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Awkward Moments in the Anthropology of the Military and the (Im)possibility of Critique

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ABSTRACT One outcome of Denmark's recent military engagements in international conflicts is an emerging social category of veterans exceeding 40,000 individuals. While the contemporary wars are 'distant wars', the veterans bring war home in various guises. For that reason, veterans have become a major political, professional, and scholarly matter of concern. This article explores co-existing framings of 'the veteran' with point of departure in the authors' engagements with veterans, professionals and fellow academics. We focus on 'awkward fieldwork moments', when we felt caught between conflicting normative views of the veteran that each demanded different 'appropriate reactions', and scrutinize the (im)possibilities of critique that these situations present. By way of conclusion, we propose a pluralizing attitude to this particularly charged field of inquiry; one, which neither condemns nor lauds ipso facto, but, rather, dissects the discursive limits imposed on our reasoning and experiment with the possibility of braving them through empathetic engagement.

KEYWORDS Veterans; Denmark; awkward moments; critique; normativity

Militarism, militarisation, and securitisation have become signature features of our contemporary world, as regimes and societies worldwide have become increasingly preoccupied with diverse threats and dangers, both real and imaginary (Gillis 1989; Maguire et al. 2014; Masco 2014). These create predictable as well as unforeseeable global connections and constitute important generative forces that reshape the physical and social worlds we inhabit and leave both spectacular and more opaque, yet no less real, traces everywhere in our societies. These multiple and deep-impact reverberations are matters of critical concern that an engaged anthropology does and perhaps should address. How and even if such addressing ought to be configured, however, is by no means agreed upon.

Anthropology's intellectual trajectory is ripe with examples of anthropologists engaging with the armed struggles of their time, from World War I to postcolonial struggles to more recent counterinsurgency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. As war is a social institution that "makes value and values out of the obliteration of human lives", it constitutes "a privileged site of morality production" (Lutz and Millar 2012:482) whose shifting margins are policed by different actors (ibid.:483). Unsurprisingly, the anthropology of war and the military, or of "things military," to paraphrase Lutz (2001), likewise constitutes a moral field subjected to meticulous internal policing out of a fear of the discipline itself being co-opted and militarised (Gusterson 2007; Lucas 2009; McNamara and Rubinstein 2011; see also Hauthzinger and Scandlyn, this issue). While this concern has for long mainly haunted American anthropology, it now re-surfaces in other national contexts as anthropologists direct their gaze at their own nation's involvement in securitising and militarising practices at home or in distant places (Sørensen and Ben-Ari 2019).

Denmark is a relative newcomer among modern-day war-fighting nations, but since the early 1990s it has made a substantial contribution to international UN and NATO-led peacebuilding and counterinsurgency operations with military equipment, expertise, and troops (Daugbjerg and Sørensen 2017; Pedersen 2017). Today, more than 45,000 Danish

soldiers have been deployed and returned as war veterans.¹ In this period, several Danish anthropologists have researched post-colonial armed conflicts and political emergencies in the global South, and a few have also examined Denmark's historic wars (Daugbjerg 2014) and its recent participation in UN peacekeeping operations (Nørgaard 2004). While none of these cases were devoid of ethical dilemmas and hard choices arising during fieldwork and in the post-field process of analytical digestion and writing, we contend that Denmark's ongoing military engagements, which entail combat missions, the use of lethal force, and collaboration both with superpowers and sometimes dubious local forces, is an even more contentious field for Danish anthropologists to engage with. This is so, because the current path departs significantly from the national self-image and foreign policies that developed in the course of the 19th and 20th centuries and calls for an unprecedented integration of war as a feature of 'being Danish' (Daugbjerg & Sørensen 2017; Pedersen 2017:29-31). And this, in turn, inevitably raises big political and moral questions. In the following, we reflect upon the predicaments of developing a critical anthropology of Denmark as a war-fighting nation by paying analytical attention to what we call "awkward moments" and their implications for the possibilities and impossibilities of critique. Before sharing these moments, however, we offer a few words about our research trajectories, methodology, and theoretical point of departure.

We both entered the Danish field having experienced the hardships and ethical challenges of doing ethnographic field research in war-ravaged Sri Lanka, where no question was innocent, conspiracy theories flourished, allegiance to one party was expected, and one seemed always under suspicion and social surveillance (Sørensen 2009; Weisdorf 2015:23,30). War fatigue and a growing interest in Denmark's surprising turn to war became the starting point for Sørensen's ethnographic explorations of the domestic social and cultural effects of

¹ We use the term "veteran" in accordance with Danish policy, which defines a veteran as a "person who has been deployed in international operations at least once, on the grounds of a decision made by the Parliament, the Danish Government or a minister" (Danish Government 2016).

distant wars and the political life and personal experiences of returning war veterans (Sørensen and Pedersen 2012; Sørensen 2018). Ethnographic research included participant observation at public events and political rituals, interviews with veterans, their families, and representatives of the military and voluntary interest organisations, as well as scrutiny of print and social media. The limited Danish experience with war-fighting implied a dearth of expertise in many fields, and from the initial research came invitations to contribute as a lecturer, sparring partner, member of advisory boards and external consultant on private veteran projects and initiatives. Though not always entirely straightforward, this multifaceted involvement, fuelled by a fundamental curiosity about Denmark's trajectory of becoming a warring nation and marked by a decision to abstain from blanket condemnation of any and all actors involved in the process, resulted in multiple co-existing positions in the field. Such positions were, in turn, contingent on our subject positions as respectively junior and senior and male and female – and all white and ethnically Danish – academics. As we shall see, these positions, and the expectations that came in tow, were sometimes tricky to align. Sørensen and Weisdorf together evaluated two applied projects, one aiming to help veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) re-establish their social and personal everyday lives, the other assisting veterans undergo the transition to a post-military civilian career. Here, data were generated through interviews and informal conversations with project staff and participant veterans, participation in veteran conferences and workshops, visits to veterans' private homes, and participant observation in their everyday lives. This article does not present an in-depth ethnographic account of veterans' post-war lives. Rather, it deals with the often contradictory and uncomfortable, indeed awkward positions the two authors came to occupy as anthropologists, when researching and taking part in the complex process of constructing veterans as a knowable entity. In other words, the article attends to our experiences of awkwardness, prompted by, among other things, competing efforts to police the moral field of war that had suddenly entered our world.

