

# Deployment and Dehumanization: A Multi-Method Study of Combat Soldiers' Loss of Empathy

*By Morten Braender*

*"It is only a matter of time before God, if he exists, opens the heavens and pours down lava or starts a Flood. Because this ... this is bad".*

Danish officer, on the Afghan population.

Soldiers' level of empathy decreases during deployment. In his qualitative Vietnam War study, Moskos showed how American combat soldiers regarded both their South Vietnamese allies (ARVN) and the college kids back home with contempt (Moskos, 1971, pp.231, 236). Likewise, in a recent quantitative study, Braender and Andersen demonstrate, that while soldiers' abstract motivation is affected positively during deployment, their compassion, or their empathetic motivation, seems to be affected negatively by exposure to war (Braender & Andersen, 2013).

The purpose of this article is to increase our understanding of how deployment affects soldiers. It does so by combining quantitative and qualitative methods. The research question is interpretative: *How do soldiers make sense of their declining compassion?* This research question does not seek to test a hypothesis. Instead, its aim is to clarify how soldiers perceive the process described above. Moreover, contrary to King, Keohane and Verba's famous credo that the "*goal [of social research] is inference*", the purpose of this article is not "*to make descriptive or explanatory inferences on the basis of empirical information about the world*" (King, Keohane & Verba, 1994, p.7). Instead, the case analyzed here, that of a private, is chosen from a pool of already inferable observations. Along with 210 others, he filled out a questionnaire, examining combat soldiers before and after they were deployed to Afghanistan. Moreover, he also participated along with 21 others in individual in-depth interviews conducted before and after their tour of duty. The quantitative data shows that the soldiers' level of compassion declines. Below, data from the qualitative interview with this particular soldier are analysed, because he experienced a more radical decline than most of his comrades. In that respect, he represents a "most likely" case : if the social "mechanisms" corresponding with such a decline of compassion can be found anywhere, we ought to find them here and an analysis of this particular case will yield useful knowledge about how such mechanisms work and an analysis of this particular case will yield useful knowledge about how such mechanisms work.

This article is structured as follows: the next section centres on the theory of "emotional withdrawal", explaining why soldiers' level of empathy decreases when exposed to the hardships of deployment. Although interpretative studies are not "theory-testing", but rather "theory-building" (Eisenhardt, 1989), this theory nevertheless provides a framework for conducting subsequent analyses. The case selection method – briefly mentioned above – is described in detail in a third section. The analyses to be found in the fourth section show how and discuss why the servicemen's perceptions of civilian Afghans, of the Taliban and of their fellow-soldiers undergo drastic changes during deployment. A fifth section concludes.

## Theory : Emotional Withdrawal and Dehumanization

War entails the transgression of some of the most fundamental rules of mankind: The obligation of self-preservation and the prohibition of killing. According to Grossman, violating the latter is not just breaching an ethical or social norm or trespassing a religious taboo. Killing counters our natural instinct not to inflict harm on our own species: “... *there are compelling data that indicate that this singular lack of enthusiasm for killing one’s fellow man has existed throughout history*” (Grossman, 2009, p. 16). Grossman’s point of departure is S.L.A. Marshall’s famous<sup>1</sup> World War II findings (Grossman, 2009, p.3). Marshall claimed that only a minority of soldiers actually fired their weapons in combat (Marshall, 1947, p.56). Not because they fled, or because they did not have the opportunity – but simply because they chose not to. According to Grossman, although man may not be fit for killing, he can learn to kill. A number of factors – including group and authority pressure – will facilitate this learning process. But, as also emphasized by Siddle (2008) and Artwohl and Christensen (1997), the soldier must train in realistic environments, so that when he finds himself in the situation where it is required of him that he kill, he can actually do so. Moreover, he must establish a distance between himself and the victim, so that he can deal with the fundamentally transgressive act of taking a life.

Distance can be understood as physical distance, pure and simple. No doubt, physical distance is essential when it comes to killing. Grossman describes this in detail, when he reflects on the difference between killing with a rifle and killing with a knife or with your bare hands (Grossman, 2009, p.97sq). Just as important, however, the soldier should also distance himself emotionally from the enemy. (Grossman 2009, p.156sq) Emotional distance is established through “emotional withdrawal” or “detachment”: the two concepts are used interchangeably below. Grossman distinguishes between four forms of emotional distance: *mechanical*, *social*, *moral* and *cultural*. Mechanical distance is the distance established by technological means. Technology is, of course, also a necessary condition for establishing physical distance: Most soldiers find it far more difficult to kill with an edged weapon than with a – more advanced – projectile weapon. Whereas a crossbow or a rifle can be used from a distance, you cannot kill with a knife or a bayonet without sensing – seeing, hearing, feeling – the agony and death inflicted by you on the victim (Grossman, 2008, p.120sq). Just as relevant, however, is the fact that technology also implies an objectification – or a *Verfremdung* – of the victim, that enables an emotionally convenient rephrasing of the transgressive act of war. Although their acts may be legally justified, we are still hesitant to say that (our own) marksmen and bomber pilots “kill people”. Instead, they “take out” or “neutralize” “targets”.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Marshall’s findings are not only famous, but also famously contested, and he is often criticised for being “*right for the wrong reasons*” (Bateman, 2007 ; Jordan, 2002 ; Spiller, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> Grossman’s prime example of technology-induced alienation is the use of thermal- or night-vision devices reducing people to heat waves depicted by green light (2009, p.170). A more recent example is the use of drones or UAVs, criticised for “*remov[ing] the unique characteristics humans bring to the battlespace: deliberation, doubt, fear, gut instinct, and judgment*” (Dowd, 2013, p.11)

