

## **POSITIONED TO KILL: A NEW APPROACH TO THE QUESTION OF MILITARY VIOLENCE**

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### **INTRODUCTION.**

South Africa is a highly militarised society in which all white men, if not all citizens are positioned within a military discourse. This positioning has serious effects on the practices and options available to the subjects. While numerous studies emanating from a host of disciplines have been conducted on the experiences of conscripts and on the SADF in general, little, if any, research has focused on killing itself. As this is so critical an aspect of war and simultaneously one of the greatest taboos of our culture, it seems an important area of investigation particularly in South Africa where young men are conscripted and often forced to participate under threat of harsh consequences.

This research was motivated by the desire to understand how ordinary people become participants in legalised killing. These young men are positioned within a military discourse within which killing and atrocities take place. For those who are concerned about the psychological sequelae of participation in these activities, it is crucial to understand how it is that these men are able to carry them out. This paper attempts such an explanation.

## **THEORETICAL APPROACH.**

Numerous studies have explored the reasons why people kill or display aggressive and violent behaviour. Most focus on the interaction between individual and environmental or societal factors in an attempt to understand their relative contributions to the behaviour under examination. Such approaches share an acceptance of the rational unitary subject who, once exposed to various environmental influences behaves in a manner which is uncharacteristic and unusual.

Research into the field of atrocities has revealed that ordinary people can and do commit atrocities when engaged in atrocity-producing situations (Lifton, 1973; 1987). Such a claim could serve to support the theoretical assumptions accepted by mainstream social psychology with research focusing on the interactional effects of the atrocity-producing situation on the behaviour of the individual. Such a dualistic approach is not, however, the necessary consequence of an acceptance of Lifton's proposition. On the contrary, his conceptual model and methodology are not inconsistent with the theoretical approach proposed and developed by the social constructionists, in particular Henriques, Hollway, Unwin, Venn & Walkerdine (1984); and Hollway (1989).

Lifton's psychohistorical account of those involved in the perpetration of atrocities reveals a complex interaction of psychological mechanisms which operate in atrocity-producing situations. His explanation of the psychodynamics of these processes provides a useful link to a social constructionist approach to the analysis of atrocities.

The social constructionists are critical of the individual-society dualism which is fundamental to the dominant approach in social psychology. They deconstruct the rational, unitary subject and propose that subjects are positioned within a multiplicity of discourses (1). The potentially contradictory subjectivities which result from such positioning suggest practices which might otherwise have been considered "out of character" but which are consistent with the particular positioning of the subject.

This paper attempts an integration of the approach suggested by social constructionism and the psychological mechanisms identified in atrocities research. It traces one subject's history of positioning within a range of discourses which reveals how he comes to be positioned within a killing discourse. In analysing the act of killing itself, as well as other destructive acts such as kraal burning, the paper suggests that the subject's actions are inextricably linked to his unique positioning within a range of discourses, to the balance of investments within the discourses and the psychological mechanisms arising from the subject's psychodynamic processes.



## **METHOD.**

The lack of clarity as regards methodology in social constructionist enquiry resulted in an experimental approach to information gathering. One person was selected for analysis in order to present a detailed account of the discourses and positioning of the subject. The particular subject, Paul, was selected because of the specific nature of his combat experience which appeared to be strongly related to his involvement in the specialised unit to which he belonged.

Arising from the theoretical model proposed, which investigated the subject's history of positioning within discourses, the largely unstructured interview was designed to trace such development. After specific questions were asked about the subject's military and personal background, the interview proceeded to an investigation of four contexts. The subject was asked to describe how he experienced himself with his family, friends, during basic military training and in combat situations. These contexts were chosen as they were considered important positionings in the subject's developmental history which informed his actions.

The transcription was analysed and the four major discourses within which the subject was positioned were identified. Three subsidiary discourses, which arose from the subject's positioning in the major discourses, were also identified. The identification of these discourses was based on a close analysis of the text and the researcher's subjective judgement about the organisation of the material.

## **ANALYSIS.**

The four dominant discourses that arose from an analysis of the text and that are examined include the "military", "Dutch Reform Afrikaner family", "successful macho leader" and "creative". While these discourses interconnect not only with one another but with others within which Paul is positioned, an attempt is made, for the purposes of analysis, to isolate each one in turn and provide illustration. The three subsidiary discourses - the moral, bullying and killing discourses - are also discussed.