Taking Awkwardness Seriously

Awkward situations that triggered a sense of discomfort on our part were recurring phenomena in our research into and among Danish war veterans. In this article, we take as our point of departure the “awkward moments” that occurred in our interactions with fellow anthropologists, professionals, and veterans. Although minuscule vis-à-vis the larger body of ethnography, these moments affected us deeply, kept cropping up, and caused us to reflect on their reasons and meanings and their possible implications for our production of anthropological knowledge. Here we discuss what these moments can impart about the possibilities and limitations of empathy in ethnographic fieldwork and of critique in writing about Denmark at war.

Awkwardness has received growing attention in anthropology in recent years, where it has been explored in relation to wider methodological and ethical discussions about reflexivity, representation, and legitimisation (Hume and Mulcock 2004; Kent 2000; König and Ooi 2013; Pillow 2003). Scholars writing on the subject agree that, while awkward situations are to be expected in fieldwork, they have traditionally been omitted from the ethnographic account because they have been regarded as a testimony to the researcher’s vulnerability or inadequacy as a professional ethnographer (König and Ooi 2013:16, 19; see also Hume and Mulcock 2004:xii,xvi). However, awkwardness deserves more concerted attention not only to produce more honest accounts of fieldwork (Kent 2000), but also because it provides ethnographic insights into the socio-cultural worlds under scrutiny and offers potent analytical clues (Hume and Mulcock 2004:xxii; König and Ooi 2013:17,29; Patino 2018). But what is this awkwardness more specifically, and how, more precisely, does awkwardness relate to anthropology?

A Sense of Awkwardness

The psychologist Joshua Clegg (2012) has explored awkwardness in the context of ordinary social relations, but his understanding of awkwardness resonates well with ethnographic

fieldwork encounters. Clegg found that people experience awkwardness as “a sense of moral or social transgression that magnified and intensified social experience” (Clegg 2012:262). It typically occurs in situations with “problematic instances of social affiliation” when a person is not fully attuned to the “needs, emotional states, and tacit understandings of a group” (Clegg 2012:263, 267). Such situations cause deep anxiety that people actively try to escape or in some way resolve (Clegg 2012:270). Anthropologists’ descriptions of awkward situations reveal a similar anxiety, including “feelings of frustration and even despair”, “feelings of personal inadequacy and social failure” (Hume and Mulcock 2004:xii-xiii), and feelings of being “insecure, troubled, frustrated and uncomfortable” (Konig and Ooi 2013:23-24).

Awkwardness and Ethnography

Ethnographic fieldwork produces various kinds of awkwardness that exist in different relations to the production of knowledge. One kind arises as a result of the ethnographer being a cultural novice who has to learn the “local ways”. Awkwardness here is related to the ethnographer’s lack of knowledge and skills and his or her initial position on the periphery of existing communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991). While a failure to perform certain practices properly may turn the ethnographer into an object of criticism, corrections, and ridicule, which in turn may affect his or her comfort and self-confidence, such failures are also at the core of participant observation and a perennial means of gaining ethnographic insights (Konig and Ooi 2013:27-28).

A different but related kind of awkwardness arises from the ethnographer’s multiple roles in the field and the ambiguity of at the same time wanting to belong and trying to keep a distance (Hume and Mulcock 2004: xi; Konig and Ooi 2013:18). Awkwardness in this sense has less to do with how proficient and knowledgeable the ethnographer is than with his or her engagement in social relationships with interlocutors. While distance is often considered vital in analysing the field experiences subsequently, the ambiguous role of insider/outsider carries the risk of the ethnographer being considered untrustworthy, disloyal, dishonest, self-

interested, a spy or traitor by one's interlocutors (Scheper-Hughes 2000), and it may also generate moral qualms about appropriate relations of exchange (Patino 2018). Discussions of ethics in fieldwork have often implicitly assumed the ethnographer to have more power, but sometimes our interlocutors deliberately try to draw us into their worlds, shape us according to their values, and even use us as tools to promote their own interests and agendas (Sørensen 2009). Especially when these clash with our personal convictions, we experience awkward situations of being torn between conflicting values and interests as we negotiate with ourselves how far to go in the name of good ethnography (ibid.; König and Ooi 2013:19; Patino 2018).

Awkwardness and Reflexivity

The potential of awkward situations as a rich source of ethnographic insights is only one reason behind the recent calls for more attention to be paid to awkwardness. Another and no less important one is the analytical, indeed critical potential of awkward encounters (König and Ooi 2013; Patino 2018; Pillow 2003). From this perspective, awkwardness is associated with issues of reflexivity and representation. Much has been written about reflexivity in anthropology in decades past, but according to Pillow (2003), “uncomfortable reflexive practices” have largely been omitted from the debate. This debate, Pillow argues, is divided between those who advocate a “reflexivity of the self” (Pillow 2003:176,181-184), in which case transparency regarding the ethnographer's subject position is considered a means to produce better analyses, and those who instead promote “reflexivity as recognition” (Pillow 2003:184-185), in which case interlocutors are granted a role as co-producers of knowledge as a way to address unequal power relations and produce more accurate accounts. From both of these positions, reflexivity is linked to validity and ultimately becomes an “instrument of the production of truth” (Pillow 2003:186).

Pillow dismisses these approaches as “paralyzed reflexivity” (Varadharajan in Pillow 2003:187; see also König and Ooi 2013:26) and argues instead in favour of “reflexivities of

discomfort” that aim to destabilise the certainties of the subjectivities, knowledge, and assumptions on which both reflexivity of the self and reflexivity as recognition rest (Pillow 2003:188-189). The writings that Pillow cites as sources of inspiration for an un-paralysed reflexivity are perhaps more radical in ambition and style than what we hope to achieve with this article. Even so, their attention to “shifting and hybrid subjectivities”, to the “constraints of available categories and language” and the field space as “a contradictory one of collusion and oppositionality, complicity and subversion” (Pillow 2003:189-191), resonate well with our own aspiration to “unparalyze” the conversation about Danish war veterans as a first step towards a critical anthropological intervention.