Social distance is primarily relevant in pre-modern societies, where military rank follows social status, and where the cavalry noblemen's slaughtering of enemy peasant foot-soldiers could be seen as an extension of their feudal rights with other means. Social cleavages may of course still be present in military organizations, where officers are primarily recruited from military academies, and where they perhaps already belong to particular social strata (Grossman, 2009, pp.168-169). In the context of the Danish Army, however, this is not particularly relevant. Here, the career ladder of any serviceman begins with the draft, and draftees are recruited from a universal welfare State with only minimal social differences. Granted, social cleavages may explain some of the Danish soldiers' contempt towards the Afghan population, not unlike the "materialism" of US soldiers in Vietnam observed by Moskos in the late 1960s (Moskos, 1970, pp.152-153). Yet, as will be argued below, these are mainly understood as cultural cleavages, and will, accordingly, be treated as elements of cultural distance.

Killing justified by moral distance is killing justified by referring to the higher purpose for which the soldiers serve. As emphasised by Grossman (2009, p.167), a moral distance does not imply viewing the enemy as an inferior human being. It just implies that he is fighting for an inferior cause, and hence – given that he is in the way of our course – the killing is justified.

To justify killing by referring to cultural distance, however, is exactly to view others as inferior. A culturally distant enemy is liable to attack, simply because of his inferiority. In this view, killing the enemy is no different than killing an animal or – more precisely – to exterminate vermin.<sup>3</sup>

To deprive others of their *human* capacities is what psychologists refer to as dehumanization – a concept originally coined by Kelman (1976). However, Grossman's concept of cultural distance only captures one sense of dehumanisation, and it does not provide much help in explaining processes of emotional detachment beyond notions of cultural supremacy. An ISAF soldier in Afghanistan may for instance refer to his adversaries as either "*ragheads*" or "*Taliban*" (as a noun, not as an adjective). Both terms signify an emotional distance. Both terms reduce the feared enemy to a faceless creature. Yet, only the former, "*raghead*", unequivocally implies inferiority.

As shown by Haslam (2006), dehumanization can be understood more broadly. In this context, distinguishing between different aspects of dehumanization may help us understand how soldiers' perceptions of others change following deployment. Given that we can distinguish between two different ways of perceiving humans, Haslam argues that we can also distinguish between two different forms of dehumanization : first, we can view it as depriving others of capacities that are uniquely human, of what distinguishes us from animals (Haslam, 2006, p.257sq). Only in this sense can we regard dehumanization as

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<sup>3</sup> As mentioned below, to regard others as "*less than*" human does not necessarily imply regarding them as animals. On the contrary, soldiers often report that seeing animals suffer is much more difficult than killing the enemy (Møller, 2010, pp.65-66). Hence, when they say that the enemies are "*like animals*", it is in the sense of "vermin".

analogue to cultural distance: to dehumanize others is to regard them as (less than)<sup>4</sup> animals. Accordingly, Haslam calls it “animalistic dehumanization”.

Second, depriving others of their “humanity” may also be seen as dehumanization. In this view, what characterizes humans is not what distinguishes us from animals (e.g. reason, spoken language, political society, or the use of advanced tools), but traits shared by human beings in general, traits characteristic of human nature (e.g. empathy, caring, or social life). Here, the semiotic “other” is not the “inferior animal”, but the “cold” and “remote machine”. Accordingly, to dehumanize others is to see them as emotionally detached, shallow or cynical. Haslam calls this “mechanistic dehumanization”. In spite of the fact that elements of “mechanical distance” may be relevant in this regard, we do not find a concept directly analogue to mechanistic dehumanization in Grossman’s work. One reason for this may simply be that whereas Grossman focuses on the emotional distance between the soldier and his enemy, Haslam emphasises that dehumanization transcends the barriers of merely physical violence.<sup>5</sup> And as will be argued in the following, although elements of animalistic dehumanization are clearly vivid in the soldiers’ perceptions of others, they are not absolute. Moreover, animalistic dehumanization is not most outspoken in regard to the enemy.

Before turning to the case selection and analysis of the interviews, one more point should be emphasized. Distinguishing between different aspects of dehumanization may help us understand how soldiers perceive other groups, and examine how such perceptions change following deployment. However, given that the way we perceive others reflects how we perceive ourselves (Jenkins, 2004, p.79), we should also expect an enhanced dehumanization of others to reflect an enhanced feeling of unity among the soldiers. The significance of the in-group has been thoroughly studied in military sociology, as either de-individuation (Barash & Webel, 2009, p.126) or group cohesion (Wong *et al.*, 2003, pp.1-5). The theory emphasises that the chances of success (of defeating the enemy, if in war) are much larger if you are part of a group (du Picq, 1947, p.110).<sup>6</sup> Moreover, when you are part of group, you are – literally – part of something larger than life : the group will live on even if you should die. And the memory of you will live on with the group. The theoretical claim is that bonds established between fighting men make it easier to cope with the hardships of war.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Although Haslam mentions that there might be other forms of dehumanization than the two sketched out here (Haslam, 2006, p.262), he is not very precise when it comes to distinguishing between seeing people as animals and seeing them as “less than animals”.

<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, the way women are regarded in pornography or the way physicians put emotional distance between themselves and terminal patients may also be regarded as dehumanization (Haslam, 2006, p.253).

<sup>6</sup> Although Ardant du Picq’s *Études sur le Combat* were initially written in French, his thoughts were mainly introduced to the military community through the English translation, referred to here.

