Military Training. Group, Culture, Total Institution, and Torture

Charlie Barnao

1. **Author information**
   Charlie Barnao
   Department of Giurisprudenza, Economia e Sociologia, University of Catanzaro, Italy

2. **Author e-mail address**
   Charlie Barnao
   E-mail: charlie.barnao@unicz.it

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Charlie Barnao*

Corresponding author:
Charlie Barnao
E-mail: charlie.barnao@unicz.it

Abstract

The subject of this article is the military institution, with particular reference to the training, the military culture and socialization processes that characterize it. My approach to the subject is through the results of micro-sociological research, which mostly refer to the conceptual instruments of Symbolic Interactionism.

In the first part, I introduce several studies that describe and analyze the main aspects of the military institution from a cultural point of view. Within the total military institution, military cultures are transmitted through socialization processes that recognize, as a basic unit, the primary group as the main agent of socialization. Training, in turn, follows certain specific phases during which recruits are guided as they learn the norms, values, traditions, techniques, etc., which mark the passage from a 'civilian' to a 'military' life.

As well as the primary group, the use of rituals is another essential element for military socialization. These help the recruits to learn, but also reinforce specific norms and values, even outside the rigid formal training context, and for the rest of their military life. The final part of my work deals with the connection between military training and torture.

Keywords: military institution, culture, Symbolic Interactionism, total institution, torture.

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* Department of Giurisprudenza, Economia e Sociologia, University of Catanzaro, Italy.

1. Introduction

The subject of this article is the military institution, with particular reference to the training, the military culture and the socialization processes that characterize it.

Even though this theme is particularly significant, it is often neglected by social scientists. Its relevance derives from the fact that war is a social fact *par excellence* (Dal Lago, 2005) as it is closely interconnected with the social cohesion of society (here, we are thinking of mass deaths, mourning, the destruction that war entails). It also presents itself as a set of particularly complex processes (economic, cultural, political, juridical, etc.) involved in the transformation of society itself.[1]

Ours is an increasingly militarized society that manifests its profound transformation through the phenomenon that some scholars have called the double movement. This is the trend which involves policing carried out by the military and military action carried out by the police (Dal Lago, Palidda, 2010; Barnao, Saitta, 2014).[2]

It is against this background of great change, for example, that we have seen a radical shift in the structure of the armed forces and police forces in many European countries (see Caplow, Vennesson, 2000; Barnao, Saitta, 2012). This is mainly due to: a) the growing commitment of international war operations and so-called 'peace keeping'; b) the abolition of military service and the emergence of professional armies; c) the creation of privileged channels for the passage from army to police, and consequently the entry of huge numbers of veterans into the police force; d) the de facto militarization of police activities through the use of technological war equipment, for example, to control borders and street demonstrations (Bigo, Tsoukala, 2008).

However, despite its relevance, this subject is often overlooked by social science literature, or is not dealt with in enough detail or with due care. The reasons for this may be both political and methodological (as we know, these two perspectives often intertwine and overlap). It is an especially difficult subject to study from a political point of view as it is so complex, and involves such disparate dimensions and the most diverse levels of society. In fact, 'war is the continuation of politics by other means' (Von Clausewitz, 1940), but also, 'politics is the continuation of war by other means' (Foucault, 2003).

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[1] For a discussion on this topic, see the relevant essay by Dal Lago (2005).

[2] In Italy, for example, police mobile units and street police are characterized by a certain militarization, often due to the fact that, for the past twenty years, recruitment has predominantly favoured ex-army volunteers who have served in war zones (Balkans, Iraq, Afghanistan, etc.) (cfr. Barnao, Saitta, 2014; Palidda, 2015).

From a specifically methodological point of view, access to the research field is often extremely difficult, especially for independent sources. As a total institution, military institutions are closed off and frequently impenetrable for those on the outside, and military institutions rarely allow access to external subjects wishing to study its characteristics. Most of the research on the military institution, therefore, has been conducted either by sources within the institution itself or by those who are not sufficiently independent from it (see Cockerham 2003).