Awkwardness and Critique

The descriptions and reflections on different awkward moments that follow are our attempt to contribute to an “uncomfortable reflexivity” that engages with different representations of, among other things, Danish war veterans. Rather than aiming at any one truth, we seek to account for “multiplicity without making it singular”, to acknowledge “the unknowable without making it familiar” (Pillow 2003:181), and to be accountable to different interlocutors’ “struggles for self-representation and self-determination” (Pillow 2003:188,193; see also Patino 2018). This pluralisation is no mean feat. As we make clear, on several occasions we have felt torn between the often empirically induced pull of normative judgments that, as Sarah Hautzinger and Jean Scandlyn put it in this issue, “undoes, invalidates, strips away” (Hautzinger and Scandlyn, this volume), and the intellectual posture by which critique entails being critical before being normative. That is – and this is perhaps typical of ethnographies of ‘things military,’ with its morally hyperbolic zest – we have often felt drawn to a normative and fault-finding kind of judgment of the contemporary Danish military, whether by our own political and moral inclinations or those of our colleagues and collaborators, so much so that the social critique part of the anthropological endeavor has receded.

This article, then, is an attempt to counter this proclivity. It thus forms part of a critical conversation that began in the field and continues to call for our attention. It is part of a continuous exercise in foregoing ultimate judgments in favor of, as Fassin has it, “a critical analysis of the complex consequences of the production of distinct truths” (Fassin 2017:17, see also Biehl and McKay 2012). At the end of the day, the kind of critique that we espouse and strive to exemplify in our work, ironically quoting the very scholar who famously declared critique a relic of the past, “could be associated with *more*, not with *less*, with *multiplication*, not *subtraction*” (Latour 2004:248, original emphasis). It is a kind of critique that celebrates deliberate, intellectual intractability and refuses to naturalize certain states of affairs or discursive formations (Foucault 1997, Fassin & Rechtman 2009:7) It is a kind of critique that reveals and promotes alternatives and thus allows for a pluralisation of the ways in which we inhabit our social worlds (Foucault 2003a, 2003b). Finally, it is a critique that aims to open up new conversations among sometimes antagonistic audiences and contributing to what Patino terms a “politics of critical empathy” (2018).

This analytical agenda implies that the awkward moments we unfold move beyond those that occurred in face to face interactions with veterans. That is, we include those moments of surprise, frustration, doubt, and even despair that erupted when we interacted with pro-veteran stakeholders and professionals in our positions as consultants or observers, as well as those that emerged in our regular professional and social interactions with anthropology colleagues. It is to these diverse encounters that we now turn.

Awkward Moments in the Academic World

Research into the multiple personal, social, and cultural reverberations of Denmark’s new foreign and security policy demanded careful considerations of empathy and critical distance, even if ours was not a study of the military and its operations per se, but rather of Denmark’s

new reality as a war-fighting nation. Let it be clear that we do not propose that the social interactions and moral negotiations of war in Denmark were unique as such, but we concur with Lutz (2002) that they were particularised in reflecting a sited culture and history. The research was not conducted *for* the military and was not funded or in any way regulated *by* the military. However, it did imply collaboration *with* the military in order to obtain access to veterans still under military contracts and to the many events and activities for veterans and their families that were hosted by the armed forces. It also included ethnographic fieldwork in civilian settings and situations that were heavily influenced by military presence and interests.

The work of military anthropologists is frequently seen and assessed through the lens of their discipline's contributions to and complicity with their nation's past violent imperialist and state-building projects (McNamara and Rubinstein 2011; Tomforde 2011). In our case, the situation did not spur any scrutiny and reflections regarding anthropology's possible roles in Denmark's colonial projects. Instead the debate was framed and nurtured by the general "moral panic" (Utas 2009) within the global anthropological community over the use of anthropologists in the US Army's Human Terrain System (Forte 2011; Gonzalez 2008; Gusteron 2007), which reinvigorated long-standing tensions concerning anthropology's relationship to the state and its contributions to war efforts (McNamara and Rubinstein 2011). That is, Denmark's position as a close political and military ally of the US reinforced a suspicious attitude and an inclination to police Danish anthropologists who dared to study "things military" (Lutz 2001), in an attempt to define appropriate lines of engagement and inquiry. Our discussions with fellow anthropologists about the emerging ethical, theoretical, and methodological repercussions of researching Denmark's military involvement in wars were generally open, stimulating, and immensely rewarding, but on some occasions, an intense sense of awkwardness stifled this exchange. Below we revisit headnotes and scribbles from such moments and explore what "reflexivities of discomfort" (Pillow 2003:188) can teach us about the challenges of developing a critical Danish military anthropology.

Civilian-Military: A Moral Hierarchy

Believing with Catherine Lutz (2001:231) that a society reveals and shapes itself through the way it treats its soldiers, our work explored veterans' homecoming as a productive moment that fashioned new civil-military relations and new social imaginaries of the nation and the military. In going about this task, soldiers with experiences of going to war and coming home to become veterans naturally made up one important interlocutor group. For ethical and practical reasons, the veterans who volunteered to be interviewed decided the time and place of the interviews. Many suggested meeting at the university, a place they described as "convenient", as "offering anonymity" or, with a twinkle in the eye, as "enemy land".

One afternoon, a colleague accidentally witnessed a fit, civilian-clad young man leaving the office of Sørensen with a firm handshake; the said colleague rightly suspecting him to be a soldier interlocutor. "How can you talk to them?" she uttered disapprovingly. Baffled and dumbstruck by the question, I (here meaning Sørensen) failed to interrogate my colleague as to how to interpret this query. Something was at stake in the situation, which made me experience her question and my own lack of response as awkward and caused me to reflect on and revisit the situation many times thereafter. The question and her tone of voice indicated that interviewing soldiers who had been deployed on military operations counted as a "dangerous liaison" (McNamara and Rubinstein 2011), potentially contagious, or transgressing the boundaries of who constitutes appropriate objects of anthropological study and, perhaps by extension, empathetic engagements. My hanging out with veterans raised sufficient doubts, or so it seemed, about my professional judgment, integrity, and loyalty to the discipline's ethos to require soft collegial policing (Butler 2009). Similarly, Weisdorf was several times warned by sincerely concerned colleagues that entering this particular scholarly field could potentially affect his career negatively. The discomfort of being addressed as a potential liability to the discipline, however, was surpassed by our fascination for the revealed tension

between a professional curiosity to explore alternative lives and personal and political convictions regarding particular types of interlocutors. Surely, with their constitutional right to take certain lives, obligation to protect other lives, and willingness to sacrifice their own, the soldiers constituted an “extraordinary” class of people of heightened moral significance (Featherstone 1992; Wool 2015). Yet, the question’s slightly derogatory reduction of the interlocutors to a singular category of otherness (“*them*”) was problematic in more ways than one and, we argue, limited the scope for moving beyond a sterile and “paralyzed” critique of things military (Pillow 2003).