<sup>7</sup> Throughout the past 70 years, research has provided an empirical warrant for this claim. This does not mean, however, that cohesion is the sole factor involved. As shown by Moskos and later by Wong *et al.*, structural conditions – e.g., a limited time of deployment or abandoning the draft – may cause other motives to be just as important (Moskos, 1970, p.141sq ; Wong *et al.*, 2003, pp.17-22). But *The American Soldier*, the World War II study most famous for this observation (Stouffer *et al.*, 1949, vol.2, pp.105-191), showed that cohesion scored constantly high, and constantly higher than other factors, for instance patriotism.

The seamy side of the matter is, first, that being part of a group makes it tempting to put the norms of the group before any individual or ethical considerations (Diken & Laustsen, 2005). Second, the strength of the in-group inclusion mirrors the out-group exclusion. The stronger bonds you can establish among your peers, the easier it becomes to regard those not part of the in-group as unworthy of recognition and hence as deprived of the basic protection against harm which our instinct otherwise requires us to apply to all members of our own species.

## Case Selection and Methods of Analysis

The data used in the following are excerpts from qualitative interviews with Danish combat soldiers immediately before and immediately after their deployment to Helmand, Afghanistan. The soldiers came from two different companies – one from the Jutland Dragoons (Jydske Dragonregiment) and one from the Hussar Guards (Garderhusarregimentet). The interviews were conducted at the barracks in the townships of Holstebro and Slagelse. In the first round, this writer talked with 22 soldiers from different rank-groups and with different levels of experience. In the second round, 16 of those were re-interviewed. Of the remaining six, two had left the armed forces, one was on holiday, one had been transferred to another unit, one was still in Afghanistan, and one had been killed in action.

As mentioned above, the aim of the following analysis is to improve our understanding of the observed decrease in the level of empathetic motivation. Given that interpretative analyses are time- and space-consuming, this study will only focus on a single interviewee, and on the interviews conducted with him before and after departure.

In order to choose the right case, the quantitative data used in the panel analysis contain valuable information. Since the purpose here is to understand what it means for soldiers that their compassion drops, we need a typical case, a soldier whose empathetic motivation drops remarkably. In the quantitative panel analysis, compassion was measured using a five-item index, with a 0-100 scale.

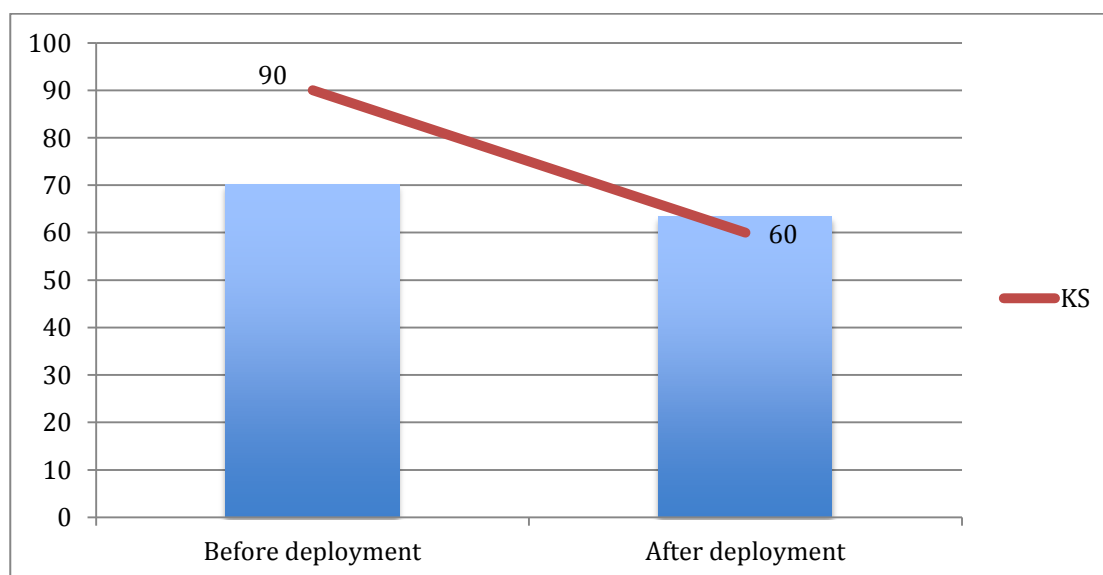
**Table 1 :** Items contained in the Compassion Index. Danish wording and English translation

2b. “Jeg bliver følelsesmæssigt berørt, når jeg ser mennesker i nød” <i>‘It is difficult for me to contain my feelings when I see people in need’ (PSM 4)</i>
2c “Jeg indlever mig i de vanskeligheder, andre står over for” <i>‘I empathize with other people who face difficulties’ (COM 3)</i>
2e “Jeg tænker sjældent på andres velbefindende, hvis jeg ikke kender dem personligt” <i>‘I seldom care about the well-being of others if I don’t know them personally’ (reversed)</i>
2f “Jeg tænker sjældent på andres velbefindende, hvis ikke de er soldater” <i>‘I seldom care about the well-being of others if they aren’t soldiers’ (reversed)</i>
2g “Jeg tænker sjældent på andres velbefindende, hvis ikke de er danskere” <i>‘I seldom care about the well-being of others if they aren’t Danes’ (reversed)</i>

Two of these items (2b-2c) were taken from the expanding literature on public service motivation (PSM). The remaining three (2e-2g) were constructed specifically for these surveys in order to measure how soldiers relate to other groups. Factor loadings for these 5 items were between .567 and .738, and the Cronbach’s alpha at .78 (results not shown).