In this paper, I approach the subject by using the results of micro-sociological research, which mainly refer to the conceptual instruments of Symbolic Interactionism. In fact, the concepts typical of the interactionist tradition (e.g. primary group, total institution, socialization) become central to any research that deals with the study of social relations related to military training.

I will begin by introducing some of the studies that describe and analyze the main aspects of the military institution from a cultural point of view. Within the total military institution, military cultures are transmitted through socialization processes that see the primary group, the basic unit, as the main agent of socialization, since it provides emotional support and precise normative indications and values to its members throughout the process of socialization during training. Training, in turn, follows well-defined phases during which recruits are guided as they learn the norms, values, traditions, techniques, etc., which mark their passage from a 'civilian' to a 'military' life.

Together with the primary group, the use of rituals is another essential element for military socialization. These help recruits to learn, but also reinforce, specific norms and values, even outside their formal and rigid training context, and for the rest of their military life.

The final part of my work will deal, albeit briefly, with the connection between military training and torture. Torture is increasingly present in contemporary military action, and is carried out by soldiers in actions that are an expression of the *primacy of security*, especially in the aftermath of 11 September 2001.[3] However, the deep-rooted connection between torture and training does not stop there. In fact, military training itself can be considered a form of torture, as it uses techniques, interactional dynamics, and a psychological model of reference, typical of torture.

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[3] On this topic see, for example: Lyon (2007), Bigo (2014).

2. Military culture and total institution

Whatever the training model pursued, there are certain forms of interaction and group dynamics common to all military training courses, and these aspects have been the objects of micro-sociological research.

Micro-sociological studies on military institutions focus their attention on the armed forces from an organizational point of view. In fact, by definition, war is a social activity based on some form of organization (Creveld, 1991), and a military organization is a type of organization that has its own norms, values, rituals and specific forms of socialization (Cockerham, 2003).[4]

Berger and Luckmann (1967) give an accurate description of these aspects, and underline that during secondary socialization (as is the case with the military training experience) the internalized world is a reality characterized by social cohesion, social norms, affective contents and cognitive components. These are elements that characterize what we can call a military culture.

The military culture is made up of norms, songs, specific languages and ways of thinking, etc., which is socialized and transmitted to individuals who are 'recruits to be molded', 'infants to be educated', through what can be called a real regression towards an infantile psychology (Battistelli, Ammendola, Greco, 2008).

Goffman speaks of similar feelings of infantilism within the total institutions (Goffman, 1961), and in fact, he explicitly refers to punishments and the role they play within total institutions:

> There are some special features of the privilege system which should be noted.
> First, punishments and privileges are themselves modes of organization peculiar to total institutions. Whatever their severity, punishments are largely known in the inmate's home world as something applied to animals and children; this conditioning, behavioristic model is not widely applied to adults, since failure to maintain required standards typically leads to indirect disadvantageous consequences and not to specific immediate punishment at all. And privileges in the total institution, it should be emphasized, are not the same as perquisites, indulgences, or values, but merely the absence of deprivations one ordinarily expects not to have to sustain. The very notions of punishments and privileges are not ones that are cut from civilian cloth (Goffman, 1961: 51).

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[4] See also Creveld (2017).

Some micro-sociological studies on the military institution have highlighted how the military is a total institution. Total institutions (for example, prisons, monasteries, army barracks, psychiatric wards) are institutions that control the behavior of group members in a 'total' way, that is, through a comprehensive series of rules that regulate (often, even the smallest details) all their behaviors. It is within the four walls of these institutions that the individual members experience the totality of their daily relationships, and carry out their duties. Institutions such as these are normally characterized by a complete separation between the inside and the outside world, so that it becomes extremely difficult to obtain information about what happens inside them. Obviously, there is a difference between the control exercised over the individual behavior of those living inside a prison, in comparison to the control over the behavior of those who live in a monastery. However, some of the characteristics and interaction dynamics are common to all total institutions.

This particular feature of the military institution is important for two reasons. On the one hand, it explains why it is so difficult to acquire information about it, in fact, *by definition* total institutions do not give (or give very little) information about what happens inside them. On the other hand, being a total institution underlines just how much power the military institution has over the activities of its members, and – with particular reference to our object of study – highlights the total control that it has over the training practices that take place within it. In exercising such control over every detail of the training activities, the army cadres pass on their culture through socialization processes.