The analysis attempts to indicate the balance of investments within and between the discourses in which Paul was positioned and the possible psychological needs served by his positioning. It argues that involvement in a specialised unit made possible the simultaneous expression of the practices suggested by his multiple positioning. The strength of his investments and the consequent commitment to the unit brought into operation a variety of

psychological mechanisms such as disavowal, projection, dehumanisation, numbing and doubling. This combination of positioning, investment and the operation of such mechanisms positioned Paul in such a way that he was willing and able to carry out various activities.

### **Dominant discourses.**

#### **1. Military discourse.**

All white, male South Africans are positioned within a military discourse because of the system of military conscription. This is reinforced by registration for national service at age 16 and cadet training at most white schools. The militarisation of South African society has also contributed to the positioning of white men in a military discourse. Within this generalised experience, however, each individual is positioned in a unique fashion.

As a boy, Paul enjoyed reading stories about World War Two and identified with the role played by the protagonists:

"... particularly Sven Hassel ones which were more about a bunch of ex-convicts and they were really barbarous, you know, barbaric and sort of trying to undermine any authority all the time, act quite individually and things like that. So there was a lot of idealism in that for me. Or, well ... I idealised that ... I suppose I was very much ... enticed by that sort of thing". These stories formed the basis of Paul's fantasies about the military while channeling his desire to challenge authority and act in an individualistic manner. The fulfilment of these needs formed part of his investment in all the discourses within which Paul was positioned and was a strong motivation for his volunteering for a specialised unit.

Paul's father was a voluntary member of a civilian unit where he achieved a high rank. Both his parents were proud of his father's participation as well as Paul's later involvement on the border while "doing his bit for the country". Paul considered his father's involvement in the military as a hobby. Once he was doing his national service, however, he developed "a certain amount of respect for rank". His own investment in the military discourse grew as he began to compare his own achievements to that of his father. While such rivalry is not unusual for an eighteen year old male, it is important to note that it was played out within the military discourse with particular practices suggested, such as achieving rank and honour within the army itself.

Paul's experience both at home and at school suggest that the military was not only part of his daily routine from a young age, but that it was experienced as "fun and games" or a "hobby". In other words, Paul was positioned within this discourse in a way that normalised the military as part of every day life.



Paul's particular positioning within this discourse can be understood in the context of his family's pride and involvement in the military, his cadet experience and the orientation of his school, his involvement in the Voortrekkers, his childhood fantasies based on war stories, and his attitude towards national service as an "adventure".

Paul's positioning within the military discourse shifted when he actually joined the SADF during his national service. The practices demanded by his positioning involved more than weekly cadet sessions. He now had to conform to the discipline, routine, harsh conditions and repetitious military training. The degrading experience of being "made to feel like a piece of shit" was compensated for by the "sense of achievement" and pride of his family when he achieved officer status and finally volunteered for a specialised unit.

## 2. Afrikaner Dutch Reform discourse.

His military experiences had an important effect on his positioning within the "Afrikaner Dutch Reform family" discourse. Paul described his family as a "typical Afrikaner family". The family structure was strictly patriarchal and Dutch Reform. Paul himself was "very religious". He described the Dutch Reform church as "generally very much behind the whole military effort". Once he was in the army the chaplains "really glorified the idea of you not only fighting for your country but you're also fighting for your god". He considered this to be "kind of appropriate".

Paul's family supported the army and the nationalist ideology and were proud of their son doing his national service. During his first year he was expected to attend Church in his uniform so that his family could show him off. Paul's positioning within the "Afrikaner Dutch Reform family" discourse began to shift as his involvement in the army proceeded. His increased exposure to combat situations led to disillusionment "with the whole idea of Christianity" as well as with the "structured Afrikaner way of doing things". In addition, he began to experience the contradiction between "on the one hand being exposed to such sort of extreme stressful situations if you'd like, such as violent combat, and then the people at home on the other side, on the other hand". This resulted in ambiguous feelings when returning home on leave during which he wished to be back on the border.

The shifting locus of power between Paul's investments in the military and family discourses is evident when he began to feel "more at home in the army" and it became "where I would rather be". This illustrates the effect that shifting positioning within one discourse has on positioning within other discourses. Beyond the contradictory positioning which would confront any

conscript in returning home on leave is the fact that Paul began to develop intimate emotional connections, camaraderie and a high level of trust with the men in his unit. Paul felt that "one could exchange emotions and things much easier". Paul's need to secure emotional ties is an important aspect in the shifting of the balance of investments towards the military discourse where such relationships became possible.