As in other similar studies, the panel analysis shows that the soldiers’ level of compassion decreases. Before departure, their average score was 70.14. After their return, the mean score dropped nearly 10 percentage points, to 63.36.<sup>8</sup> From the items used, we can see that the decreasing compassion occurs with regard to the soldiers’ relation a number of other groups: foreigners, fellow-countrymen, and other soldiers alike. What we cannot say, however, is what this means to the individual soldier. In order to shed light on this, one of the privates whose compassion had dropped most remarkably was chosen. Hence, as can be seen from Graph 1, below, the soldier in question’s initial level of empathetic motivation dropped 30 points following deployment (from 90 to 60).

**Graph 1** : Compassion, before and after deployment: Average score and individual scores for KS. Soldier surveys and interviews, balanced panel, 2011



Compassion is measured using a 5-item index, ranging 0-100

The dataset contains soldiers reporting an even more significant decrease. Although interview data from them are not available, the quantitative data show that most of them are either Sergeants or Privates First Class, and that none of them (and that goes for the private analyzed below as well) are on their first tour of duty – a point to which we shall return below.

<sup>8</sup> Given that the Standard Deviation is 16.79 before their departure and 20.07 after their return, we cannot exclude the possibility that the compassion of some soldiers actually increases. When looking at the individual cases, one particularly interesting example of this development is one of the COs who scored 50 before departure and 65 after his return on the Compassion Index.

In the analysis, the private is called “KS”. This pseudonym is an abbreviation for “Køleskab” (literally “fridge”), because, as shown below, a fridge plays a central role in the post-deployment interview. Thus, KS are not his real initials, and apart from the fact that he is a private and that he has served abroad before, I will conceal any information by means of which he can be identified.

All five items used to measure compassion in the quantitative analysis inquire how the respondents regard other people. This will also be the focal point in the analysis below. Thus, following the structure indicated in the short theoretical introduction to the phenomenon of social distance, the analyses focus on the views KS holds of others, and whether this enhances our understanding of the observed decrease in empathetic motivation.

## Analysis

The following pages focus on how KS describe other groups in the area of operations. First, the “presumed” out-group: the Afghans and the Taliban. Second, the “presumed” in-group: his fellow-soldiers.<sup>9</sup> As mentioned in the theory section above, cultural distance or animalistic dehumanization is a way of detaching yourself emotionally from the enemy in order to facilitate the killing. Yet, as the analysis will show, the patterns of detachment – who becomes dehumanized and how? – change following deployment. And in the end, it is not the enemies who are described as less than humans.

### From Empathy to Animalistic Dehumanization: The Afghans

The quantitative panel analysis showed that the soldiers’ level of compassion decreased following deployment. Compassion, or empathetic motivation, is the public service motivation concept that most clearly concerns the relation between the service providers and the recipients of the service. In this context, this means that the drop in the level of compassion should be most vivid in regard to the soldiers’ (the service providers’) relation to the Afghans in the area of operations (the recipients of their service).

When asked directly in the post-deployment interview whether the deployment has changed his view of the Afghans in general, KS himself emphasizes that this is very much the case:

**Interviewer** : What about your view on the civilian Afghans? Has it changed now, do you think?

**KS** : *Yes, it has. Now it is very, very different.*

**Interviewer** : How ?

**KS** : (...) *I think they are very, very bad persons, a lot of them. They sell out people for nothing, and they tell lies, and they steal, and they ... well, I just think they are creepy. I simply don't get it.*<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> The “presumed” out-group designates those whom an outsider would expect the social actor to categorize as “them”. The “presumed” in-group refers to those expected to be categorized as “us”. As indicated by the word “presumed”, the empirical test will show a more nuanced pattern.

<sup>10</sup> Post-deployment interview, KS: p.15, lines 3-11.

Before departure, KS had a rather idealistic view of his service. Before departure, he stated that could easily see himself as a “humanitarian aid worker”.<sup>11</sup> This does not mean that his high level of empathetic motivation before departure should be seen as a motivation to serve “concrete others” – what in the literature is described as “user orientation” (Andersen, Pallesen & Pedersen, 2011). On the contrary, he explicitly states that he does not regard digging a well or building a school for girls as purposeful means of serving in Afghanistan. Wells can be filled up. Schools can be torn down. And neither construction will safeguard the population against the Taliban. In other words, security must be ensured for humanitarian aid to have any lasting effect. Nevertheless, humanitarian aid workers command respect from him because they place themselves in harm’s way to make a difference and pursue their ideals – the higher purpose of their service. And they do so voluntarily.

After KS’ return, there is, however, little but shattered illusions left. In fairness, it should be mentioned that when asked directly, he does distinguish between the three groups which can be seen as the recipients of the soldiers’ service: The civilians, the Afghan National Police (ANP), and the Afghan National Army (ANA). Moreover, KS was already somewhat hesitant in regard to both the ANA and the ANP before departure. Thus, although he said that it was “great” that the ANA were being taught to fight a just war with just means, he also emphasized both that he and his (Danish) fellow-soldiers would be on their guard when training local soldiers, and that he was aware of problem constituted by the level of corruption in the armed branches in Afghanistan.

In keeping with the statements made by other soldiers from different rank groups and with different levels of experience, KS also sees the problems of corruption and abuse of power as most outspoken in regard to the ANP. There is, nevertheless, little comfort to find in his impression of the Afghans in general.

**KS :** *They just tell lies, and they think you are stupid. They tell lies right in your face. They use their religion all the time, saying “oh no, you can’t do this or that”, and then they aren’t any damn better themselves. They don’t even know what their religion demands. They just do all sorts of things which we know are mortal sins in their religion. They do it openly.*

**Interviewer :** As for instance ?

**KS :** *They rape little boys. And they have sex with men all the time, and I don’t know what. And they just do it openly. Well, I fell damn sick, when I think about the things they are doing. It’s creepy.*<sup>12</sup>

### **From Animalistic to Mechanical Dehumanization: The Taliban**

In the post-deployment interview, KS denies that his view of the Taliban has changed. When we look at the actual statements, this is, however, a qualified truth.