Zurcher's research (1965) studied the life of sailors on a warship, intended as a total institution. Every single aspect of the sailors' daily life took place on the ship, under the same authority that gave out precise orders specifying the daily duties for each individual, based on a general rational plan. Within this world, there was a distinct separation between the inside and the outside. On the inside, there were a series of specific rituals and a language that was practically incomprehensible to anyone on the outside. On arrival in a friendly port, the sailors would go ashore, leaving the total institution behind them in order to find 'freedom' in the external world.

Within general military culture, we can identify many different subcultures. There are, for example, different subcultures (which consist of norms, values, songs, specific uniforms, etc.) depending on which corps, regiment, platoon or team the soldier belongs to.

The military subculture that contains the founding nucleus, the essential and fundamental aspects of the more general military culture, is the Special Forces. These soldiers are trained to fight in non-conventional war situations

(ambush situations, guerrilla warfare, etc.) in enemy-controlled areas (Cockerham, 2003).

Of all the Special Forces, the paratroopers are considered the best soldiers, but this has nothing to do with the fact that they jump out of a plane. Rather, it is a conviction related to the fact that they are volunteers, their training is particularly hard and vigorous, their units are strong and cohesive, their leaders are charismatic individuals, and they have a particular propensity for combat (see Cockerham, 1978; Just, 1970; Segal *et al.*, 1984).

Indeed, the Special Forces can be considered a total institution within the more general military total institution (Cockerham, 2003). The Green Berets (the nickname by which the US army special forces are known) are an example in this sense, that is, they are a closed society within a closed society. In fact, they are a special corps, which is: a) in many ways isolated from the rest of the military institution; b) made up of many small primary groups (teams), c) that reciprocally share a common and precise subculture, distinct from that of the general military institution. In fact, the members of special corps usually only frequent people belonging to the same world.

3. The group

The macrosocial level only partly influences the behavior of soldiers. Instead, the units of soldiers, or small groups, constitute the specific 'world' of individual soldiers within the more general military organization (Cockerham, 2003).

In military life, the main agent of socialization (that is, the agent involved in transferring the specific culture that is the object of the socialization process) is undoubtedly the primary group. The primary group (Cooley, 1962) is a concept that has influenced all major studies on military institutions. According to Cooley, the primary group is a group 'characterized by intimate face-to-face association and cooperation' and is primary because it is 'fundamental in forming the social nature and ideals of the individual' (Cooley, 1962: 23).

This is the basic unit, a small group of soldiers with whom the individual soldier shares most of his military experience. The unity between the individuals within the group produces common and profound feelings of belonging, and the essence of the primary group is its emotional and functional character (Faris, 1932). Its emotional character is what gives cohesion to the group, while its functional character is expressed in the activities that each member carries out. In the military institution the primary group is usually made up of a small unit (for example a squad, platoon),

composed of a limited number of people who have developed a common way of adapting to the environment and a common way behaving in it (Cockerham, 2003).

In general, within military institutions, these are the conditions that push individuals to create particularly significant relationships within their primary groups: a) their pre-military affiliations are interrupted and their non-military social status is low; b) the soldier is isolated from other social groups; c) military life is so different from civilian life that primary groups in civilian life are unable to provide socio-psychological support; d) the functional interdependence of the people who constitute a military unit tends to be a closed social system, due to the particularly specialized nature of the activities that take place within it (Coates, Pellegrin, 1965).

The importance of the primary group within the military institution was the main aspect highlighted by the pioneering work of military sociology The American Soldier (Stouffer *et al.*, 1949), in which the behaviors of small groups were studied during World War II. In particular, in combat, the primary group was seem to carry out two main functions: 1) it indicated and emphasized the correct behavioral norms; 2) and it gave support to the individual in stressful situations.

