces (SAF) give meaning to their own personal experiences of loyalty and to describe possible common patterns within the participant group.

Experiences of Loyalty within the Military

The professional ethics within the military often stress the importance of loyalty, whether it is to the vocation of the officer corps (Weber, 1978) or the in-group cohesion of units (Shalit, 2009). Loyalty among military personnel has been described as consisting of different layers each of which has internal priorities in relation to each other, depending on context, reciprocity (Heinecken, 2009) and strong emotional bonds between the members of a

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[1] Wieseke, Alavi & Habel, 2014.
[2] Berghaus & Cartagena, 2013.
[3] Huntington, 1985 ; Moskos & Wood, 1988 ; Kirkhaug, 2009 ; Olsthoorn, 2011 ; Beard, 2014.
[4] Molendijk, Kramer & Verweij, 2018.
[5] Gabriel, 1982 ; Connor, 2010.)
[6] Umphress & Bingham, 2011.
[7] Olsthoorn, 2011 ; Connor, Andrews, Noack-Lundberg & Wadham, 2019.
[8] Larsson, Haerem, Sjöberg, Alvinius & Bakken, 2007.
[9] Fergusson & Milliman, 2008 ; Oh, Cho & Lim, 2018.

unit.[10] The connection between strong emotional bonds and loyalty is also suggested in studies of soldier behaviours during the American Civil War (Costa & Kahn, 2008).

The question of multiple loyalties in the military is highlighted among personnel with dual roles, such as medical personnel[11] or chaplains (Gribble, 2019). Multiple roles like these can cause competing moral and organizational loyalties between the two opposing sides of your tasks, i.e. on the one hand saving lives, and on the other using force if necessary possibly taking lives.[12] Soldiers with a bi-cultural background have been known to experience emotional tensions caused by dual expectations of loyalty to both the local population, due to their ethnical background and to the units they belong to.[13] Another competing loyalty is that between the two greedy institutions, the military profession and the family (Segal, 1986), where the family often is downgraded resulting in feelings of distress and neglect within the family.[14]

Method

Choice of Method

In order to explore the subjective meanings of loyalty and to allow the participants to reflect and make sense of their experiences during the interviews, the study was done using interpretative phenomenological analysis, IPA.[15] The IPA-method is also often used to examine the individual´s dilemmatic issues and worries (Kacprzak, 2017, pp.2, 53-68), which in this study were assumed to be an overarching recurrent theme.

Sample

Nine active-duty generals/ admirals from different services of the SAF were asked to participate in the study and all agreed. The participants are all experienced officers and therefore should be able to reflect on loyalty within the organization from a broad perspective. Furthermore, all participants were in appointments with a considerable impact in the organization and therefore likely to affect the Armed forces' personnel's views regarding expectations of loyal behaviour.

All participants were male and in the age range of 53 to 60 years old. They include five generals from the Army, two from the Air Force and two admirals from the Navy. All of them had experience of serving at the joint forces level of command. In order to anonymize the participants no further details will be given about them. Characteristic expressions, specific commands or events were anonymized in quotations. The anonymous first names, randomly added to each participant, are the top nine most common male first names in Sweden (Statistics Sweden, 2019).

Data Collection

Data was collected through recorded semi-structured interviews. The participants were given the interview schedule's main questions in advance in order to give them the opportunity to reflect about the issue before the interview. Participants signed a letter of consent, explaining the purpose of the study, the handling of possibly sensitive data and measures for anonymity. The study was approved by the Swedish ethical review authority (dnr 2017/924-31/5). All interviews were conducted in the participants' offices at work and were done by the researcher.

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[10] Connor, Andrews, Noack-Lundberg & Wadham, 2019.
[11] Johnsson, Bacho & Ralph, 2006, pp.171, 311-315.
[12] Lundberg, Kjellström, Jonsson & Sandman, 2014.
[13] Bosman, Soeters & Ait Bari, 2008.
[14] Aducci, Baptist, George, Barros & Nelson Goff, 2011, pp.23, 231, 249.
[15] Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009.

The interviews lasted for approximately 60 minutes each. The researcher is an experienced Army officer with a relatively broad contextual understanding of the military environment, which was seen as facilitating the conduct of the interviews.

A first interview schedule was developed following the guidelines given by Smith et al. (2009) and this was tested on two high-ranking military officers. A final version was then formulated after helpful feedback from research colleagues.

Data Analysis

All interviews were digitally recorded and additional notes were made immediately after the interviews to capture the first impressions of the situation. The interviews were then transcribed by the researcher in order to become more familiar with the data. The interviews were fully analyzed one by one, following the steps described by Smith et al. (2009). Step one was done by first reading through each sentence, or sets of sentences, and making initial descriptive notes about what was said. In step two the data was re-read focusing on the language use of the participant. The third step meant re-reading the data – including the initial notes in steps one and two – and interpreting the conceptual meaning of the data. Based on these initial notes, emergent themes were developed. Then a second order analysis based on the results from all participants was completed. This meant re-reading the results from the first order analysis several times in order to identify recurrent themes that could then be clustered into superordinate themes.[16] Themes were considered recurrent within the sample when 4-5 of the participants showed evidence of the theme.