### 3. Successful macho leader discourse.

His increasingly strong investment in the military discourse is closely related to his positioning within the "successful macho leader" discourse. Such positioning can be traced back to his schooldays where Paul was elected cadet leader, prefect, captain of the first rugby team and was "seen in a leadership role". His involvement in the Voortrekkers further promoted his prestige by virtue of his being an Afrikaner. Within the family Paul was pushed to be "first in class and do the best at school and be good at rugby". His father was a professional man and it was expected that he would follow suit. Socially, Paul took a leadership role even though many of his friends were older than he was. Many of them were "the jollers or the heavy types that one tends to idealise when you are 14, 15 years old". From the age of fifteen, Paul developed a rebellious attitude to family traditions and authority in general.

When he began his national service, he volunteered for the officer's course and later joined a specialised unit. Although he had previously rebelled against authority structures, his desire to succeed as an officer influenced his ability to cope with the "incredibly strict discipline" which would otherwise have been "a bad mark" against his name. While in training he felt pressurised to perform by his family.

Paul volunteered for a specialised, elite unit which seemed to operate "on a more informal level" and in which the emphasis on discipline related to "operations" rather than drilling "in a straight line". During his basic training Paul came across men from this unit and it struck him as "being incredibly glamorous". The style of the unit appealed to this rebellious leader and he was finally persuaded by a good friend who convinced him that it would involve "not play war" but "real war". Paul felt that it "sounded exciting, it sounded like maybe this is what war is about and so on. So from the beginning I was very keen on going". The childhood fantasies were about to become reality. His volunteering for the specialised unit clearly emerged as a common meeting point of all three discourses in which he was positioned.

### 4. Creative discourse.

Paul had a strong interest in culture which he described as "offbeat from a typical Afrikaner upbringing". He also referred to the "joller" friends he had



at school as "offbeat". His cultural interest and inclination towards adventurous, creative and offbeat activities influenced his desire to join a specialised unit which involved working mainly with black troops and required that the soldier learn a bit of Portuguese. Paul was informed that the nature of the activities would be clandestine, the methods of operation unorthodox, and the size of the groups small. Paul felt that it would be "a different unit than an ordinary army unit" in which "mundane things aren't all that important". Paul's creativity was further stimulated in the army where he experienced the mysteriousness of the "fear of dark Africa". He described the ritualistic nature of his experiences with particular reference to his identification with shamanism. When he interrogated civilians on the whereabouts of the guerillas, for example, he frequently wore a bone necklace which was associated with magic and threatened the "suspect" with witchcraft if s/he did not reveal the information he requested.

While Paul's positioning within a "creative" discourse could suggest a range of practices other than volunteering for a specialised army unit, his simultaneous positioning within the military, successful macho leader and Afrikaner Dutch Reform family discourses provide strong motivating factors for his increasingly strong investment in the military discourse and his unit specifically. His involvement in this particular unit simultaneously fulfilled his need for emotional closeness, camaraderie, achievement, elitism, individualism within the confines of authority structures, and adventure. He felt that he was able to "establish my male dominance in a way, and that it was a kind of macho thing to do and that it was different. Not different in the sense that it's different from normal accepted behaviour, but it was different as an aspect of the army or within the army".

### **Subsidiary discourses.**

Once he became a member of this unit, Paul was positioned increasingly within moral, bullying and killing discourses. Before examining how he came to act within these discourses it is necessary to understand Paul's experience of the unit as well as his own history of positioning within the three discourses.

Paul felt privileged to belong to an elite unit and took pride in the fact that "people for no well-found reason would actually treat you with a great amount of respect, without even you having to say anything or even open your mouth". The training for the unit involved drills that were "very unique to the unit", "handling foreign weapons", "specialised navigation" and "unorthodox" methods. Paul discovered that "in order to prove yourself you had to be a bit more creative and actually...counter the training leaders". Once he was placed in the field he experienced the adventure of clandestine

operations which frequently involved operating as a fairly autonomous unit. " ... I could really make decisions on the spot and I had quite an amount of freedom to actually, well within limits, but more freedom than say the ordinary infantry unit would have in the field".