The awkwardness prompted by the question rested partly on its intrinsic moral hierarchy, in which soldiers, due to their professional occupation as purported handmaidens of institutionalised violence and identities (Higate 2001, 2003), were relegated to a position of “untouchables” for the superior anthropologist with neither time nor regard for their individual motives, actions, and views. In her exploration of “moral wounds” among soldiers, Nancy Sherman (2015) rejects such rigid categorical understandings of soldiers as only “instruments of war” and insists that, “even in war, soldiers remain human beings and their lives retain worth” (Sherman 2015:xv). Instead of ascribing to soldiers a radical otherness based on an unyielding, normative military-civilian dichotomy, Sherman points to our common humanity across the military-civilian divide and our shared responsibilities as fellow citizens. Thus, she argues that, even when we ourselves would make different choices, as citizens and scholars we can and must attempt to grasp soldiers’ choices and their social and existential aftermaths empathetically, even when this brings with it all sorts of discomfort (Sherman 2015). That is, to improve our understanding of the complexities of war and militarisation, we need to interrogate, with our usual professional empathy and curiosity, the perpetrators as well as the many military and civilian others who, deliberately or not, contribute to reproducing structures of violence (Scheper-Hughes 1993; Tomforde 2011).

Being willing to talk to veterans as fellow human beings and citizens and to engage in a “reflexivity of discomfort” (Pillow 2003:188), we argue, holds the potential to shed important light on what we as humans are capable of and what we can(not) endure, but it also raise critical questions regarding the division of labour in society and how it is both legitimised and delegitimised.

Condoning False Stereotypes or Furthering a Military Cause?

A few months into the project on Denmark becoming a war-fighting nation, I (here again meaning Sørensen) struck up a conversation with a colleague in his office. We casually talked about my recent and first visit to the garrison of the Danish Royal Life Guards to recruit participants among the recently returned Danish soldiers and slipped into a discussion of a show on national TV about young soldiers who had fallen and their loved ones (*De Faldne*, 5 September 2010). At some point in our conversation, my colleague remarked matter-of-factly that the soldiers were not “the sharpest tools in the box” (*de er jo heller ikke de skarpeste knive i skuffen*) and begged me to confirm that, “at heart, they were warmongering, right?” (*dybest set er de jo krigsliderlige, er de ikke?*). For a moment I felt inclined to object to this platitude and to disclose that a recent survey of deployed soldiers had not found any major difference between soldiers’ socio-economic or educational backgrounds and those of civilians of the same age (Lyk-Jensen et al. 2011). I also wanted to share the diversity of subjective motivations for joining the armed forces and the reflections about combat, death, fear, hope, care, love, and recognition that I had encountered in my interviews with veterans so far and which I struggled to make sense of. However, I only managed to mutter that the picture was probably more complex than that before leaving his office.

Soldiers and veterans are often constructed and represented as archetypes: heroes, villains, victims (Sørensen 2015; Featherstone 1992; Higate 2001; McCartney 2011; Randrup 2017). Further, the public image of soldiers as coming from poor socio-economic back-

grounds with little education and a lack of options coupled with a particular aggressive attitude and desire for combat belongs to a common repertoire of stereotypes that has gained a cultural life beyond the particular historical experiences that produced it. Much to the regret of many armed forces, this portrayal seems resilient to any changes in the profiles of contemporary soldiers. While our colleague's remarks exemplified this widely shared image of the armed forces, the sense of awkwardness that erupted on this occasion had less to do with this circumstance in itself (although a keener sense of nuance from a colleague could perhaps have been expected) and more to do with his assertiveness and his expectation that I confirmed his view. Whereas an open question about who volunteers to join the armed forces today and why could have spurred a productive conversation about the intricacies of youth and social identity in a changed global security landscape, the two platitudes barred any exchange. And by remaining silent, I was complicit. However, attempting to dispute and challenge the stereotypes with research-based facts would, ironically, have felt awkward too. Rather than achieving a pluralisation of the veteran category, any normalisation of the veteran in socio-economic terms would inadvertently have felt like positioning oneself as an advocate of the military, joining them in their efforts to debunk a myth and help improve their public image, a role I was not interested in playing. To cite the more general terms expressed by Clegg, we may say that part of the awkwardness here stemmed from an experience of "problematic instances of social affiliation" (Clegg 2012:263).

The encounter demonstrated how easily discussions become trapped in normative us-them and for-against dichotomies. Throughout this article, we argue that a critical military anthropology is best served by moving beyond these dichotomies and attending to the emerging diversities, entanglements, and frictions in a fashion similar to other anthropological fields of interest. Rather than being committed to othering or normalising veterans, we suggest that a critical approach be based on a process of pluralising the category and opening it up for comparison with other kinds of people.

Being Uncritically Critical

The final brief example of an awkward moment in the course of everyday academic life occurred at a research seminar with an international scholar researching how the United Kingdom perceives, frames, and supports its veterans of different wars. In the course of the lecture, the scholar remarked how, just as in the United States, many initiatives were saturated with a heroic discourse (e.g. Help for Heroes). In the Q&A session that followed, I (Sørensen) picked up this theme and remarked that, interestingly, in Denmark, the cultural figure of the hero was more contested and ambiguous and the use of the term “hero” in veteran contexts relatively rare. Before I got to elaborate, however, one of the participants loudly sneered, “that is probably because they *are* no heroes!” (*det er sikkert fordi de ikke er helte!*). The interruption and the hostile tone of voice contributed to making this an unpleasant moment in an otherwise engaged debate on an important topic. More important for the purposes of this article is the fact that the utterance was followed by a conspicuous silence and an immediate change of topic. The statement was critical in so far as it categorically denied that soldiers deserve people’s social recognition and respect for their actions and achievements in war. However, it prevented a critical investigation of the particular cultural histories of the term “hero” itself, the politics of labelling soldiers and veterans in different places and times, and its relation to wider processes of militarisation (Enloe 2000). In this respect, such a comment may well qualify as criticism, but falls short of critique as an investigation of the “very framework of evaluation itself” (Butler 2002: 214).