In fact, group bonds can become particularly strong in situations of stress, danger and deprivation, especially where escape is impossible in the face of a threat from outside the group (Kellett, 1982; Marshall, 2000). Research on American soldiers (Marshall, 2000) and German soldiers (Shils, Janowitz, 1948) during the Second World War, reached similar conclusions about the importance of the primary group in combat.

There are other important studies that highlight military group dynamics and being part of a common subculture. Hockey (1996; 2016) studied a British Army infantry company in its life within the barracks, during field exercises, and combat operations in Northern Ireland. This scholar focused on the subculture of soldiers in different aspects of their daily life. He noted how the development of empathy and affection among members of the primary group was continuously reinforced by training activities: each soldier was trained to coordinate his movements on the battlefield with those of the other members of the group, in order to obtain mutual cover and protection against possible enemy attack. The continuous and incessant repetition of exercises and simulation was used to teach the members of the primary group how to respond automatically in real combat situations.

Obviously, relationships within the primary group are not the only source of motivation for combat. Esprit de corps, training, discipline, leadership, ideology and patriotism have been identified as particularly important in this regard (see Faris, 1995; Kellett, 1982). However, the fundamental links that

unite individuals within small military units and motivate them to support each other, remain those of the primary group (Cockerham, 2003).

The primary group transmits norms, values, attitudes and behavioral standards, elements that do not only concern the primary group in the strictest sense, but also the wider military community. The concepts of duty, homeland, honor and esprit de corps are transmitted through the primary group, whatever the specific sub-culture of belonging (navy, army, air force, etc.). In short, individual behavior in military organizations is guided and sustained – at the micro level – by the relations within the primary group and influenced by symbolic group elements such as norms, values and military attitudes (Cockerham, 2003).

4. Socialization, training, and military re-socialization

From the ethnographic study by Faris (1975) on basic and advanced infantry training, it emerges that recruits are actually socialized to accept the values and norms that are specific to military culture. Wamsley's study (1972) on the air force argues that military socialization involves a substantial change in the attitudes and values of those who are socialized.

The question is, how is culture – and the corresponding military subcultures – transmitted to the military members of the institution? Moreover, what characterizes the processes of military socialization?

If, by socialization, we mean the processes used to transmit a certain cultural heritage, military training can be considered a re-socialization, that is, a new socialization in which the protagonist is an individual who has already been socialized to a 'civilian' life, but who is re-socialized to a new 'military' culture. The protagonist of this process is a social actor who, on the one hand, experiences the disintegration of their previously acquired system of norms and values (from their 'civilian' life) and on the other, learns a new culture (norms, values, languages, songs, etc.) necessary to act in a new context (military), and completely different from the previous one.

As we have already seen, this is a new cultural horizon that is learned within a total institution and which has, as its main agent of socialization, the primary group. It is indeed through the incessant and fundamental daily action of the primary group that the process of re-socializing the soldier takes place.

Using the conceptual instruments proposed by the anthropologist Van Gennep (1908) we can see how the soldier's process of socialization takes place during certain precise phases. The initial training process for the military socialization of a recruit is characterized by three different phases: a

preliminary phase, or separation, a transition phase, and an aggregation phase (see Barnao 2009; Barnao, Saitta, 2012; 2014).[5]

In the first phase, or *separation*, the recruits abandon the social position and behavioral forms they held in their former life. During this phase, all previously acquired habits and previously learned norms and values are erased. The objective of the military institution in this very early phase (normally linked to the first days of training in barracks) is to destabilize and standardize (Barnao, 2009, Barnao, Saitta, 2012, Barnao, Saitta, 2014), so they are no longer dependent on the points of reference from their previous civilian life. This happens on a daily basis at this stage, and for new recruits this can take the form of rituals, including cutting their hair or wearing different clothes. These practices clearly aim to erase the values, status and roles from their 'civilian life' (Barnao, Saitta, 2014). Some of the educational tools used by their trainers are sleep deprivation, forcing them to take up stressful positions, and actions of verbal, physical and psychological violence (see Barnao, 2009; Barnao, Saitta, 2014).