Results

Seven recurrent superordinate themes were developed from 30 emergent themes identified in the interviews. (1) To choose and balance between loyalties, (2) Loyalty as a professional norm and a personal identity, (3) To comply or to oppose, (4) Loyalty means sacrifice, (5) Extended actions – to do more, (6) Leadership and loyalty, and (7) Destructive loyalty. All superordinate themes were developed from emergent themes; however, the results focus on the former.

To Choose and Balance between Loyalties

An almost reflexive answer in all interviews was that loyalty to the mission was paramount among all other possible options. However, a more complex picture developed as participants realized that their answers were not always precise. Nils realized quite fast that he had not really thought about the full meaning of loyalty and the scope of possible objects of loyalty.

Interviewer (I) : So where would you say your loyalties lie ?

Participant (P) : I think that I feel rather… that I feel loyal to most of the things around me. Well or not… I would be considered stupid if I said that... Eh…most of the normal things around me, I mean our society, my family, my work and my working place. And then there are lots of things that I am not the slightest bit loyal to.

The pervading impression from most participants is that loyalty dilemmas are an obvious element of the extreme nature of the military profession. Karl sums up his experiences of such dilemmas and his strategy of letting his own core values guide him in these situations.

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[16] Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009.

Everybody has a lot of loyalties to deal with at the same time, and that's the complex part…you can´t really choose in advance… you must use your inner moral compass to advise you.

Karl's way of dealing with dilemmas illustrates how he views decisions about loyalty as a personal responsibility and not a forced or predetermined choice made by others. However, free will seems to be strongly influenced by normative values within the profession. The influence of professional norms is quite logical ; however, when norms are contradictory, the balance between loyalties becomes problematic. When norms such as duty, compliance and obedience are balanced against the norm of exercising your professional competence, or speaking up about irregularities, the choice seems far from obvious. Johan describes a feeling of resignation about his chances of actually influencing decisions with his professional perspective.

P: Yes, and I was about to say that this is the very nature of working in the Headquarters. Almost always there seem to be things that you as an individual think are crazy, but you still put them into effect because they are the results of a democratic process. But I've done them because that's my job. So I am more loyal to the system than I am towards my own professional opinion and experience. That's just the way it is.

I: But how does that feel?

P: Well…that's the way things are designed, that's how society works. But there is a limit somewhere.

I: A limit?

P: There is a limit somewhere certainly... a limit where you can't live with it anymore and then you shouldn't continue doing what you are doing.

Johan's account illustrates that the norm of compliance will most often override all other choices until some sort of moral limit is reached and then the option is to leave rather than to speak up.

Another recurring issue was the balance between obediently performing your tasks and the impact on your image as a trustworthy colleague and professional. The problem is mainly accentuated when the participants are torn between obeying orders from higher command and acting according to loyalties to which they are closer to emotionally. Several of the participants described these conflicts of loyalty as having negative and long-lasting effects on their relationships with colleagues. Karl's account of the dilemmas during a period of extensive financial cutbacks in the SAF, illustrates mixed emotions of uncertainty leading to a feeling of possibly letting others down.

Well, that was when there were the regimental disbandments. Then there were some very difficult leadership situations. There were lots of questions about who one should be loyal to. Would you be loyal to your own staff, fight for your regiment or would you be loyal to those who pay your salary, i.e. to the system.

In all interviews, the balance of loyalty between work and family came up and it is far from certain that the family will be at the top of the loyalty list. Rather, the family is included as one factor among others. An underlying assumption among the participants is that the families at home know that they will not be the highest priority when there are serious situations at work. Furthermore, it seems that families often take second place in situations that are less serious. Lars reasons that the feeling of being part of something larger than yourself legitimizes the downgrading of other loyalties, including your family.

I: It still seems to require quite a lot for you not to prioritize the job first.

P: Yes, it does take a lot. For me personally, it would take a lot at home to…

I: Why do you think that's the case? Because you are irreplaceable at work, but you are not at home, are you?

P: No, no… but that's probably why you choose it in some way. You are always part of a team, of something larger than the individual. I don´t think it is… for me personally, it's not the loyalty to any superior; it's loyalty to the mission, that's what I'm most loyal to.

Loyalty as a Professional Norm and A Personal Identity

As seen in the theme of balancing loyalties the norm among the participants focused on the overall mission of the SAF. Professional socialization towards these normative values is described as beginning early in the career, where you are shaped to understand and accept that you should be willing to do anything for the benefit of the higher purpose. Lars captures the essence of this when he describes himself being highly fused with his profession, and it seems to be a natural part of his identity :

You are always part of something larger than yourself… you are raised that way.