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<sup>11</sup> Pre-deployment interview, KS : p.8, lines 9-13.

<sup>12</sup> Post-deployment interview, KS : p.15, line 20 ; p.16, line 6.



When KS in the pre-deployment interview was asked which of the ANA or the Taliban he respected the more, he emphasized that although he admires people who are fighting for a cause, neither the Taliban's course, nor the means by which they pursue it, warrant any respect.

**Interviewer** : What about the Taliban, how do you perceive them?

**KS** : (...). *It is just phased-out religion. It is. Fundamentally, I think it is great that you ... that you believe in something, that you aren't just an anarchist, but this ... this is just extreme, isn't it? It is just abusing your religion for something that in the end doesn't solve any damn problems. (...). I don't get it, dammit, I don't.*

**Interviewer**: What about as adversaries or as warriors or as soldiers, how do you perceive the Taliban in that respect ?

**KS** : *But, it's cowardly dogs. Well, they hide behind the civilians, (...) they plant IEDs, and you hardly ever see them, do you ?*<sup>13</sup>

When asked in the post-deployment interview about the worst experience he had during this particular tour of duty (and how he and his friends had coped with that), KS describes an episode where his platoon was caught by an IED in a ravine, and five men were injured. The following day the same thing happened to another Danish platoon in the area, and a man was killed. Recognizing that the design of this incident – attacking the enemy in a pathway with no possibilities of escape neither to the left nor to the right – constitutes a textbook example of an ambush, KS does not characterize the Taliban as “cowardly dogs” anymore.

**KS** : *But, he (the Taliban) is cunning in that way, but He is also ruthless by being so cunning. Of course, we could also be cunning, but you just don't behave like that. We could also go knocking on doors and beat them up until they give us some answers, and then go directly for the enemy. But you just don't do it that way. The world doesn't work that way – at least not our world (...).*<sup>14</sup>

This is where KS states that his view of the Taliban has not changed at all, that he “*knew they were like that*”.<sup>15</sup> His deployment experiences have not made him a fan of Taliban tactics. Nevertheless, instead of describing his adversaries as “*cowardly dogs*”, he now considers them “*cunning*” or “*ruthless*”. Admittedly, to be characterized as “*cunning*” can hardly be regarded as flattering. This is also clearly visible in the quotation above. The Taliban are cunning. The ISAF troops cannot be cunning, because cunningness would imply violating the Rules of Engagement and hence jeopardizing the legitimacy of the mission. In that respect, there is little difference between the cowardice of “*hiding behind civilians*” and the ruthless cunningness of beating up people “*until they give us some answers*”. To be cunning excludes being honourable, and is therefore – conceptually – very close to cowardice. Although similar, cowardice and cunningness are not the same. Instead

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<sup>13</sup> Pre-deployment interview, KS : p.6, lines 7-16.

<sup>14</sup> Post-deployment interview, KS : p.14, lines 9-12.

<sup>15</sup> Post-deployment interview, KS : p.14, line 19.

of simply disregarding the justness of both the Taliban's cause and of their means as he did before departure, KS now seems to recognize that the adversaries know what they are doing.

This is further emphasized by the choice of words in the two quotations above. "Cowardly dogs" is a fixed expression in Danish. It can be used about anyone acting fearfully. Hence, it is not the fact that this analogy uses a creature from the animal kingdom that makes this pre-deployment characterization of the Taliban an example of animalistic dehumanization. After all, "cunning" could just as well be described by an animalistic metaphor, e.g. "sly as a fox". Yet, the particular choice of metaphors is not innocent. The difference between KS' characterization of the Taliban before and after his deployment should be found in the semiotic valuation of dogs and foxes, of cowardice and cunningness. This is the semiotic difference between animalistic and mechanical dehumanization. To call another person a cowardly dog is to deprive him of the "courage" which ought to – but does not – distinguish him from dogs. To characterize another person as cunning is to deprive him of "humanity", the warmth and empathy that ought to – but in this case clearly does not – check the calculating goal rationality.

Before departure, KS scorned both the cause pursued and the means used by the Taliban. In hindsight, his view of the latter has changed. Moreover, concurrently with this change, he also seems to have altered his view of Islamic fundamentalism as "*phased-out religion*". The only persons in the area of operations whom KS describes in positive terms and as "*exceptions to the rule*", are old Mujahidin who "*follow the Quran rigorously*" and act as "*respectable human beings*".<sup>16</sup> Regardless of the claim that his view of the Taliban has not changed, KS points out those who have fought for a similar cause in the past and who still pursue it – albeit with more peaceful means – as the only people in the area he could relate to (a point that keeps recurring across the soldier interviews).

Granted, KS's perception of the Afghans in general has altered more dramatically than his view of the Taliban. Concerning the former, his position has changed from warm to cold (from empathy to animalistic dehumanization). As for the latter, the move was merely from cold to lukewarm (from one type of dehumanization to another). The point is, however, that whereas the derogatory animalistic dehumanization has grown in regard to the Afghan civilians, the ANA and the ANP, his view of the Taliban has moved in the opposite direction.

The empathy for those who – offhand – would have the greatest claim for it, the recipients of the soldiers' service, drops dramatically during deployment. While those who should be feared the most, seem to be evaluated on a more equal footing after departure than they did before. As mentioned above, this social logic is not unknown in military studies. Thus, according to Moskos (1970, p.151sq), American soldiers in Vietnam had a lot more respect for their North Vietnamese adversaries than they did for their South Vietnamese allies.