Awkward Moments in the Policy Field

The adoption of a national veterans’ policy in October 2010 encouraged the establishment of numerous public and private organisations and projects in support of veterans. As the numbers of stakeholders grew, the agenda broadened and created a

desire and need for the sharing of experiences, information, and knowledge to optimize interventions and to improve chances in the competition for resources. For that purpose, frequent veteran workshops and conferences were organised, typically including a mix of politicians, professionals, volunteers, and veterans. We participated in several of these, in the beginning mainly as ethnographers, and later also as consultants and experts, but always also as private citizens with an academic's usual attentiveness to the ways in which Denmark is morphing. Our experiences of awkwardness in this empirical force field partly reflect this ambiguous positioning. Apart from constituting a venue where information regarding available resources were distributed and lessons learned and best practices identified, the conferences also served to establish a pro-veteran moral community to which participants were expected to adhere.

The Veteran as "a Special Species"

In November 2017, one private association organised a conference to share its past experiences in helping veterans to secure a good civilian job through a tailor-made program with inputs from psychologists and coaches as well as mentors from a variety of industries. The audience consisted of the minister of defence, military staff, as well as veterans and people from the private sector, who had already been involved in the program or were considering becoming involved. An underlying objective of the association and the conference was to construct a novel national narrative that stresses veteran resourcefulness over their potential victimhood (Sørensen 2018). As consultants in the program's pilot phase, we had taken our seats in the auditorium of the Royal Defence College that hosted the event. Contrary to other similar gatherings, the keynote speech was not delivered by a high-ranking military officer or a politician, but by Hella Joof, a Danish actress, film instructor, writer, and comedian, who is known and loved for her humorous exposés of Danish culture and everyday life. The occasion, her wearing a camouflage-patterned jacket, her initial remark that she was

fortunate enough to be married to an ex-serviceman, and her emphasis that she was “honoured and full of respect” to have been invited made it difficult to gauge whether her words, delivered with a barrage of disarming smiles, should be interpreted as ironic, humorous, or sincere. Hence our sense of feeling uncomfortable.

If the primary objective was to produce a counter-narrative to the prevailing image of veterans as victims of PTSD, Joof's speech² did much more than that; it also relied on a rigid dichotomy between veterans and civilians. Veterans were described as “a special species” and as “people with self-discipline, who keep appointments and solve problems without any palaver”; who “keep calm, when all others panic”; who are “adventurous, strong-willed, brave, curious, helpful, and passionate” and have “sacrificed life and limb”; who are “made from the right stuff” and are “people with integrity”, who possess a “concept of honour” and know “how to delay gratification”; who show “self-control, collaboration, progress, self-motivation, and to always do your best”; and who work for “a high goal and do not whine if they don't get their eight hours of beauty sleep”. In short, veterans were depicted as paragons of virtue and unyielding commitment.

Conversely, civilians were implicitly being cast as lacking these same qualities and were described as being “prejudicial to people who have been to war”, people “who cannot handle the truth” and who “want war to look nice”. When it fails to look nice, they “shiver and choke on the cookie”. Civilians “have all kinds of opinions. In our comfy sofas, in our cosy living rooms”, we “waver, because we want to see ourselves as humanists and pacifists” and are “unworldly”. Joof concluded, “you [veterans] have something that we need [...] Don't give up [in your search for a civilian job]. Not just for your own sake, but for ours [...] You are too precious. You are a gift to the private sector. To the health sector. To the educational sector. You name it. Just the thought of a former officer in a Danish school makes me smile.”

² For a Danish-only transcription, see <http://velkommenhjem.net/hella-joofs-tale-veteranerne/>

JooF's speech left many in the audience smiling, but her juxtaposition of extraordinary and ordinary members of society (Featherstone 1992; Wool 2015), her blunt apotheosis of veterans as the redeemers of Danish society and economy, and her accompanying mockery of civilians as inept fools also felt terribly awkward, at least to us! First, it was awkward because its logic, perhaps unintentionally, unapologetically pointed towards militarisation (Enloe 2000) as an appropriate response to all social challenges. Secondly, even if accepted simply as a comedian's targeting an audience of veterans and other "insiders", it's pandering felt awkward because it echoed, in words and sentiment, what we have heard voiced in earnest and endorsed in many other contexts. For instance, military staff and methods were sometimes encouraged to deal with maladjusted youths through sports and educational programs. Finally, while we, as representatives of the civilian breed, were the ones being laughed at, we noticed that some veterans seemed to feel uncomfortable too.

Thus, when called to the podium to share his alleged success story, one such veteran felt obliged to stress that he did not consider himself special and, thus, did not want special treatment. Even with an audience of supposedly sympathetic people, he felt called upon to challenge the gospel truth of the formulaic figuration of the veteran as a special, heroic breed. And just as we had heard civilians speak about sacrifices, unpayable debts and exceptional qualities at most gatherings of a similar kind, we had also met many veterans who, while taking pride in their profession and achievements, felt utterly uncomfortable when elevated to a heroic status in public discourse (Sørensen 2015). While such framings undoubtedly mobilised resources and support, this kind of identity politics ironically also obstructed the veterans' reintegration into and wish to belong to society at large. Finally, it was awkward to witness how nobody seemed to notice the inherent paradox of portraying veterans as "supermen" while simultaneously making claims for supportive exceptionalism.