Many return to the fact that loyalty is created through a strong sense of cohesion with the military profession and the unique vocation of being an officer. Anders clearly differentiates between the expectations of loyalty among military and civilian personnel, where the latter are perceived as not understanding the military values of loyalty.

Some individuals in the Swedish Armed Forces and many civilians wouldn´t understand what we have talked about here, for the last 30 minutes. It wouldn´t matter if we did it again, they would still find it too abstract and alien to their ordinary life, because they can´t relate to these issues.

Another participant expresses a lack of understanding among civilian employees at a higher level, which causes mistrust among officers at unit levels. He reasons that since they are not part of the profession they should not interfere.

I think one of the problems with loyalty in the SAF is … one of the problems is that we have a lot of civilians in the FML [the highest level of command in the SAF]. Nothing wrong with them - but they shouldn´t have a front seat role. They should take a back seat and take part only in the issues that directly affect them.

The majority of participants described the profession as a natural and extended part of life and their identity. Those who do not consider the profession to be a vocation are perceived as deviant by several participants. Erik even describes those without the right vocation as possibly being unreliable.

I have a hard time understanding those who say: "when I step outside the gate [of the regiment or unit] on Friday then I switch off ". That's not how I work. Sometimes I can wake up in the middle of the night because I´m dreaming about work or some work-related issue. And I don´t feel stressed about it or anything, it's just how I work…

For several participants, symbols and rites are considered important in fostering relevant loyalty. The decrease in important rituals and symbols that they experience in today's SAF, is seen as possibly damaging the collective identity and thus the profession itself. Nils

gives examples of some of the rituals that he thinks are good – but hesitates as if it might be incorrect to mention them.

P: We still have the soldier's admonition ceremony.[17] But what do you have in GMU[18] ? Nothing really. I assume that… nowadays you don´t even swear allegiance to your weapon. Did you do that when you did your conscription service?
I: I would have remembered that. Did you do it?
P: Yes, there was a ceremony where…, we got our weapons and then we had a ceremony...You remember that? That was quite… (Smiles)

The basis of loyalty is also described as a reciprocity between colleagues and an assurance of never being left behind. Loyalty is seen as an abstract trait and must therefore be conceptualized through concrete actions. Johan almost preaches some of these loyalty norms as if they were a part of himself and thereby indicates that they are obvious to anyone within the profession:

And because you expose yourself and others to life-threatening situations, it´s very important that this loyalty should spread throughout all of our education and our way of being. And that everyone is a part of it, we don´t leave anyone behind and all that. We help each other all the time and if you don´t have the strength to carry your rucksack, I´ll help you and so on. It´s very important to build a strong team and to build a loyalty that is truly functional.

To Comply or to Oppose

Perhaps the most prominent dilemma expressed by the participants is the feeling of conflict between executing confirmed orders and the moral obligation to question ideas and decisions from superior officers or unanimous groups. Most of the participants stressed the importance of the courage to question and to disobey. However, all of them have also experienced or observed the risks of questioning and the possible negative consequences of doing so. Karl concluded with some of his experiences of the negative consequences and stresses the importance of being prepared to take the risk of being stigmatized.

The concept of loyalty involves not only the easy and obvious but also the responsibility to express your opinion – even though you know that you´ll be criticized, called a troublemaker or even stupid – that's loyalty. […] And there's always a risk that you are wrong…

Karl described another situation where he disobeyed direct orders from his superior because he thought following the orders would risk the entire mission. He argues that loyalty to the mission was most important and that this, indirectly also meant being loyal to his superior officer, because the outcome was good:

P: […] if we did what he said the situation would have been totally derailed and become extremely dangerous – so I changed the order. I know that it was against the rules but it led to something good.
I: So were you loyal ?
P: I think I was very loyal to him by being loyal to the overall mission.

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[17] A formal ritual performed during the soldiers' basic training - where the expectations and moral duties of the soldier are described – normally in a solemn setting out in the field.
[18] Abbreviation for initial basic military training.

At the same time, there is a contradiction in several of the participants reasoning where the importance of standing up for your opinion is stressed, and yet they describe recurring avoidance of doing so. Johan describes how the courage to speak up is a part of the loyalty, while at the same time compliance is also loyal. Johan's reasoning indicates a pragmatic view that things actually have to be done rather than discussed.

No, there must be a balance and you must dare to raise your voice - but basically you have to be loyal to decisions made, otherwise it won´t work. And don´t question a decision once it has been made.