Before joining the unit, Paul thought that most of their tasks would involve reconnaissance work. He later discovered that "mainly quite an aggressive application of the unit" was required. He accepted that this was the case and "just did it". The moral discourse within which he was simultaneously positioned encouraged an unquestioning attitude towards aggression. Paul felt that within the unit nobody had "particular moral stands about warfare. I'd rather say the contrary, that it seemed to be the more cruel you are or the more aggressive you could be the better soldier you are". The commander took "great pride in the fact that (the unit) had supposedly killed more enemy than any other unit".

The moral discourse is apparent more by its absence than by its presence. There appears to have been little morality in the unit and thus the discourse itself might be overlooked. However, it is an important one in terms of Paul's positioning and has been termed a discourse of absence to indicate the disregard for moral concerns amongst the men who were positioned within it. Clearly the mere existence of this moral discourse is insufficient explanation for Paul's positioning within it. However, Paul had a particular commitment to the unit and received payoffs through his involvement. The majority of the men were positioned within this discourse and Paul's investment in the unit recommends, in turn, a possible investment in such absence of morality. It is also important to consider that Paul's pre-army positioning within a moral discourse, as suggested by his religious orientation, was not necessarily inconsistent with "fighting for your god" against the enemy whom he considered to be a sort of anti-Christ.

It should be noted, however, that Paul reported levels of aggression and violence displayed by members of his unit which he did not participate in. It appears, therefore, that there were restraining forces which protected him from such involvement. One such force seemed to be the attitude of the men under his command who did not have a positive opinion of those who allegedly raped and attacked innocent civilians. Paul knew that "they wouldn't do it ... and I suppose I respected that ... there was this kind of more human respect for women and children, old people, whatever". Paul's previous religious convictions might also be considered a restraining force even though they simultaneously suggested involvement to some extent.

Paul's unwillingness to participate fully in the activities of the unit is interesting in light of his preparedness to kill at close range. In part this



relates to the distinction between the enemy and civilians, but also suggests different positioning within a killing discourse and a bullying discourse, the latter involving the application of a different sort of violent act. His ability to muster the numbing mechanism involved when shooting the enemy did not extend to the practice of physical assault.

Paul stated that he was unable to physically assault someone unless he was "really upset or really agitated". As a boy he neither fought with his brother nor exerted himself physically. His distaste for physical violence is interesting in light of the fact that part of asserting his authority over the older black troops, in command of whom he was placed when he joined the unit, involved a degree of physical aggression. He distinguished this from assault, however: "... to be able to exercise authority and sometimes physically hit them ... not assault them but like literally dish ... out a couple of slaps in the face and make sure that he doesn't stand up to hit back type of thing. Just to maintain the group discipline because otherwise it would end up in mutiny".

The physical assertion of his authority is in clear contrast to his attitude towards the "real macho manne" who would beat up those in the group who were not able to perform adequately during basic training, thus causing the group to be punished. Paul described them as "brutes" who were "inevitably these real dumb types that would want to sort things out physically rather than intellectually".

Paul later stated that "throughout the period that I was in the army I never, even in basic training as I said, assaulted someone to get cooperation. I could never really do that". It seems as if Paul did not perceive hitting his troops to maintain discipline as physical assault, whereas assaulting people unnecessarily was so defined. He considered himself to have been trained to take command even though they were considerably older and more experienced than he was. "... it's very intimidating ... but then you think well, you've been trained to a certain extent to take charge here and most of them have never had any proper schooling ... I'd say 50% of them couldn't even read and write properly". Paul's elitist values facilitated the process of dehumanising his own troops to a degree where it became possible for him to be positioned within the bullying discourse. This apparent contradiction can be understood in terms of the doubling process, the "division of the self into two functioning wholes, so that a part-self acts as an entire self" (Lifton, p.418, 1987), whereby Paul's bullying self was involved in certain activities, the reality of which remained unacknowledged. However, it is important to note that Paul was only able to muster the doubling mechanism in a restricted set of circumstances.