The Welfare State and Military Citizenship

A contentious issue at many conferences and workshops concerned the distribution of responsibility for the returned veterans and the kind and quality of assistance offered to them. Typically these debates left us with an uneasy feeling because, while few would contest veterans' legitimate claims for post-war support and physical and psycho-social rehabilitation, the ceaseless demand and pledges for more attention and resources implied a possible remoulding of prevailing understandings of social citizenship and social welfare towards a peculiar and exclusive kind of military citizenship (Cowen 2008:26; Trundle 2013).

The Danish welfare state is based on the principle of universality, where all citizens are entitled to receive particular benefits according to individual need. Contrary to this, war veterans in other countries (e.g. the USA) enjoy special privileges through a separate welfare system. The fear that the Danish welfare model could develop into a similar two-tier system, where veterans are automatically "first in line" for (extraordinary) benefits on the basis of their deployment history alone, as some had advocated for (Gade 2009), was also sensed by others such as the Danish disability organisation, who made a public outcry when the veterans policy was launched (Pedersen and Westh 2010). And on several occasions we overheard social case workers critically reflecting on whether the attention and assistance they were expected to grant veterans amounted to "special treatment" and whether their civilian clients did not deserve and would not benefit from similar provision. Unsurprisingly, these queries were not raised in public lest they be read as unsupportive of the veterans.

The awkwardness about war's entanglement with the welfare system was an ongoing source of unease with the self-evident and continuous demands made with little or no recognition of the needs of others, and the regular shaming of those who did not agree with celebrations of veterans and refused to participate in them. This transpired when we witnessed how annual receptions were hosted by most municipalities for veterans and their families; when we learned how social case workers were recruited and trained to understand and respond to veterans' needs better; when we learned that veterans and their families enjoy life-

long free psychological assistance; when we saw how military psychologists, veteran coordinators, veteran homes, and veteran cafés were slowly creating a parallel track within the welfare system, one in which military lives seemed to have more value than civilian lives. Awkwardness, then, stemmed not from meeting veterans' legitimate needs, but from an unmentionable disquiet with the way in which a military or veteran identity politics was being championed at the expense of the universal principles of the Danish welfare state and, by extension, everyone else in Denmark. Obviously, it also related to our own sense of being expected to endorse these interests and support them with research-based evidence, and, conversely, the risk of being shamed as traitors to the cause whenever we made a point of comparing veterans with other vulnerable groups or questioning alleged unique features of veteran suffering. In hindsight: we could have and perhaps ought to have done more on this score.

Awkward Moments with Veterans

While our engagement with the military in general brought with it a fair amount of awkwardness as we traversed the academic and policy-oriented fields, our encounters with the veterans themselves also on occasion induced powerfully unsettling moments, which in turn led to reflections that have outlived the queasiness of the ethnographic instants. This is what we now turn to dissect.

Awkward Intimacy

As ethnographers, we are apt to think of intimacy with interlocutors as irreducibly positive, something that is of paramount importance to the overarching ethnographic endeavor. Excessive and premature intimacy, however – perhaps particularly when manifestly asymmetrical – can be a challenge in ways that are both personal and professional. That is, being exposed to stories of pain and existential turbulence, often upon meeting veterans for the very first time, generated an unnerving sense of trespassing emotionally and of being provided with a position to which one is not entitled. This was a particularly pressing concern

for Weisdorf, who, as a young male schooled in what may be labeled the art of ethnographic seduction, felt easy to relate to for most veterans.

One of a variety of occasions when such feelings emerged with particular force will suffice. It occurred during a four-day retreat when a dozen veterans, as part of a comprehensive PTSD rehabilitation project, spent time together as a group, enjoyed long walks and other physical activities in the countryside, or simply hung out over coffee and cigarettes. On day two, on our way to the on-site indoor swimming pool, I (here meaning Weisdorf) got to talk to Peter, a soft-spoken and patient veteran of the Balkan war in his early forties. I related how the stories shared among the veterans about sleep eluding them for years really moved me. I was impressed, I told Peter, that these veterans even managed to stay (socially) upright and maintain a meaningful life when nightmares and arousal tore at them every time their eyes closed. Peter's reply was wonderfully deadpan: "We don't". He disclosed how he had sleepwalked through existence for a decade, spending all his energy on surviving as opposed to living. For him, all this built up to a moment, only months before our conversation, when he had decided to take his own life: "I saw no other way, really. I just couldn't take it anymore". Ironically, making that fatal decision proved a turning point of sorts. That is, simply being able to make that kind of decision proved to Peter that somewhere deep inside there was still a person capable of making weighty choices and steering his own life.

Peter's story was lucid, heartbreaking and inspiring at the same time. I felt infinitely sad on Peter's behalf that he had spent so long in such a horrible place, and Peter himself was acutely aware of what he had been missing from a culturally prescribed perspective: "The thirties are supposed to be the time of your life, right? What with kids and all". On the other hand, his was an inspirational tale about coming back almost literally from the dead and recovering a measure of control in a challenging life.

The emotional charge of the story notwithstanding, what also struck me was the absurdity of that initial conversation. That is, Peter decided to relate this (to me) most intimate

story of existential demise and relationship issues within minutes of us striking up a conversation. Exacerbating this ‘out-of-placeness’, our brief conversation took place as we traversed crowded corridors and cafeteria-style dining areas with not even a hint of the atmosphere one would expect for a conversation of this sort. These conditions led me to experience an acute bashfulness by proxy, as it were. I felt as if Peter had stripped himself naked in the middle of a store, only this stripping down was an emotional one.

A particularly powerful instantiation, no doubt, Peter’s willingness to lay bare these most personal thoughts upon striking up a first conversation was by no means unique. In much the same way, conversations with other veterans suffering from PTSD opened up immediate vistas to drug abuse, obsessive gambling, feelings of grave parental inadequacy, or loss of conjugal intimacy. Drawing on the vocabulary of awkwardness established earlier, we might say that the awkwardness felt in these intimate moments was set off by “a sense of moral or social transgression that magnified and intensified social experience” (Clegg 2012:262). This transgression was accentuated by the blatant asymmetry of the confidential space in which so much was disclosed to me and so little was reciprocated, highlighting questions of the appropriate relations of exchange when one engages in ethnography (Patino 2018). During such encounters, the awkwardness of “problematic instances of social affiliation” (Clegg 2012:263) hit us with full force.

