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In and between: possible bridging positions for the Defence Forces

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Introduction

This article outlines some possibilities for developing certain types of knowledge and practice held within the Defence Forces (DF) and evident in the other articles in this volume. The possibilities could be viewed as ‘insights we can work with’ (Eisner, 2001: 138), arising from the on-the-ground experiences of all the research participants and the researcher-writers. In different ways, the articles here show the DF in a bridging position between a traditional, militarised and masculinised view of itself, on the one hand and, on the other, glimpses of other ways of being and engaging, capable of facilitating new positions, in response to our times.

The primary role traditionally articulated for the DF is to carry out militarised missions, associated with specific actions such as the crisis management operations described by McNamara (this volume). Other articles (Keyes, Markey, O’Brien, Ryan S., this volume) demonstrate tensions between this role and challenging experiences in the field. The insights in these articles offer sources for the creation of new knowledge and practice, out of a consideration of suffering, peace, negotiation, gender differences, personal remembrances, dislocation and ethical challenges. In adding such considerations to the traditional repertoire of military discourses and actions, the writers are also implicitly scrutinising and challenging traditional concepts of militarism. The articles by O’Lehan (this volume) and O’Callaghan (this volume) also show the DF in a responsive in/between state, open to the flow of information from multiple sources and adapting behaviour to suit situational challenges.

Discourse

In giving meaning to the events they narrate, and in indicating possibilities for the future, the writers and the respondents in their various research studies draw on many discourses. Discourses are meaning-resources, meaning-repertoires or ways of knowing the world. They characterise ways of talking, thinking, writing, behaving and theorising. They can define or position people or communities in particular ways. They act to legitimise certain kinds of behaviour and they provide assumptions about what is normal or desirable in any particular case.

Discourses are implicated in how we understand ourselves as persons (for example, as soldiers, civilians, academics, activists or leaders), in how we interpret what we see around us and what we experience, and in how we construct meaning about ourselves, the groups of which we are part, other groups, and the world at large. We are all inserted into

a myriad of different discourses, some competing with and some complementing each other.

Discourses that value qualitative knowledge

The articles assert, and in some cases offer, the need for a new vocabulary to describe what is going on, 'so that we can take part in new kinds of conversations' (Keyes), and not only 'dismantle communicative barriers' (ibid), but create new ways to see and deal with various situations. In this, they demonstrate a desire to retain the best of the DF's traditional knowledge and actions, but also to make suitable changes, in an adequate response to the needs of the present and the future. This is a project of knowledge, action and leadership. It requires an expansion of the boundaries of the DF, not in the numerical or quantitative sense, but in qualitative ways of knowing and being in the world.

A great deal of human knowledge comes to us in the form of qualitative data and narrative, humans think and knowledge flows among them in qualitative narrative form, as well as narratives of statistics or 'hard' data. Qualitative narratives about critical events or traumatic times are not simply 'true stories' or recitations of facts; they are 'thoughtful impositions of coherence on experience that otherwise essentially lack meaning' (Oakley, 2007: 22). Markey calls this 'conceptualising the situation'. Ryan outlines the qualitative knowledge on which groups draw when they practice iconoclasm and 'othering'. Insisting on the value of qualitative ways of knowing the world is not an attempt to displace quantitative forms of knowledge, but simply to assert the need for a discourse of equality of both forms.

Positioning within discourses

Discourses also provide positions within which we can locate ourselves. They allow us to position other people and they allow other people to position us. Positioning is the discursive process whereby people, groups or communities are located in conversations and other practices as recognisable participants in a narrative or repertoire. Whenever we speak or act, we are positioning others (interactive positioning) and positioning ourselves (reflexive positioning). Others, of course, are also interactively positioning us, and are reflexively positioning themselves (Ryan, 2001, 2011). Many outsiders, for example, interactively position the DF as unitary and univocal, whereas a scrutiny of actual practice (illuminated in the articles in this volume) reveals multiplicity and the capacity for further multiple positionings.