In the second phase, recruits pass through a *transition* period in which they are neither on one side nor the other, but find themselves in an intermediate space between the state of departure and that of arrival. In the case of initial training courses, all the recruits who have abandoned their former positions in the 'civilian' world, thanks to the previous phase, are not yet 'soldiers' (or 'marines' if they are training to enter that corps; or only 'cadet-paratroopers' if they are training to enter the 'Folgore', the Italian paratrooper brigade, etc.). 'Entrusting' is the key word during this period, as it is a phase in which, generally, the relationships between the recruits are not always regulated by clear rules and the main (if not the only and undisputed) point of reference is the instructor. He is the one who seems to have absolute power over the daily lives of the recruits. A special relationship is established between instructor and recruits, though it seems to swing between that of 'welcoming father' and 'executioner', between a figure who is there to listen and help with the difficulties (emotional, psychological) that result from such huge changes, and that of one who is willing to punish in a ruthless and sometimes incomprehensible way (see Barnao, Saitta, 2014).

All these activities aim to shape and forge the 'military soul' of the social actor who wishes to be part of the military institution. They learn the rituals of formal training (marching, salutes, etc.), and carry out basic training (regarding

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[5] It is the well-known conceptual instrumentation of the rite of passage (Van Gennep, 1908). There are numerous studies on military socialization, with reference to its rites of passage. See: (Yarmolinsky, 1971; Cockerham, 1973; Aran, 1974; Arkin, Dobrofsky, 1978; Klein, 1999; Winslow, 1999; Holyfield, 2011).

weapons and combat). Their daily actions are still pervaded by violence and the educational tools used by the instructors such as sleep and food deprivation, the use of stressful positions and psychological and verbal violence.

The last phase of any military training is *aggregation*. During this phase, the individual is 'introduced into society', and becomes a relatively stable member, that is, with precise duties and rights. In the military institution this phase is characterized by formal aggregation rituals such as 'the oath' (see Battistelli, 2008) and, often, also by informal initiation rituals (see Barnao, Saitta, 2012; 2014).

5. Rituals

Rituals are a vehicle for transmitting cultural norms and values, in fact, they constitute an important form of social conditioning[6] through which the soldier's process of socialization is developed and perpetuated. It is through rituals that training and socialization reach places and times external to those involved in ordinary training, making the process of military training 'continuous'.

Rituals, in fact, occupy most of the soldiers' time and affect all their main social interactions, both those related to training in the strictest sense (formal and institutional training: marching, salutes, flag raising, etc.), and those related to other more informal daily social interaction (for example those related to leisure time) thus totalizing the training process, even outside formal training (see also Winslow, 2004).

According to a study on the training of Australian aviation cadets, the ratio of time spent on formal training rituals (marches, ceremonies, etc.) and the time dedicated to ordinary training (in this case study: notions of military law and 'character training'), is 3 to 1 (Stevenson, 1996).

Studies on military rituals highlight two of the main effects on the training of soldiers: *blind obedience* and *dehumanization*.

There is a close link between the 'camaraderie' amongst soldiers, reinforced by group membership rituals, and the blind obedience that is in turn encouraged and reinforced by the various combat training activities. Rituals teach automatic obedience and never to question the orders and rules of the instructor, of the group, and of the military institution in general. Obedience is blind in the sense that it is 'non-reflexive'. It is, therefore, a type

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[6] On this subject there is a vast literature. Here it will suffice to recall the classic works on the theme by Emile Durkheim and Victor Turner.

of obedience that does not question orders because it is unable to evaluate its effects (see Wolfendale, 2007).

The other effect caused by many rituals is that of 'dehumanization'. Rituals, and especially the violent ones linked to hazing, develop the characteristics of dehumanization and desensitization in soldiers, through the development of resistance to the vision of suffering on the one hand, and the ability to coldly inflict pain and humiliation on the other (Conroy, 2000; Wolfendale, 2007; Barnao, 2009; Barnao, Saitta, 2012; Barnao, Saitta, 2014).

The elementary learning mechanism responsible for making military rituals work is that of operant conditioning (Grossman, 2014). In fact, repetitive actions can often reinforce behaviors considered virtuous within the institution, while punishing deviant behavior, and producing – over time – automatic responses in the soldiers who use them.