Among a majority of participants, there is also a contradiction in the reasoning about how they want their subordinates to behave. Subordinates should question, but at the same time be quiet, and just do what they are told. During the interview, Olof is confronted with the double messages he is expressing and when sorting them out he gets a bit tangled in. It is like the person Olof does not want to be questioned by his subordinates, while the professional Olof demands it; and his subordinates should balance between those messages.

I: What kind of loyalty do you expect from your subordinates?
P: That they dare to speak the truth. Speak truth to power – that's the keyword. You have to tell…everyone should tell those truths that they think will contribute to the execution of the task, even if it is damn inconvenient for them. How else would I be able to make decisions? A few minutes later in the interview, Olof expresses a different view of the questioning:
P: […] I don't think it's credible for those at unit levels to have an opinion about organizational changes before we have tried them out.
I: But when you say it like that, don't you think that you're killing their will to speak truth to power? I myself would probably think twice about saying anything out of line if a general expressed himself in those terms.
P: Yes it's possible, but I think they should dare because between the lines…

Some of the participants imply that a loyal individual should refrain from questioning the SAF in public. The core of their reasoning seems to be that the individual must disregard his own personal rights in favour of the collective identity. Lars says that you must choose, either you have a vocation as an officer and believe in what you are doing – or if you do not believe in what you are doing, then you cannot be loyal.

P: I think you have to distinguish between your private life and work. I think we have some employees who blog about things they shouldn´t do when you are part of an organization that has specified a particular pointed out a specific direction. Regardless of whether … then you almost have to leave ... It´s not the same as being critical or discussing things. When they point in directions that are completely different from those of the organization, then I have a great difficulty understanding how they can continue to do their work.
I: It is possible that employees have other loyalties as well…
P: Absolutely, and they are welcome to have them, but when you work and get paid here, then you should be loyal to the Swedish Armed Forces and the role of being an officer or part of the military.

Loyalty means Sacrifice

While all participants state that they have multiple loyalties to consider, they also argue that you only can be loyal to one thing at a time. Most of the participants had experiences where by being loyal, one must also be prepared to make sacrifices.

One category of sacrifice concerns risking your career by standing up for what you think is right. One participant describes the consequences of being open about his criticism of a major reform in the SAF. Although he experienced a direct negative impact on his career and his well-being, he does not regret being frank in his opinion :

P: It was during the week when the promotion board was meeting. And XX, who was then head of development, he said that they had cancelled the promotion process.
I: How do you feel about then speaking so openly about that and other issues ?
P: […] It would have been easier for me never to say that stuff. I've been torn apart ; I´ve had sleepless nights when I knew they were talking about me in the FML. But the message must still be that we must be loyal to the cause, not to individuals.

Another category of sacrifice is sacrificing bonds of friendship by being seen as unreliable. Anders describes the feeling of being socially excluded by former friends for a long time, when carrying out an assignment that meant extensive reorganization within the SAF :

[…] and I know I was considered to be the generals' lackey and I shouldn't be trusted as a friend anymore.

Several of the participants also mentioned sacrificing their own physical well-being. Lars expresses regret about not taking care of himself in a situation that led to serious consequences for his own well-being. The driving force to do his job and take the responsibility his position entailed was greater than that of safeguarding his own health :

I was really sick, I got pneumonia – and then it was really close. Then it felt like hell – I shouldn't have gone to work. For several months, taking pills for the headache and fever, taking cough medicine like it was water. I should have realized that it would have been better for me to get well instead of postponing it all the time. But I was the commander, responsible for an extensive operation and didn't want to give that burden to anyone… so my loyalty to the job was greater than to myself.

Yet another category of sacrifice described is that of sacrificing others. As described above, the family is always at risk of being neglected for the benefit of work – sometimes with regret and sometimes not. Lars describes how he left his wife alone with her dying father in a situation where he initially felt that his presence at work was more important. Although his wife accepted that he went to work and they have straightened it out afterwards, a feeling of having betrayed his wife remains. Lars describes how he overestimated his own importance in the organization, and at the same time underestimated his importance to his closest family :

P: […] and I think it was somewhere after I passed Nyköping that my wife calls and says that her dad has passed away… Oh shit… wrong priority. My loyalty was wrong in that case. Leaving her in that situation and we have talked a lot about it afterwards and I have had to live with it. We have sorted it all out, but… the new job I had wasn´t worth it, wouldn´t be worth it. There I think it would…
I: Do you regret it?
P: Definitely.

I: Why then?
P: Because she needed me more.

In a serious situation such as war or a serious societal crisis, all participants agree that the family is best protected by doing your job. In a discussion about possible threats to him and his family, Per is quite clear about where the line should be drawn when choosing the family or the job :

No, but of course, you mustn't be naive and the situation that you describe, you must of course picture how it would be. Somehow, I think that there'll be a situation where the family comes second. And one must put the professional role – in certain contexts – before your own safety and the well-being and security of your family, so to speak. It has a bearing on a larger context and if it doesn't work, then – in the longer run – the security of the family won't work either. But of course it's difficult – this is not easy – that's why you´re sitting here asking.