A final important source of awkwardness in encounters with veterans who willingly shared their plight was the demand for an immediate sympathetic response. This in and of itself is nothing awkward and, perhaps to the contrary, seem to be an illustration of what might be called an *ethnographic ethical demand* (cf. Løgstrup 1956). Sometimes, however, we found ourselves wondering whether the demands of readily offered confessions of crippling amnesia, suicidality, and family dramas served to blunt the force of critical examinations of the conditions of possibility of the challenged lives led by the veterans, namely the decision

to deploy Danish soldiers in distant war zones. Such reflections will be taken up more thoroughly in the discussion to come, which will help us stitch together the perspective on empathy and critique that underpins this article.

The Militarisation of the Home

Among most of the veterans that we have come to know, both those who suffer from PTSD and those who do not, there is a pronounced preoccupation with personal and family-centered security. This preoccupation expressed itself in various ways, some of which seemed innocuous enough, as when a given veteran even in Denmark consistently takes the long way around an empty plot of land in order to avoid potential, if improbable, roadside bombs.

Other signs of this security thinking and security behavior were less benign, one such manifestation being the explicit threat that any unpredictable behavior on the part of the authors might engender a violent reflex. This was less awkward than unnerving. Another was the tendency among veterans to engage in a kind of armament of the home. This tendency was widespread, and when we visited veterans, we would often find wild-life cameras screening the outsides of their homes and makeshift blunt clubs waiting behind doors on the inside. Michael, a young veteran with a dodgy criminal record and a self-professed tendency to get “fucked up drunk and violent”, proudly revealed to one of the authors the clever places in which he had hidden such weapons. This seemed all the more unnerving given his confessed propensity to “lose it” and his frequent “bad thoughts about hurting people” and even dreams in which he kills people.

Hans, a veteran in his late forties living with his wife and two small and noisy dogs in a sleepy provincial town in Jutland, had gone further still. An avid hunter, Hans has a weapons permit and thus legitimately owns firearms. This notwithstanding, it was still surprising to find rifles visible in every corner of the living room and cartridges lying casually around. Noting the way in which I (here meaning Weisdorf) eyed his impressive collection of weaponry over a cup of coffee on one of the regular home visits, Hans said: “I know it doesn’t

look very welcoming, but I just feel better knowing that I can defend myself...”. The opacity of his explanation, to me, left an indelible echo in the room. What exactly would have to be the case in order for Hans to feel that he needs to protect himself? Having met Hans before, I knew him to be a little hotheaded. He himself had, on a previous occasion, told me of several episodes in which he was “on the verge of beating someone up” in the supermarket or on the street for what, in hindsight, was no particular reason.

Several issues made encounters such as these fairly awkward. First, there is the legal issue. Hans should, by the letter of the law, have his hunting gear stored in a certificated weapon’s locker and not ready to hand as was the case. Although anthropologists have a proud tradition of being close to (and complicit with?) perpetrators of illicit activities (Goffman 2014, Tourigny 2004, Korsby 2017), this always makes ethnographic exploration thorny, and it prompts the question of whether we would sometimes rather not know what we get to know.

Perhaps more importantly, there was the anticipatory element. That is, it was less than reassuring to know that people like Michael and Hans – one prone to getting violently drunk, the other rash and confrontational, and both of them trained to neutralise any perceived adversary – went about arming their homes for ill-defined purposes and cases. One might speculate that this development to anyone but Michael and Hans themselves makes their homes less rather than more safe, both to others and to themselves. More than once, we felt a pang of obligation to question whether the arming of homes does the veterans, their families, or the communities at large any good at all, especially given that research on veterans (primarily, but not exclusively from the USA) are replete with cases of violence in the domestic sphere and beyond (Lutz 2004).

Such questioning never materialised, partly out of our desire to keep up good ethnographic appearances. The awkwardness we felt, however, may owe more to our role and, hence, responsibilities in the field than to our reluctance to flag our disapproval per se (see also König and Ooi 2013:18). That is, we were hired to evaluate whether the project in which

our veteran interlocutors were taking part did them any good as far as their everyday lives were concerned. Our job was *not* to gauge whether the mistrust displayed by the veterans promotes communal cohesion or whether the armed protection of homes signals a militarisation that, to us, is unbecoming of a country with no tradition of private gun ownership whatsoever. In short, the awkwardness of the encounters with militarised homes may primarily stem not from the encounters themselves, but from the incompatibility of scope between the job we were paid to do and the critical analyses we like to push (or like to *think* we push) as concerned and responsible citizens and academics. Whether we as academics can – or by what inalienable academic rights we can – legitimately relegate such incidents to awkward field moments are questions that continue to trouble us. Put bluntly, did we allow our eagerness to keep up ethnographic appearances trump concerns over the safety of the veterans and their families? Moreover, what does that say about the position we put ourselves into or were put into by virtue of the applied scope of our undertaking?

***“If there are women in the unit... we will stare”:* sexism and military masculinity.**

Much has been made of the cultivation and (partial) embodiment of a particular and peculiar kind of manhood in the military since Cynthia Enloe and Betty Reardon inaugurated the term ‘militarised masculinity’ in the late eighties and early nineties (Enloe 1988, 1993; Reardon 1993). And despite an important diversity of gendered expressions among our veteran interlocutors, we too quite frequently witnessed displays of gendered personhood with a decidedly military flavor, where veterans would use dichotomous military-male/civilian-female distinctions that were blatantly sexist. It often emerged in relatively casual ways, as when veterans who prided themselves on being assertive, determined, and “mission-oriented” dismissed what to them seemed to be an excessively democratic discussion of miniscule details as a “hønsesgård” (a hen-house), an expression of derogatory scorn for an excessively feminized conversation. Being “wordy” academics, we were, of course, easy targets of this kind of accusation.