6. Torture and military training

There is an increasingly strong and recurring link between torture and military institutions.

Torture is officially prohibited by international conventions on how to conduct war, and is also publicly condemned by military and government officials. Up to now, military torture has been widespread,[7] and this incongruity has been dramatically emphasized by the war against terrorism that began after 11th September 2001. The United States (signatory to several conventions banning the use of torture), for example, has been systematically using torture against terrorism suspects in Afghanistan, Iraq, Guantanamo Bay and elsewhere.

Since 'special forces units are designed to conduct unconventional warfare' (i.e. the kind of war being fought against terrorists) (Cockerham, 2003: 505), their training model can be considered the 'ideal type' (in a Weberian sense) of training model used by the military institution. Probably, for this reason, the use of torture is closely connected to elite military training. In fact,

> The training of elite military personnel builds on the dispositions generated during basic training, creates dispositions that make the performance of torture psychologically easier, and enables torturers to rationalize and justify

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[7] Amnesty International, in 2018, identifies 141 countries that use torture, many of whom are 'democratic countries', that are signatories to the above conventions. About the topic of the relation between torture and democracy, see the important study of Rejali (2009).

their actions. This process is enhanced by the use of the discourse of professionalism. The discourse of professionalism allows torturers to restrict their moral vision to their professional activities: it helps instil a belief in their special moral permission to torture and a belief that torture is necessary for the protection of national security (Wolfendale, 2007: 161).

Crelinsten (1993) describes three ways in which a combatant might become a torturer: promotion, conscription or by accident. He could be promoted or assigned to special training in a special unit dealing with interrogations, or he could be conscripted into the army or directly into the special unit, or he could find himself in a torture unit by accident – for example by requesting a transfer to a different area or a different city.

In any case 'basic military training and the training of torturers is on a continuum. Professional torturers are the most professional military personnel' (Wolfendale, 2007: 161).

However, the link between military training and torture seems even deeper. A recent study on military training (Barnao, 2018), carried out with a autoethnographic approach, and the analysis of the contents of the main military training manuals, has highlighted a surprising correspondence and overlap between military training and torture (at least how this latter is represented in the main military manuals on the subject).

The basic training process of all members of the military, and one that is common to the different armed forces, is called *torturative training*. In other words, all the soldiers are trained through a process that is, in fact, a form of torture. The correspondence between torture and training can be highlighted in three main ways: a) the phases of military training (separation, transition, aggregation) coincide precisely with those of torture; b) the interactional dynamics that develop between trainer and recruit, on the one hand, and torturer and victim, on the other, are very similar; c) the psychological model of reference (operant conditioning) is the same for torture and training (Barnao, 2018).

The potential implications of these results on the study of mental health amongst military personnel (think, for example, of all the research on PTSD), and on the study of the social interaction between the military and civilian population (at home, in situations of public order, and abroad in so-called 'peace keeping' operations) are easy to understand.

7. Conclusions

This article began by presenting some aspects of the military institution from a cultural point of view. Military cultures are transmitted within the

military total institution, through training courses that recognise the primary group as the main agent of socialization. Training, in turn, follows certain precise phases during which the recruit is guided in his transition from a 'civilian' to a 'military' life.

Together with the primary group, the other essential element for military socialization are rituals. Specific norms and values are learned and reinforced through these, even outside the formal and rigid context of military training, and perpetuate the process of socialization even in places and times external to those of ordinary training.

In the final part, we dealt with the relationship between military training and torture. Torture is increasingly present in contemporary military action, and is carried out by soldiers during international policing operations, peacekeeping, etc. It is an expression, according to some, of what is known as the *primacy of security*. However, the connection between torture and training appears even more radical. Military training itself, in fact, can be considered a form of torture, since it uses techniques, interactional dynamics, and a psychological model of reference, typical of torture.

Military training is a particularly relevant subject, but it is also difficult to study because it involves us, directly or indirectly, in a profound way, and is inextricably linked to war and its effects. Analyzing and trying to understand the main characteristics of the soldiers we want to train, can, perhaps, help us to better understand who we are and how we are transforming our social relations in the aftermath of September 11, 2001.

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