Extended Actions – To Do More

In the military, you are also expected to do certain things that are out of the ordinary; the most obvious perhaps is the use of massive organized violence and, in doing so putting yourself, your colleagues and even your friends at great risk. However, surprisingly few of the participants spontaneously address that question – perhaps because it is such an obvious part of the job that it "goes without saying". Nils addresses the inevitable nature of the military profession – to kill and to be killed. He is quite clear with himself on that issue, but at the same time not entirely comfortable talking about it :

I: Can you imagine situations when it would be a problem to keep track of all your loyalties ? The mission, your colleagues, the system and everything else ?
P: Well, yes, yes, yes it will be… I mean the military profession is at its worst when it comes to ordering people to sacrifice their lives for the sake of the mission. That's the way it is. You probably shouldn't bury your head in the sand about that.

Mikael comes to a straightforward conclusion about what professional loyalty involves. He addresses the issue of being an officer, which means that you may have to tell others to carry out extreme actions such as killing and possibly, dying for missions when following your orders.

Yes, but you always have to deal with yourself – what is our profession about ? It is, after all, about defending democracy by force of arms. And if you then become a senior officer, then the assignment isn't just about being prepared to kill or die. But you should also be able to motivate others to kill on your behalf, because you are in charge.

The military norm of always doing your utmost to complete your tasks in combat also tends to prevail also in day-to-day work where such behaviours are not really needed. The participants often describe loyal individuals as altruistic or devoted people who do their utmost for others and put themselves in second place. Among other things, this means breaking work regulations and neglecting your own well-being. In the interview with Erik, it is clear that individuals who do things beyond what is required are also those who are perceived as the most loyal. Erik indicates an implied view that violations of work regulations are the norm rather than the exception :

I'm thinking of a particular super loyal person. He's been here at weekends and such, and he was on the way to getting burned out and all that. He has worked both Saturdays and

Sundays for this to work. That, to me, is loyalty when it's at its best – when you realize that if you don't get the task done, others will be affected 5000 kilometres away.

The limits of the individual's loyalties to different things vary. Ultimately, in the practice of the profession, death is the limit. At other times, loyalty requires reciprocity, which means being loyal to those who are loyal to you. If you then experience reciprocity as being broken, loyalty ceases. Mikael expresses frustration when loyalty is misused in situations of real importance, which might cause feelings of loyalty to be seriously compromised. Mikael's use of harsh words indicates a mistrust when reciprocity isn't respected on the employer's part :

I: How far can you stretch that loyalty then – where can you draw the line for how much you can ask for – in a peacetime situation?

P: Yes, in war, I think that loyalty is driven until people die and then it is no longer relevant. In peacetime, it's a balancing act where you have to ask yourself the question all the time – am I going too far with this? Because the consequence is that they will quit – if what they experience is mostly shit. And especially if we take advantage of their loyalty to run our own administration or something else that isn't really that important.

Leadership and Loyalty

All participants agree that leadership has a pronounced impact on loyalty. The impact of leadership could be sorted into three aspects. The first aspect is the professional core values and norms that foster the desired behaviour. The second aspect is the ability to convey contextual understanding. Per says that the higher the stake or the risk, the more important it is to understand the purpose of why something should be done. If you understand the purpose and the meaning of the mission, your loyalty to it will be greater and vice versa :

Well, that's just an opinion I have. If you don't understand why you're doing something and then, at a certain stage it changes and you start thinking I won't do this. There might be a risk in this that I don't see. But if you can put it all into context and understand how important [your task] is in the bigger picture, then I think this loyalty can be drawn upon even further. You'll have no problem in maintaining your loyalty to the task.

Mikael stresses that the understanding of context is affected by the traceability of a decision. Without a clear division of responsibilities and clear traceability, loyalty is reduced to the lowest levels :

So out of the air comes a decision that doesn't represent what I stand for […] ; secondly, I can't recognize why it's been arrived at. I mean I have no particular interest in being loyal to the air. That doesn't raise my interest in being loyal any more than getting paid on the 25th of each month.

The third aspect is the need for basic trust in superior officers' competence and the decisions they make. The direct leadership experienced from the immediate line manager seems to be crucial for the degree of loyalty to the task. Managers who demonstrate knowledge and competence, and establish a feeling of participation get more loyalty from their subordinates – and vice versa. However, because most officers always seem to be loyal to the overall mission there is redundancy within the system to handle any lack of trust within the chain of command. Per exemplifies this redundancy when he describes how loyalty to a task

can be eroded by not trusting your superior, but also how the professional norm – or is it just habit – makes you execute decisions anyway :

I: Can lack of loyalty to a manager that you don't trust, affect loyalty to the task or mission itself.
P: Yes, it can probably be like that in some situations, but I think… then you need to take a step back and look at what it's really about and try to take the focus away from the person as much as possible. When I was NN's subordinate, none of my experience of him was good. Still, there was this dilemma that I had to be loyal to his decisions. But I didn't have any problems with that since I've been in the game for so long. But it was a different feeling if you understand what I mean.