The articles here imply that the DF has the capacity to position itself as a co-creator of knowledge. Individuals within the organisation can co-create knowledge together, internally. The organisation can also co-create knowledge with other communities, by interactively positioning them as holders and creators of important and useful knowledge, and by reflexively positioning itself as a recipient of knowledge.

Honouring traditional positionings

Before moving to outline some of the 'new' positioning possibilities, I wish to emphasise the importance of honouring more traditional roles and the actions associated with them, such as caring for communities and helping them to cope. In this mode, outside agents identify abused and traumatised communities, and position them as targets for care, with

specific needs to be met. Sometimes, in crises, this positioning is necessary for a time, as described by McNamara, in order to manage the immediate crisis. But it does not rule out the possibility of relating to traumatised communities in other ways that recognise their place-based knowledge and capacity to contribute to solutions.

Looking within

The task of looking within is about how to engage with 'self'. Within the DF, the 'self' is present in at least two ways represented in this volume. O'Brien, by selecting them as respondents in her research, positions Non-Commissioned Officers and privates alongside other officers, as carriers and creators of knowledge significant for the organisation. Although she does not comment on it, this is an important 'seed' for taking the knowledge-conversation forward: it demonstrates a recognition that all parts of the organisation have a part to play in the construction of new and relevant knowledge.

More overtly, by concentrating on the gendered identities of the members of the DF, O'Brien makes another important contribution. In the simple naming of men as a category, her work has the effect of transferring men 'from a universal nothing to a specific something' (Kronsell, 2012: 16). We should be careful about assuming that discourses surrounding gender difference affect the DF more than any other working environment. Sexually differentiated behaviour and attitudes are characteristic of all work organizations, and should be researched as such (ibid). However, in every organization, if we are to make progress towards diversity in gender relations, it is crucial to name men as a category, in contrast to the usual assumption that a unitary masculinity is the invisible norm, and that women are the problematic 'other'.

When it comes to gender discourses, we need also to ask about being simultaneously positioned as a man, a soldier, and somebody delivering care for traumatised communities. The gendered division of care work is not a fact of nature. It is possible to imagine a world where care work is both valued and shared, along the lines of what Fraser (1997) calls the 'universal caregiver' model. Thus, it should be possible to position soldiers as care workers, but without reinforcing the gendered division of labour that sees care as the preserve of women, something they are good at because of an essential feminine nature

O'Brien's article suggests the possibility of drawing on knowledge of human multiplicity, so that both women and men are free to critique and resist normative discourses of what it is to be a man or a woman. This is a challenge to the traditionally masculinist underpinnings of the military field of thought and action (cf Cockburn: 2007: 246). Nevertheless, O'Brien's research and writing imply the possibility of individuality within a democratic and egalitarian organization.

Co-creating knowledge with actors outside the DF

It is also possible for the DF to position itself as a recipient of knowledge from communities outside its boundaries, such as Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)

which also have a role as providers of care. Keyes refers to this as ‘being open to a flow of knowledge’ between NGOs and the DF. The possibility exists for them to engage with each other as co-creators of knowledge.

Expanded discourses of engagement also position communities as knowers, in possession of valuable traditional knowledge. Markey, for example, names the value of the traditional knowledge held in Darfur and he meditates intensively on the place, the ‘land of the Fur’, in order to engage with a deeply complex conflict situation. He also asserts the value of knowledge generated through struggle, dislocation and disruption. Ryan’s respondents have a deep attachment to place and he illuminates the importance of restoring emotionally and symbolically important cultural artefacts, on a par with infrastructure like bridges and sewage systems. O’Brien’s article also draws attention to the positioning of women – often doubly positioned as victims – in traumatised communities, and the need to recognise the knowledge they too possess and generate in their struggles (cf Conflict Resolution Unit, 2011). Here, we have the possibility of a radical re-positioning of other actors, including the centering of the marginalised, the so-called ‘losers’ in the dominant system.

There is also openness to a flow of knowledge from other military organisations, as outlined by McNamara and Markey. Sometimes the knowledge is quantitative, sometimes it is so qualitative that it might not be seen as knowledge at all, as when Markey recognises the valuable knowledge held by his African Union counterpart. But this recognition nevertheless informs his engagement with this person and his military community.