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<sup>16</sup> Post-deployment interview, KS : p.16, line 18 ; p.17, line 12.

Grossman also addresses the point that emotional withdrawal may “fail”, so that those intended to benefit from your service are regarded with contempt, and those you are intended to fight are regarded with admiration (Grossman, 2009, p.158sq). And it is not difficult to explain the social-psychological mechanism that causes friends to become foes and foes to become equals. First, counter-intuitive as it may seem, the local allied troops face a much harder challenge meeting the criteria applied to them than the adversaries. Since they (the locals) are the recipients of your service, those for whom you sacrifice your time and ultimately your life, they must prove worthy of this sacrifice. It is extremely difficult for anyone to prove worthy of a sacrifice. For the Afghans in this case – described as lying sodomists – this would be an insurmountable challenge. The adversaries on the other hand, only have to prove dangerous to fulfil their function.<sup>17</sup>

Second, whereas local civilians are peasants living under conditions unimaginable for the modern soldier, the enemy is a soldier – just like himself. The modern soldier may not agree with the cause for which his enemy is fighting. He may not approve of the tactics his enemy is using. Yet, the enemy is still a fighting man, putting himself in harm’s way. That may, of course, also be true in regard to the local troops, being trained by, living next to and patrolling side by side with the Danish soldiers. All these efforts have the purpose of establishing cross-national bonds of cohesion between the ISAF troops and the ANA. Yet, in spite of all good intentions, proximity may prove to be a two-edged sword. Instead of leading to a greater mutual trust, mutual dependency may also lead to a greater degree of mistrust. For instance if the close contact emphasises differences instead of similarities – a point which is probably amplified by the fact that in recent years, soldiers in ANA uniforms have turned their weapons against western military advisers and their fellow-countrymen on a number of occasions.

Although we by reading interview transcripts may understand the mechanisms leading to greater degrees of suspiciousness between Western soldiers and the recipients of their service, this does not alter the fact that it is a worrisome finding, predicting little good for the future of Afghanistan, or the fruitfulness of future attempts to train local troops in third-world countries.

### **Enhanced Mechanical Dehumanization: The Staff**

We now redirect our gaze to look at the equally interesting, and equally worrisome, relations between soldiers serving on the same tour of duty.

Already before his deployment, KS stated that he and other soldiers of the line benefitting from the bonds of unit cohesion and patrolling the area of operations, would have a much more genuine picture of what was going on on the ground than the high-ranking officers – the “silver stars” – dwelling behind their desks in camp:

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<sup>17</sup> Accordingly, even on non-combat missions, soldiers may regard their adversaries as dangerous, yet inspiring respect, and view the locals with contempt. If this is true, it might add to the reasons listed by Weibull (2012) why even “uneventful” deployments can have wide-ranging emotional consequences for the soldiers’ wellbeing.

**KS** : *You establish more friendships as a private. (...). Then we have the silver stars, haven't we? They don't talk to each other. (...) They don't look each other in the eyes. It's more just via the wireless (...). We also establish close bonds of friendship with our sergeants, don't we, who also just become part of the group, then. So, it [the bond of friendship] includes privates, sergeants and then the officers, with whom they serve.*<sup>18</sup>

At least two important distinctions are implied in this quotation: First, a general distinction between the rank and file on the one hand and the officers on the other ; second, a distinction between those officers who only get their information “via the wireless” – the “silver stars”, officers ranking Major or higher – and then those officers who go on patrol with the men. The latter may still be approached on a more “professional” basis, but they are nevertheless part of the group with which you identify.

In the opening remarks of the post-deployment interview, KS states that he was extremely disappointed with this deployment:

**Interviewer** : (...) [Did the] deployment live up to the expectations you had before ?

**KS** : *No !*

**Interviewer** : Positively or negatively ?

**KS**: *Negatively !*

**Interviewer** : How so ?

**KS** : *It just didn't. We were told that we were going to do a lot of things, which we never ever got to do. So our pre-deployment training ... it was useless, so to speak.*<sup>19</sup>

Though not unchecked, this perception is also found in numerous of the other post-deployment interviews among privates, sergeants and officers alike, and especially among those who have been on non-combat tours before. One obvious reason why this may have been the case on this particular mission is that the troops had been trained to use light infantry armour. They were hoping that this new equipment would turn the tide of war in Helmand as armour allegedly had turned the tide of war in the Danish Area of Operations in Bosnia 15 years earlier (Jakobsen, 2001). However, probably due to official ISAF policy following General Petraeus' call for “*disciplined use of force*” (ISAF News, 2010), the armour never got rolling. Moreover, the troops were placed in small patrol bases, compounds covering merely 600 square feet, with very few amenities at hand.

Whatever the reason for this change of tactics, the soldiers did not direct their frustration towards the ISAF command, but towards soldiers at the Main Operation Base (MOB), Camp Price, enjoying luxuries that they did not have themselves, and especially towards their own staff, apparently unaware of the realities on the ground. Other studies have also observed tensions between the troops who go on patrols on a daily basis and the “fobbits” staying safely behind the confines of the Forward Operation Base (Wong &

<sup>18</sup> Pre-deployment interview, KS : p.3, lines 14-21.

<sup>19</sup> Post-deployment interview, KS : p.1, lines 5-18.