Destructive Loyalty

The results indicate a recurring perception that there are at least three different forms of misguided or destructive loyalty behaviours : conformism, obedience and egocentric loyalty. The participants describe conformism as a double-edged sword, where one side manifests itself in a loyal submission to unanimous opinions or decisions, although personal knowledge and experience say otherwise. The other side of conformity is a strong sense of cohesion and concentrated effort towards organizational goals, where the team's results are more important than personal success. Karl describes how deviating from an underlying norm of conformity could have negative consequences for the individual :

Sometimes there is too much conformity, you are afraid to be different and become a threat to the organization ... it should be the other way around.

The second form of destructive loyalty is obedience, or blind loyalty. This type of behaviour is described as an unreflective sort of obedience where you just obey without asking yourself or anyone else whether your orders are reasonable. Erik worries that this blindly obedient behaviour causes a lack of feasibility checks in the decision-making process :

We have learned that, for us, the higher commander's assumptions are facts. But where does the questioning happen ? If we simply obey our commanders then it might not be possible to stop things and they may get out of hand and go really wrong. Where does this happen ?

Overall, the participants handle the expression obedience very carefully. Mikael almost seems a bit uncomfortable when the subject is raised. The dialogue below indicates that Mikael needs and expects a feeling of mutual understanding and agreement in order to make him feel comfortable :

I: But if I were to interpret what you are saying now, then obedience is a big part of loyalty? I mean that when a decision is made, then you do as you are told?
P: Obedience and obedience, well I wouldn't say that…
I: So what do you expect from your subordinates in terms of loyalty?
P: I expect them to complete their tasks. Obedience is a pretty strong word…
I: Sounds a bit like training a dog…
P: Yes, it does sound like that – I mean – sit! – That's obedience. Even worse is unbreakable obedience, that's even stronger, right? But obedience…that doesn´t sound very democratic, does it?
I: But you command, and you obey orders, that's rather a large part of the military…

P: Absolutely, ehm – and that's more of an expectation right ? I expect that if we agree about something, then I expect it to be carried out. If you call that obedience, I think it sounds a bit negative… I like to have a positive view of other people.

Per elaborates on this issue by explaining that he considers there to be three forms of obedience. One form could be described, as agreed obedience, where everyone involved has had their say and has understood the purpose of the order. The second form is automatic obedience, where quick reactions are necessary for survival and there is no time for questions – only for trust. The third and destructive form, unreflective obedience is described above.

Yes, but obedience is built on an understanding of why you are ordered to do something, rather than just blindly obeying every word you are told. I think that obedience comes with trust for the person with whom you have some sort of loyalty relationship. And in some situations blind trust in someone on whom you are totally dependent is necessary.

The third form of destructive loyalty is egocentric loyalty, where the individual is constantly loyal to what currently benefits their career rather than what is best for the organization. In Olof's statement below there is frustration that the organization and perhaps colleagues allow this to happen :

I: If you think about disloyalty – what is being disloyal ?
P: It is to do the exact opposite of what I am saying now. Locking yourself in your bubble, getting away with it and not doing shit. And then you're allowed to make a career out of it – I think that's disloyal.

Although all participants describe the egocentric loyalty as a problem, most of them find it difficult to actually exemplify this with concrete events. The examples given relate to various branches within the organization which pursue their own agendas based on their particular needs and are thus disloyal to the organization as a whole. Mikael says that a lack of understanding of the bigger picture, or perhaps mistrust, might sometimes lead to a behaviour where protecting your own group's interests may lead to irrational decisions and loyalty dilemmas:

When I look back with some insight into those tasks, certain decisions probably weren't always based on the most rational reasons. Then it also becomes difficult to justify them out in the organization and then loyalty discussions like this arise.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore how high-ranking officers in the SAF give meaning to their own personal experiences of loyalty and to describe possible common patterns within the participant group.

