

THE TRANSFERABLE ‘WE’: AXES OF IDENTITY FOR THE BRITISH INFANTRY SOLDIER

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Abstract. This paper uses a social model to investigate the complex area of identity in the British Army with special reference to the Infantry at unit level. The model, created in earlier research, specifically to examine unit-level organizational culture in the British Army, conceptualizes four different shared bodies of ideas, rules and conventions of behaviour which inform groups of people or individuals how to organize and conduct themselves vis-à-vis each other. Various axes of identity are described, based on these four ‘social structures’, revealing a multi-faceted and dynamic set of social issues. This investigation confirms that the model is a useful tool with which to examine issues of identity entirely within units of the British Army, but where these issues connect strongly with aspects or people outside the unit boundary it is a less appropriate tool. Even so, the model can be useful in providing insights into the origins of the elements that contribute to constructions by unit members of outsiders as ‘the other’. This investigation implies that the model may be of use in systems engineering for British Army equipment projects (particularly with respect to the new Human Factors Integration Domain ‘Organizational and Social’), and in planning organizational change in the British Army.

INTRODUCTION

The Joint Officer’s Mess [1] was comfortable but not luxurious, as befits such a place in an operational theatre. Sprawled in one of the easy chairs was an officer of one of the Guards regiments. His small china coffee cup was on the occasional table at his elbow and he was reading an English newspaper flown out from UK the day before. Round his waist, outside his uniform ‘jersey heavy wool’ and performing no obvious function, was a webbing belt. An officer in the Royal Air Force approached him. “Excuse me,” he said, “we don’t wear belts in the Mess”. The Guards officer looked up, clearly slightly bemused. “Oh,” he said, politely, “we do.” And he returned to his newspaper and his coffee.

Both individuals told me afterwards that the other had been extremely rude to them but they were not going to make an issue of it [2].

This small incident is redolent of many interesting social issues. It tells us something of life in a mixed-Service officers’ mess. It tells us about some of the echoes of home life that are preserved in large messes in operational theatres if at all possible (easy chairs, occasional tables, china coffee cups). It opens up ideas of culture-clash between Services. But this paper concentrates on the small word ‘we’ which was used by both participants in this exchange but put them poles apart.

The main interest in the use of this word is that its meaning is always precise (‘myself and those similarly situated’) yet out of context it means nothing and the meaning flexes with changes in context. For example, members of a crowd of football supporters might join together in celebrating a victory in singing ‘We are the Champions!’ on a Saturday evening but by Sunday morning they will have fragmented into a plethora of smaller, mainly residence- or family- based groups each of which form the most immediate ‘we’ as the individuals wake up and start their day. Yet on most occasions, its meaning is unambiguous and understood by all concerned in its use. Even in the incident above there was no doubt about its meaning. Although it was used in different

senses as an axis of rebuke and counter-rebuke, the difference in meaning in each use was clear to both parties.

Such considerations have led to the writing of this paper, which seeks to identify the different axes on which an infantry soldier [3] in the British Army might use the word ‘we’ and its derivatives (and, in some contexts ‘I’ and its derivatives), and thus express his [4] identity.

It has to be said early in this paper that the issues that this investigation has raised are both many and multifaceted. We can do no more than visit some of the most important issues here, leaving a more detailed analysis to what could certainly be a suite of papers.

RESEARCH BASIS

This paper is founded on social anthropological research carried out for a series of studies into the organizational culture of the British Army at unit level. It was started in 1974 and continues to date. For much of its length it has been extensive, rather than intensive, with observations being made on an *ad hoc* basis in support of a general research aim, but over the past ten years it has been more closely focused on the production of a series of research papers including a PhD thesis [5]. The two major axes of the research were participant observation and individual interviews (mostly between thirty and ninety minutes) with over 120 British soldiers of all ranks from private to lieutenant colonel, complemented by a small number of group discussions.

Gaining access to the units was made easier because I, as researcher, was a serving Army officer and thus an insider, but it was necessary to bear in mind throughout the research that my status as a serving officer would affect the context in which the data were gathered.

The methodology for the study and discussion of my status as an insider of senior rank are fully discussed elsewhere [6]. Suffice it to say here that the potentially distorting factors were explored and allowed for as far as possible and the fact that researcher and researched shared some of the basic perceptions and assumptions turned out to be a positive advantage. In particular, the research results are in harmony with the social milieu as experienced by both researcher and

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