Gerras, 2006; Griffin, 2006). The Danish military attempts to bridge the gap that are inevitably established between soldiers at the spearhead and those in supply functions by demanding that every deployed soldier go on patrols regularly. Yet, the fact that some will bear a larger burden of danger than others is difficult to ignore. At least in this case, the tension seems to have given rise to outspoken expression on both sides of the gap. Thus, KS states that, “... a certain hatred develops towards the people on the big bases”.<sup>20</sup> Later, when returning to the subject, he says: “We didn’t like these people (...). When you came into Camp Price for a couple of days once in a while, it was as if you weren’t really welcome there”.<sup>21</sup>

Rivalry and envy between different military branches and between different groups fulfilling different tasks is probably inevitable, and some “healthy competition” may sometimes even be productive. Yet, when – as in this case – the soldiers’ frustration is not only expressed through rivalry but affects their relation towards their superior officers, it is hard to regard it as anything but counterproductive. KS reports that they tried to use both “official” and “unofficial” channels of communication, when trying to make the staff aware of their dissatisfaction. At formal meetings they did have the opportunity to share their thoughts with their superior officers:

**KS :** *So in that way, it is articulated. It is just not being heard, is it? Or perhaps it was just easier to let us stay out there. I don’t know.*<sup>22</sup>

Deprived of the possibility of changing their situation, they instead seized other means, described by KS himself as “teenagers blowing off steam”,<sup>23</sup> such as obscene graffiti or – as we shall see below – to take matters in their own hands in other (innocent) ways. What is interesting about these reactions is first – as reflected by the teenager analogy – that the soldiers were aware that it would not change a thing. Second, reacting in that way, and with that awareness, only served to expose their inability to change anything, and hence strengthen their frustration.

**KS :** *And when they [the official channels] don’t work, you resort to, move to, [a] low[er] level. It’s stupid, of course, in hindsight, but at the time it seemed like a good idea.*<sup>24</sup>

Most worrisome, however, is that according to KS these frustrations and this febleness affected their loyalty towards the military and their task. Instead of merely seeing the “silver stars” as people whose position prevented them from sharing the bonds of cohesion, everyone outside that tightly coupled fellowship – Afghans and silver stars alike – became regarded as part of the same shapeless out-group:

<sup>20</sup> Post-deployment interview, KS : p.3, line 7.

<sup>21</sup> Post-deployment interview, KS : p.7, line 15-16.

<sup>22</sup> Post-deployment interview, KS : p.3, lines 18-19.

<sup>23</sup> Post-deployment interview, KS : p.4, lines 7-8.

<sup>24</sup> Post-deployment interview, KS : p.4, lines 14-15.

**KS** : (...) *You just want to tear down the Danish flag and then hoist the Jolly Roger, and then just be autonomous out there. And then just attack anyone that approaches. Because you are just forgotten, aren't you? You are just forgotten. They didn't even know what was going on out there.*<sup>25</sup>

This statement is, of course, alarming. The very idea of being “*autonomous*” and “*attack[ing] anyone that approaches*” signifies a shift of allegiance away from the military organization and towards the strong bonds of the outfit, jeopardizing the notion that when a nation deploy soldiers, everybody pulls together. There is no loyalty left towards the nation or the military organization, embodied in the flag. KS already articulated the gap between staff and line before departure, but the quotation above signifies a strengthening of these tensions. The “*silver stars*” are unaware of the realities on the ground, not just because of their remote position, but because they have “*forgotten*” their men. Hence, they, and not the men, have broken the bonds of mutual trust that ought to persist between the officers and the rank and file. This is not a case of animalistic dehumanization, as described in regard to the Afghans. This is another example of mechanical dehumanization, as in regard to the Taliban. The silver stars are not described as inferior. They are described as insensitive to the needs of the personnel. They are not deprived of their “*humaneness*”, but of their “*humanity*”.

Yet, one important difference in regard to the view of the staff, on the one hand, and of the Taliban, on the other, should be emphasized. In keeping with KS’s own framing – when he characterizes himself and others as “*teenagers blowing off steam*” – and with what will be argued with reference to the example below, there is a great difference between wanting to rebel and actually rebelling. The quotation above signifies a pronounced tension between staff and line. It is not an omen of mutiny.

### **Enhanced In-Group Cohesion: The Soldiers of the Line**

As stated in the theory section above, processes of exclusion and inclusion seem to coincide: hence, as staff officers and supply soldiers are seen as emotionally detached, the line soldiers become more firmly attached to each other.

The most vivid example of this reciprocity in the interviews analyzed here is probably the episode which KS himself characterizes as the most exciting event during the deployment. When asked about their best deployment experience, some soldiers talked about skirmishes where everything just worked smoothly ; others talked about the importance of comradeship (irrespective of particular episodes). KS, however, refers to the incident where he and his comrades got hold of an industrial refrigerator.

**KS** : (...) *It was something we had to steal from the Base. And it was insane, wasn't it? That in 120° Fahrenheit, there, you make us steal a fridge. But we had to do it.*

**Interviewer** : So you “*acquired*” a fridge ?

**KS** : *We “acquired” a fridge !*

<sup>25</sup> Post-deployment interview, KS : p.7, lines 4-6.

**Interviewer** : And that was the one experience which clearly stands out as the most positive ?

**KS** : *Yes, it was great.*

**Interviewer** : What made it great ? Was that to have access to cold water or the fact that you had been together when acquiring it ?

**KS** : *It was the mission (...) getting that large industrial fridge. It was great, dammit. (...).*

**Interviewer** : Was it a big American fridge or...?

**KS** : *Yes, it was an industrial fridge. One like those you see in restaurants, a gigantic one. We got that. (...) It will never be known. (...). They never come out on the patrol bases. So it was never discovered, was it?*<sup>26</sup>

Stealing a fridge isn't just stealing a fridge. The importance of that episode is only understandable in light of the above-mentioned tension between KS and his fellow-soldiers at the patrol base on the one hand and the staff and the supply troops at the MOB on the other. The fridge is the semiotic prism through which the interplay between in-group de-individuation and out-group dehumanization unfolds simultaneously at – at least – four different levels.