O’Lehan has shown that the DF is open to the flow of knowledge with civilian society. This demonstrates a capacity to engage with national pioneering knowledge-communities, and to engage with them, so that the knowledge can be amplified for the service of the whole national community. Pioneers can probably identify and name vulnerable communities and populations, but they are not in a position to care for them, because their own position is vulnerable (Wheatley and Frieze, 2011).

For example, the Risk Resilience Network (Korowitz, 2010) has developed knowledge of the possibility of local trauma, but does not have the resources to help communities cope with the trauma. Ireland is part of a very complex infrastructure that ties us to the global sourcing and production mechanisms for energy, food, water and transport. There is some evidence that the German Armed Forces have already engaged with the knowledge produced by this group (Korowitz, 2010, 2012), which demonstrates the high probability that we are entering a near-term local period of profound, abrupt change. This could herald the breakdown of systems in the ‘developed’ world, with accompanying risks.

The risks extend to the complex infrastructures such as the grid and IT networks, transport, sewage and water. Their dependence on large economies of scale, the purchasing power within economies, and continual re-supply through highly complex resource intensive and specialised supply-chains will be challenged. Furthermore their co-dependency may mean that failure in one will cause cascading

failure. ... the integration and complexity of the globalised economy means that no country will avoid some level of collapse. The principal risk management challenge is ... about how we deal with the consequences of their collapse. (Korowitz, 2010, no page number)

An established organization, such as the DF, which participates in the Emergency Planning Office, is positioned to process the knowledge generated by such pioneers, to judge how to use it, and to act on it if necessary.

It is also possible for the DF to identify and important knowledge pioneers and invite them to participate in important conversations, in order to generate knowledge in partnership. Such invitation to inclusion also gives pioneers status by virtue of association. The dominant system often marginalises pioneers who are attempting to create and disseminate new knowledge, but bridging organisations such as the DF are powerfully positioned to shield vulnerable but important knowledge groups and communities. The DF is powerfully positioned in the establishment, yet also positioned in ways that allows it to see the need for new knowledge. Such invitation and inclusion can also help pioneers to connect with each other, thus making viable the kinds of knowledge-systems they are attempting to create. This connection among pioneers can help make more stable the new systems they are developing, in turn making the systems more attractive, so that more people want to and are able to participate in them (Wheatley and Frieze, 2011).

Inviting the participation of knowers normally excluded, and seeking types of knowledge often overlooked, is based on a principle of acquiring and valuing information from the whole system. But as well as looking to the 'new', it is important to continue to converse with communities and individuals embedded in conventional knowledge-systems, so that they too are invited to bring their talents and resources to the creation of something better.

Hosting many options: an expanded discourse of leadership

Keyes refers to the traditional 'desired end state'. This can be interpreted as a military discourse of certainty, which privileges the traditional expert-hero-leader, who possesses the knowledge required to improve a situation. In an emergency (if an emergency or crisis is what emerges), it may be necessary to take firm, decisive action in the model of the traditional leader. But the articles also imply that DF discourses of leadership are capable of expansion to a discourse of hosting, that is, holding all options, or as many as possible, in order to allow the best one for the situation to emerge. Ryan's research illuminates, for example, the multiple interpretations of the Old Bridge at Mostar. A leader needs to be able to host multiplicity, to draw on conceptual, qualitative knowledge, and to facilitate the emergence of new ways of being in the situation.

We see the respondents in O'Callaghan's research already poised on the brink of this discursive positioning. The situations they face are complex and interconnected; order is

likely to emerge from shared meaning, constructed through maximum participation and the building of relationships (cf Wheatley and Frieze, 2011).

Military organizations already work on the basis of deep relationships, developed during the long-term training and preparation of every individual soldier, allowing them to rely on each other in action. Such a way of being is an essential type of knowledge, especially in times of uncertainty, and it can be extended to relationships with other groups, including those not normally included. So the DF can cultivate relationships and position itself as a 'knower', rather than adopting a fixed role. This is about being strategic, understanding the ways that other communities position themselves, being able to read what is required for the situation in the moment, while also being able to imagine a better way of being.