Although the meaning of loyalty initially seemed obvious to the participants, most of them initially had difficulties in describing what it consists of. This corresponds to the view that the conceptualization of virtues generally seems to be difficult (Curren & Kotzee, 2014). The results in this study show that the individuals' view of loyalty is affected not only by their professional ideals but also by societal and personal ideals about loyalty. The participants also described a number of callers for their loyalty, such as colleagues, friends, the mission and the family. But also abstract callers, such as professional and certain societal norms. The balance between these different callers for loyalty was by far the most commonly expressed issue about

loyalty. Handling a mix of different and sometimes opposite ideals is often seen as relatively complicated for the individual (McIntyre, 1984), suggesting possible ideological dilemmas for the participants of the study. However, most of the participants describe that their loyalty is created through a merge between the own personal identity and the identity of the military profession causing professional norms to become personal as well. This fusion between the individual's identities, as described, creates strong emotional bonds between the individual and a certain social identity of a specific group.[19] The complex balance between different identities is often described as the balance between dual roles[20] or dual identities.[21] However, the results of this study suggest that the participants' identities are balancing between multiple social identities most likely resulting in a complex composition between personal identity and different social identities. Loyalty dilemmas concerning work-family interaction conflicts,[22] and between "greedy institutions" (Coser, 1974) such as the military profession, have long been recognized. However, the results indicate that the expected norm among the participants would be to regularly downgrade their own family. A downgrading of one's own personal ties or the family seems rational in situations of crisis or war, but not as rational in everyday life situations. This highlights a need to learn more about how a rational behavioural norm in one type of context transfers to a different context where other ideals and behaviours might be more appropriate.

The results of the study show that the ideal of loyalty is to do more than is normally expected as well as to do sacrifices for a greater good, even when it means breaking regulations and risking your own health. This corresponds to earlier research about social identity fusion having an impact on individual behaviour.[23] The results also indicate a feeling of mistrust against colleagues without the right degree of engagement with the profession (i.e. that are not properly fused with the military norms). Another more unusual concept of loyalty that was addressed by all participants was the duty to raise your voice and to question irrational decisions. Although raising your voice is discussed as an act of loyalty (Hirschman, 2008) and sometimes seen as an obligation when it comes to reveal misconduct (Pershing, 2002), the military norm is more often to be silent.[24] Raising your voice in an undesired way is often seen as a breach of loyalty (Gagnon & Perron, 2019). A conclusion of the results could be that there is an imbalance between the core values of conformism and expressing discontent or dissent. The imbalance is likely to be a cause of contradictory norms, but also a cause of shifting between the different roles within the profession.

A noteworthy part of the results indicate a problematic balancing act concerning contradictory core values (norms) within the professional practice itself. Among others, the main contradictory issue was the dilemma between the two norms of compliance and questioning, both described as important to the participants. Contradictory norms are described in situations of dual roles,[25] or as ideological dilemmas (Billig, 1988), but the results in this study indicated an inner personal conflict about what a loyal behaviour is within a single role. While participants describe both positive and negative aspects of both compliance and of questioning, the results indicate that the norm of questioning often gets downgraded. Such downgrading seems to be either a result of conforming behaviour transferred from situations where it is relevant (i.e. combat and hasty decisions) to situations where it is not ; or of inhibitory negative consequences for the openly opposing individual. Although the issue of

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[19] Swann, Gomez, Dovidio, Hart & Jetten, 2010.
[20] For instance : Johnsson, Bacho & Ralph, 2006 ; Lundberg, Kjellström, Jonsson & Sandman, 2014.
[21] For instance : Segal, 1986 ; Bosman, Soeters & Ait Bari, 2008.
[22] Michel, Kotbra, Mitchelson, Clark & Baltes, 2010.
[23] Swann, Gomez, Dovidio, Hart & Jetten, 2010.
[24] Petrovic, van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2018.
[25] Johnsson, Bacho & Ralph, 2006 ; Lundberg, Kjellström, Jonsson & Sandman, 2014.

questioning and its negative consequences have been described before,[26] and the risk of strong loyalties causing a culture of silence (Winslow, 1998), it could be seen as remarkable that individuals in top positions are inhibited by negative consequences for speaking up their professional opinion. The results concerning norms, and the balance between them, suggests that the shifting contextual roles that often characterize the military profession (Törnvall, 2001) may cause a misapplied transfer of behaviour concerning choices of loyalty. The misapplied transfer of norms between different professional roles should be further investigated in order to support military personnel to adapt normative behaviour to the situation at hand.

The leadership impact that creates trust, thus amplifying levels of loyalty, is reflected throughout the participants´ experiences of loyalty. The meaning of trust is firmly established in leadership literature.[27] According to the majority of participants, a leadership style that enhances a comprehensive understanding of the purpose of a task will also enhance loyalty and hence the risk-willingness for the task. To some extent, this is linked to the concept of sense-making as a strategy to support leaders in ethical dilemmas.[28] However, the comprehensive understanding desired also includes traceability of decisions within the chain of command to enhance the various levels' loyalty. One could argue that the need for a detailed traceability in decisions would indicate a lack of trust rather than vice versa. Therefore further studies on the connection between traceability, trust and loyalty to a task would be relevant. The most significant leadership impact in this study is the effect of professional and organizational norms. Desired normative behaviours are identified by the individual through various forms of psychological contracts (Rousseau & Schalk, 2000), but also through normative influence by colleagues and close friends within the organization.[29] The results show that even though the participants have reached a very high organizational level and thereby are strong influencers of normative behaviour, the culture of the profession and the organization itself maintain a strong hold over their own behaviour. Some research suggests that leaders whose personal norms comply with the expected professional norms are more trusted.[30] This indicates that existing trust within the organization overrides the individuals' own desire to change undesired normative behaviours such as destructive conformity.