Paul's disavowal of his own involvement in inflicting physical harm is apparent most starkly in his discussion of kraal burning. Although he claimed that he was "never involved with physically harming civilians", he burnt their kraals to "teach them a lesson" if ammunition was found in the kraal. He avoided consideration of the fact that leaving people without a roof over their heads could be construed as physical harm. He projected the blame onto the victims themselves and argued that he "wasn't really morally convicted to respecting their houses and so on because they had overstepped the line. So for me it was quite straight forward". He described the kraal burning as "accepted standard procedure" although he could not recall "specific instances where it was put as orders". Paul was simultaneously positioned within a bullying discourse and a discourse of moral absence wherein he was able to act as expected, drawing on the mechanisms of disavowal, projection and doubling (see Lifton, 1973; 1987).

His ability to muster these mechanisms in this situation related to his contradictory attitudes towards the citizens themselves. At one point he distanced himself from the actions of those men who "just went bananas" and destroyed kraals by driving Casspirs through them. "I could never help feeling ... that I'm really intruding when you walk into a kraal and people are sitting around the fire and this is their house, and these are their cattle and things like that". Later, however, when describing the burning of kraals, Paul's attitude to the civilians seemed to have changed. Although he now considered his behaviour to be reasonable, because of the discovery of weapons, he expressed a very different attitude to the people themselves: "I mean their existence is so unbelievably bare and so sort of without any earthly belongings, it's just incredible. In a sense that probably influenced my idea of them as a people. I thought that ... they (are) so uncultured, they just don't have any sense of having, they just don't have any things to prove that they are worthy people, they have just such sort of low, such low class".

The doubling mechanism is clearly evident in Paul's dehumanising of the civilians whom he supposedly respected. Within the moral and bullying discourse he was able to act in an aggressive manner towards people whom he respected when positioned within a contradictory discourse. It is therefore not surprising that his attitude towards victims differed considerably depending on whether he himself was a perpetrator. In order to be able to perpetrate acts which were demanded of him because of his positioning in a discourse within which he was heavily invested, he had to muster mechanisms which enabled him to act by defending him from overwhelming guilt and anxiety.

A similar set of mechanisms were operative when Paul was positioned in the killing discourse and acted in a way which was suggested by his positioning.



An understanding of his history of positioning within this discourse is important in analysing how he was able to kill three wounded guerillas. Paul became familiar with rifles at a young age when he began to hunt animals on the family farm. It was part of the "family tradition" to go hunting which he considered to be "fair game". He enjoyed the test and skill involved in the hunt. As a result of his previous experience with this weapon, Paul felt "quite comfortable with a rifle" by the time he joined the army. Once in the army, he discovered that a rifle "gives you such a lot of power actually over other human beings that you maybe could use it easier and its maybe even a slightly more abstract way of exerting aggression, I suppose, in the sense that it's not really you that's doing it, it's more the rifle".

Paul's preparedness to use a rifle is an important contrast to his reluctance to exert physical aggression. His experience of power when armed with a rifle and his ability to split himself off from this weapon strengthened his investment in the killing discourse and increased the likelihood that he would act as expected. The power he gained enabled him to act while fending off death anxiety. The numbing mechanisms which protected him and enabled him to kill with a rifle were unavailable when faced with directly assaulting someone. This was too physical, too close, too real and the numbing broke down, it could not be sustained despite the dehumanisation. He would be overwhelmed by guilt and anxiety were he not protected by the dehumanising mechanism (see Lifton, 1973; 1987). As he could not muster it when faced with the option of assaulting someone, he could not act and chose other courses of action instead.

However, he was able to rely on these mechanisms when faced with the task of killing with a rifle. In addition to his previous positioning within the killing discourse as discussed above, his attitude to the enemy must be considered in order to observe the dehumanisation at work. Once again he displayed contradictory attitudes towards the enemy who were both "well trained" and "very, very clever" guerilla strategists as well as "inferior warriors" with "inferior training". Paul respected them to the extent that they were dangerous. However, his overriding feeling was that "these guys are so wrong, here they are fighting for communism and they're fighting against Christianity and all this, you know, and how can they be human?".

This dehumanisation is a critical point in Paul's situation because in killing the wounded soldiers he was not acting under orders. On the contrary, his unit "really were encouraged to actually take captives". Yet, when faced with three wounded guerillas, on two occasions, Paul put the rifle next to their heads and pulled the trigger. He explained the reasons for his actions in terms of the physical impossibility of taking the wounded men along with him, that

it became a "security risk and too much of a hassle to have this guy tagged along and maybe you didn't really have food for him".