First, as stated by KS, they really did need a fridge out on the patrol base. And they probably needed it a lot more than people at the MOB already enjoying all sorts of luxuries. In that sense, acquiring a fridge should not be seen as a criminal act of stealing, but rather as a just act of redistribution, a view reflected in the statement that “... *in 120° Fahrenheit, there, you make us steal a fridge*”. In this sentence, grammatical agency, and, hence, moral (if not legal) blame, lies not with the soldiers, but with the undefined “you”, the cold and remote “system”, personified by the cold and insensitive staff officers.

Second, all excuses aside and as reflected in KS's own initial wording, taking something without asking *is* stealing. Making a “fridge raid” on the MOB was the patrol base soldiers' way of taking matters into their own hands. They could not “*tear down the Danish flag and hoist the Jolly Roger*” without facing a court martial for mutiny. What they could do, however, was to steal a fridge and in that way show their adversaries – in this case the superior officers – that they were not just going to let them have it their way.

Third, in this case, stealing a fridge is not that different from expressing your discontent through obscure graffiti paintings. It is just “teenagers letting off steam”. If the purpose of that symbolic act was to teach the superior officers a lesson, then maybe they should have chosen an act that would actually have made a difference. Stealing a fridge which – as anyone who has worked in 120° Fahrenheit would agree – you need more than those from whom you steal it, is not much of a substitute for mutiny; especially not, if your chances of being discovered are virtually zero. Stealing a fridge, which no one will miss is acting “as if” (Wedeen, 1998). In that respect, stealing a fridge is not just a symbolic act. It is an empty gesture, a way of pretending that you are at the brink of mutiny while in

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<sup>26</sup> Post-deployment interview, KS : p.6, lines 2-22.

reality, the paralysis signified by your act is more likely to prove that all things considered, you will in the end let the officers have it their way.

Fourth, while stealing the fridge may not make much of a difference in the actual relation between staff officers and the soldiers at the patrol base, such symbolic acts still make a difference among those who actually participate in their enactment. In regard to catching the superior officers' (the out-group's) attention, the "fridge raid" was an empty gesture. When it comes to confirming the bonds of cohesion between the soldiers participating in the act (the in-group), the memory of the "fridge raid" remains the single most exciting event during a six-month deployment to war. The soldiers who went on the "fridge raid" did so together and, according to KS, the fact that they did it as a group made all the difference:

*KS : We were a group (...) : 'now we fucking steal that fridge'. And then we did it. It wasn't just me. We did it. We did it, dammit.<sup>27</sup>*

Using a distinction originally coined by Merton (1996), we may say that while the manifest function of stealing a fridge – to show the officers that they could not have it their way – was not fulfilled, the latent function of the act – to amplify group cohesion – was an unequivocal success. Merton's example is the Hopi rain dance ritual. Regardless of the fact that dancing in a particular way may not cause the rain to fall, the ritual still fulfils an important social function in the Hopi community: it creates a sense of belonging between those who participate (and it reifies social boundaries dividing participants from non-participants). Likewise, regardless of the fact that stealing a fridge may not cause the officers' opinion to change, the act still fulfils the function in the community of fighting men: it creates a sense of belonging, and it reifies the social divide between line and staff.

Just like KS's view of the Taliban and the Afghans in the area of operations seems to evolve following deployment, so does his view of his fellow-soldiers. As previously mentioned, the emotional withdrawal was much more outspoken in regard to the immediate recipients of the soldiers' service – the civilians, the ANA and the ANP – than it was in regard to the Taliban. What the analysis of the relation between the soldiers of the line and the staff has shown is not, however, that the emotional detachment of the locals leads to a strengthening of the bonds between the soldiers in general. Instead, the only bonds that were strengthened were between the soldiers sharing the hardships of patrol base life, and everybody else, including their fellow-soldiers on the large bases and their superior officers of the staff, were dehumanized.

## **Conclusion**

Deployment to war alters the soldiers' view of different groups in the area of operations. Results from the quantitative analysis suggested that the soldiers' level of empathy decreases following deployment, and that this decrease affects all other groups,

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<sup>27</sup> Post-deployment interview, KS : p.9, lines 7-9.



civilians and fellow-soldiers alike. The interviewee, KS, was chosen because he – judging from the quantitative data – can be seen as a typical example of this decrease.

The analysis of his view of other groups provides us with two important, and somewhat worrisome, findings. First, the deployment seems to alter his perception of both the local Afghans and of the Taliban. Before departure, he regarded the Taliban as “cowardly dogs”. On his return, it is the local Afghans – the civilians, the police and the Afghan troops – who are regarded as less than human. The Taliban, on the contrary, seem to be viewed with greater respect. Judging from his post-deployment statements, both the local Afghans and the Taliban are deprived of their human characteristics. But whereas he gives up empathy and substitutes animalistic dehumanization for it as regards the local Afghans, his view of the Taliban changes from animalistic to mechanical dehumanization.

Second, this deployment apparently amplified the distinction between staff and line soldiers to such extent that the loyalty of the latter could be called into question. Before departure, KS already emphasized that the bonds of cohesion would only include those sharing the hardships of war: it might include NCOs and lower-ranking officers, but certainly not the desk-bound “Silver Stars”. After his return, however, not only does he regard the superior officers as outsiders, deprived the possibility of sharing the strong social bonds of the combat unit, but his view of officers and staff soldiers can best be categorized as a form of mechanical dehumanization, not unlike the way he characterizes the Taliban.

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