Some considerations when taking up new positions

The possibilities outlined above indicate that the concept of positioning is more dynamic than the static definition of role, since it enables us to see potential in all engagements, and how knowledge is constructed in encounters between and among people and groups. If we accept that people and organisations are not rigidly fixed in a single identity, then we can study the ways in which they are able to change, to resist and oppose dominant discourses, either by taking up positions outside these discourses, or by developing other discourses, or both. Positioning theory or the concept of positioning allows us to recognise that individuals and organisations simultaneously occupy a range of social and cultural positions and the writers and their research respondents incorporate this knowledge into their reflections on different situations

However, there are consequences for positioning oneself reflexively in certain discourses. Depending on whom one is talking to, one can be interactively positioned as powerful, or as inconsequential, even crazy. Again, it is important to be strategic, to know when to act in the traditional mode, or to host new options.

In addition, simultaneous positioning in a range of different discourses can give rise to contradictions. Change is possible through the contradictions between and among different discourses, and how people experience themselves as positioned through more than one discourse. Keyes, for gives an example of this: he was positioned as an aid worker, but also had experience of being in the position of a soldier. O'Lehan points out that all military personnel occupy positions as civilians. Similarly, O'Brien is positioned as an officer / soldier and as a woman. The leader who hosts multiple options and holds space for new knowledge to emerge may be criticised for not acting swiftly and with certainty, in a more conventional model of leadership.

Knowledge, then, is not determined. But the experience of contradiction can be difficult to accommodate, in a world where coherence and certainty are encouraged. The individual involved in any or all of this kind of discursive and positioning work needs to have a high degree of self-awareness and the capacity for self-reflection. And the organisation that facilitates such multiple positioning needs to know how to support its personnel, as they work through contradictions and create new knowledge.

Conclusion

The in/between positioning of the DF opens possibilities for broadening the discursive spaces about the purpose of the DF, and for the co-creation of knowledge in high-quality engagement with many different actors, both within and without the organisation.

Writing, though the act of constructing a text or narrative, can create a deep conceptual engagement with the situation under scrutiny. Writing can also help to create the world to which one aspires. Each article here is a narrative that draws the reader in to a current situation, but it also indicates what might emerge through expanded forms of engagement. The suggestions that have emerged from my reading of the articles, and from my own writing process, are necessarily contingent, partial and open to revision, but I hope they may provide the seeds of a conceptual framework for discussing expanded practice. I also hope that they will help outside observers of and commentators on the DF to resist the temptation to generalise about the culture, practices and ideas at work within the DF.

In summary, the DF has potential to maintain its own primary actions and behaviours, while respecting the integrity of all the other actors engaged with. The possibilities include:

- Inviting hitherto excluded voices (global and national) to genuinely participate in the conversations and activities required to cope with difficult present circumstances and to create a better world
- Inviting people and organisations powerfully positioned within the dominant system to bring their resources and talents to the creation of something new
- Protecting and hosting pioneers (individuals and communities) that are actively working towards creating an expanded system, but who may be vulnerable within the dominant system
- Caring for traumatised people and communities (local and global), while at the same time recognising their capacity to contribute to the creation of new knowledge
- Co-creating knowledge within the organisation, and with other actors.
- Participating in the evolution of a new vocabulary that values qualitative knowledge, including narrative, and makes it possible to talk about the dynamic processes required.

Such high-quality engagement could allow the DF to evolve in possibly unpredictable ways. The paths to be trodden are diverse, without final destinations and with few reliable maps. The DF, like every other organization and individual concerned with deep democracy and the emergence of a better world, needs tools for working in complex, shifting environments, sometimes with very few, or unstable resources. There are many things the DF can do to prepare, but one cannot predict outcomes. The lived reality may appear chaotic, since the process is one of emergence. This requires *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, which in turn 'requires full engagement in practical challenges, embracing mistakes and messes, insight through reflection and revision of personal

practices' (de Guerre and Taylor, 2004:74). Vision could no longer be the prerogative of designated leaders; the challenges invite the inclusion of everyone's knowledge, in whatever form is appropriate for the particular moment in which action is required.

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