If such situations were subtle indications of militarised, sexist masculinities, the posture at other times hit us full in the face. One such occasion was when Weisdorf and the co-editor of this special issue, Sebastian Mohr, offered a presentation on veteran sexuality in Copenhagen. The venue, a self-professed oasis of tranquility for veterans and next of kin, was packed for the occasion with a mix of veterans, partners and children, as well as a few academics and champions of veteran interest groups. After the presentation itself, the questions from the audience turned to issues regarding gender in the military and, perhaps inevitably, to the role and experiences of women in the Danish army. This set the house on fire. A few female veterans indignantly spoke of discriminating and sexist treatment in the army and experiences bordering on sexual abuse, and several male veterans began mobilising excuses that quickly turned into counterattacks. What, they asked, are women even doing in the army? They are no good as soldiers, it was claimed, and if they cannot guard themselves against unwanted sexual attention, they basically do not belong to the army in the first place. Adding insult to insult, several of the male veterans in attendance added arguments to the effect that sexual misconduct simply could not be helped, given the alleged soldierly propensity to inappropriate behavior and lax morality. “If there are women in the unit [during deployments], we *will* stare”, one veteran declared, “and eventually someone *will* act on it. That is just how it is”.

As the debate continued and became increasingly hostile, a view emerged of male soldiers, and of men more generally, as lewd dupes of nature. Under certain circumstances, men simply cannot help maltreating women. Despite the exhilaratingly engaged evening, and despite feeling relief that the topic of blatant sexism in the Danish military had been broached explicitly, all was not well. That is, for the sake of keeping up good working relations with some of the male veterans present, several of whom we had really enjoyed talking to and hanging out with on earlier occasions, I (here meaning Weisdorf) had stayed out of the discussion altogether. That is, I tried to maintain the pose of an impartial observer – a position whose very availability probably owed as much to my being male as to my being a civilian

academic – whose main job was to maintain an element of order during the increasingly heated discussion, even as my sense of decency cried out for a denunciation of the views held by some of the male veterans. On my way home, I had to fight off a nagging feeling of complicity at not having spoken out against what to me was a nauseating expression of misogyny and at not having challenged or at least nuanced gendered stereotypes out of consideration for my (mostly male) veteran interlocutors. I could not, and still cannot, shake the feeling that I missed a chance to raise critical points in favor of a less sexist and discriminatory Danish military for the sake of ethnographic expediency and of dodging a socially uncomfortable ethnographic bullet. In this, I felt the no longer unfamiliar sting of “inadequacy and social failure” (Hume and Mulcock 2004:xii), collusion and complicity (Pillow 2003: 189-191).

Discussion: empathy and the impossibilities of critique

Our fieldwork entailed participation and presence in several social spaces that we experienced as awkward, partly due to our initial unfamiliarity with the military culture that governed them. However, in this article we have zoomed in on the awkward moments we experienced in both awkwardly strange and comfortably familiar social environments. Though in many ways dissimilar, these moments, in our view, all exposed people’s efforts – including, very notably, that of the authors – to come to grips with and act upon the ramifications of Denmark’s new position as a warring nation, whether these concerned policing the boundaries and content of the anthropological discipline, defining territories, rationalities, and targets for intervention, or coming to know oneself as a gendered post-deployment soldier and citizen. The awkward moments demonstrated just how much was at stake for all those confronted with the existence and experience of war, and the urgency of engaging in the reconfiguration of the Danish nation and people that many felt. As such, these moments became part

of our “war-coming-home ethnography”, but they also contributed to our understanding of the very conditions required to produce this ethnography and a critical anthropology, and it is with this latter dimension we conclude this article.

We entered the field with equal measures of excitement and anxiety, but determined to do our best to engage empathetically and non-judgmentally with all our interlocutors in order to understand their worlds and the experiential fields of which they were a part. This is the bread and butter of ethnography, and as such, we anticipated treating these fields as we would any other field. However, our commitment to empathy and non-condemnation was on several occasions interpreted as sympathy and, derivatively, with taking a somewhat positive judgmental stance. The initial soft policing we were subjected to by our peers and their radical othering of our interlocutors, we argue, were attempts to prevent us from becoming sympathetic of “things military” and to preserve the ethos of the discipline. Conversely, in the policy field our empathetic approach was often appreciated as a sincere effort to move beyond stereotypical categories and was taken as a sign of our commitment and support to the cause. Veterans rarely demanded our sympathy, but our voluntary interest in their experiences and current situation, as opposed to those who either had a professional obligation or monetary interest in engaging with them, and our ample time to listen and see for ourselves, was welcomed by many as a sign that we would offer a “sincere ethnography” (Patino 2018) that would catch what lay beyond the stereotypical categorizations. However, awkward moments arose when veterans adopted and performed stereotyped roles and tended to ‘other’ us as civilians, but importantly also when veterans instantly reciprocated our interest with insights into the most intimate aspects of their troubled lives. In these moments, a sympathetic feeling or care for a fellow human being in distress often superseded our critical ambitions and effectively foreclosed critical scrutiny of the “complex consequences of the production of distinct truths” (Fassin 2017:17) that frames the way people inhabit their social worlds

(Foucault 2003a, 2003b). This article, then, is a groping for such a critique. It is a kind of critique that reveals and promotes alternatives and thus allows for a pluralization of the ways in which we inhabit our social worlds (Foucault 2003a, 2003b).

Our sense of awkwardness was rooted in these triple “problematic instances of social affiliation” (Clegg 2012:263) and the difficulties of pursuing our critical agenda as we were persistently drawn into different worlds. The critique we hoped to develop entailed pluralizing the field and its actors. Empathetic engagement allowed pluralization to emerge, whereas its interpretation as sympathy constantly threatened to close down these opportunities and reduced the field to simplistic and “paralyzed” (Pillow 2003) normative dichotomies of military-civilian, them-us, bad-good.

The above unfolding of awkward moments is our attempt to unpack the difficulty with which we wed ethnographic empathy to social (scientific) critique in a field that, perhaps like few others, pits these tenets of anthropology against one another. As it turns out, these concluding remarks are inconclusive indeed, and awkwardness continues to crop up. For both of us, the very writing of this article has, to an unexpected degree, constituted an awkward endeavor, primarily in that we have here written about, and thus shared with an audience, thoughts that we could not, indeed would not, air during those encounters themselves. While some may argue that this is the prerogative of academia, we want, by way of wrapping up, to ask ourselves and others in similar circumstances: Analytical distance notwithstanding, can we now, in this most convoluted form, legitimately raise objections to comments, behavior, comportments that we did not dare address during those very field encounters? For us, this conversation is to be continued.

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