Participants describe three main different forms of destructive loyalty : conformism, obedience, or blind loyalty, and egocentric behaviour. Examples of destructive behaviour – mainly misplaced conformism and obedience – are described above, and confirm earlier work on the matter[31] – therefore this will not be further elaborated here. However, the subject is important and should be examined further regarding possible prevalence within military units.

Conclusions

This study has contributed to a broadened understanding of personal experiences concerning the phenomenon of loyalty in a profession, such as the military, that is characterized by strong norms that often seem to be contradictory or dilemmatic in everyday life. It has done so by exploring how high-ranking officers in the SAF give meaning to their own personal experiences of loyalty. The study's results describe how the participants experience a broad variety of options and hence complexity in balancing and prioritizing their loyalty between them. This balancing act is seen as part of the profession which in turn requires a well thought-

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[26] Rotschild & Miethe, 1999 ; Hirschman, 2008.
[27] For example : Lewicki & Bunker, 1996 ; Legood *et al*., 2020.
[28] Thiel, Bagdasarov, Harkrider & Johnson, 2012.
[29] Leo & Wickenberg, 2013 ; Geber, 2019.
[30] De Wolde, Groenendaal, Helsloot & Schmidt, 2014.
[31] Gabriel, 1982 ; Winslow, 1998 ; Connor, 2010 ; Umphress & Bingham, 2011.

through moral ground to use as the basis for loyalty decisions in dilemmatic situations. Therefore, the issue of loyalty within the organization needs to be addressed with conceptual clarity and nuance and not just used as a phrase with vague meaning. Among the participants, loyalty seems to be strongly influenced by professional norms and identity, but also by other social identities they find themselves closely immersed in. However, the professional norms are sometimes contradictory or too simplified to handle dilemmatic situations, which in turn could cause moral stress or lead to inadequate decisions. Two of the most contradictory norms participants seem to be navigating between in search of balance are obeying orders and speaking up about inaccuracies. The dilemma of knowing when to speak up – or to disobey – and when to be compliant is influenced by a number of circumstances, namely time factors, levels of risk and personal stakes. These, together, lead to how the manifestation of loyalty is described by the participants, which is mainly what you are prepared to do for someone or something and what you are willing to sacrifice. Again this is a personal choice, influenced by the core values that individuals have merged into their own identity. As clear and accepted core values are very likely to direct the choice of loyalty, they seem to be an important part of professional socialization. Therefore core values should be well thought-through and carefully implemented and nurtured by the organization. The impact of leadership in establishing these core values seems to be important and the biggest challenge is, again, the problem of contradictions in norms and behaviours from superior officers and the organization. All participants have reflected on the responsibility within the military officer corps to address these issues in order to be able to handle the dilemmatic situations that all too probably will arise in the line of duty. Finally, the results also addressed the destructive parts of loyalty, mainly focusing on when there is a lack of questioning irrational decisions or behaviours. Misplaced loyalty such as blind loyalty, or when loyalty to something causes neglect of other important issues, is part of the balancing act between loyalties. To conclude, loyalty seems to be a strong and important organizational norm which when explored reveals itself to have many facets, experienced as complex to handle. Therefore, the organization and its leaders should have a clear and well thought-out normative base concerning expected loyalty behaviour. However, this base should be able to highlight the sometimes contradictory reality of professional activity and hence guide the officer corps in dilemmatic situations.

Limitations of the Study and Further Research

The findings of this research are based on the participants' personal way of giving meaning to the concept of loyalty, and should not be seen as the official view on the matter. The sample is small and quite homogenous in its composition : without further study the results cannot be seen as generalizable to the military population as a whole. All participants are at a high level in the SAF hierarchy and it is possible that their answers could be biased because of a desire to appear correct in front of a subordinate officer. However, the participants seem to have been very frank about their personal experiences, as is indicated by their open and sometimes personally revealing answers. The interpretations of the researcher, being a military officer, are possibly biased from his own pre-understanding and opinions on the issue. There could also be an implicit dependency situation as the researcher possibly could be a subordinate to some of the participants in future commands. On the other hand, the researcher's prior understanding of the profession is also likely to have contributed to the open and often collegial atmosphere of the interviews.

Further research into the phenomenon of loyalty would be relevant and should focus on finding implications of the generalizability of loyalty experiences as well as on a deeper understanding of the identified themes of this study. It would also be interesting to examine how sense is made of other core virtues within the military, such as courage and honour, etc.

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