Additional explanation was offered in terms of his troops' refusal to do it themselves which Paul interpreted as "superstition" as well as acknowledging that "it's obviously not a very nice human thing to do, just finish someone off like that". The troops left it up to him "since I'm in charge, I suppose".

The numbing process is clearly evident both in his explanation of his actions as well as in his description of the activity itself which Paul referred to as "finishing them off" or "cleaning up the area". Paul had been exposed previously to such activity as an observer and had been "horrified" and couldn't "believe this guy just did that". However, he also felt that "it just looks so damned easy". He realised that this was "run of the mill stuff, this is probably what I'm going to have to do next". He thought that he would be nauseous "the first time I would see someone dead by more or less your own hands", but discovered that he "wasn't moved at all. Sort of felt a bit awkward, but I just did it". Paul also reported having gone "blank for a while".

By the second occasion, when he shot two wounded soldiers, Paul said that "I just didn't even think twice about it ... it literally was a question of well, there's nothing else you can do, it took a couple of seconds. I mean I didn't even think twice about it". He didn't feel particularly disturbed and "argued it's better to sort of finish them off rather than leave them half dead". Paul did not consider the fact that the men might survive if left wounded. "It's just that I really thought that this guy's not going to make it. I don't know, it could be that because I'd done it previously that it was just so easy to do again".

The numbing which Paul experienced during the act of killing occurred in the context of the madness of the situation, a type of derealization (Lifton, 1987). "I mean it's in the middle of this sort of really fast moving battle with helicopters flying around, and bombs falling ... so when you get involved in this quick fire fight with somebody shooting at you, then your main aim at that stage is just to keep on moving, you know. It's just sort of one, two, three and then it's over and then you carry on".

The numbing process was essential to Paul's ability to continue with the tasks that were expected. His description strongly suggests a bureaucratised situation in which each person or group completes a part of the task: " ... we were following these guys who were running away ... with helicopter support ... the helicopter would then trace them and say, 'well look, they're about a



hundred meters in front of you' ... Both these guys were injured. And they were lying there wounded, and it was a very hasty thing, we literally sort of kept on running in this file, almost cleaning up the whole area. So it was just a question of finishing them off there and then. You couldn't do anything apart from that. I mean it wasn't a question of well, get out the stretcher bearers and carry them ... I made a spot decision knowing that I had to move on in support of another group and that they might depend on me".

Paul was also aware of the significance of his acts in proving himself to his troops and maintaining discipline. "In a sense also I suppose one has to keep your composure ... it has to do with the discipline of the troops ... It's as if they're very much aware of what's going on and they know exactly what you're going to do. They accept it but they watch you and they want to see how you go about it. If you are as strong, and I suppose not physically strong, but if you have that kind of control to do such a thing".

In addition to the processes of numbing and dehumanisation, Paul projected responsibility for his actions away from himself in an attempt to ward off guilt. "I don't have particular feelings of guilt about it, I'd much rather try to blame someone else for it, either the government or even my family as being part of this sort of system. So I guess that it is escapist in a way but I don't feel particularly bad. I suppose in a sense what might have influenced me was the fact that I was also injured and that I could also have been killed...I'd been in this explosion, maybe I'd paid my dues and that you know, why should I feel guilty about it, look I was also nearly killed".

The relationship between the numbing and dehumanising mechanisms and Paul's particular positioning within a range of discourses becomes increasingly clear through his explanation of his actions. These mechanisms do not operate in isolation but within the context of particular discourses and enable particular people to act in certain ways. His involvement in a specialised unit positioned Paul within a specific moral and killing discourse. He did not think morally about the act of killing and said that it "just seemed like this is what you do especially if you're with this unit". This statement is in stark contrast to his attitude and refusal to participate in certain other activities that seemed standard practice within the unit. He also assumed that "anybody else would have done exactly the same thing in that situation" despite acknowledging his troops' refusal to kill the wounded soldiers.

Although Paul's blocking mechanisms appear to have remained fairly strong, he did not revel in the activity. "I never felt very good about it, but I can't say that I ever felt very bad about it either. It's a sort of rather neutral emotion. I suppose in a similar situation now I would probably even do the

same thing. I think those kind of drills would just come back and if I'm faced with such a situation, I'd probably do exactly the same".

Paul's attitude to these drills which taught the repertoire of behaviours exhibited is ironic. He stated that "one has to adhere to certain drills and certain rules otherwise somebody's going to get unnecessarily killed". Paul's adherence to these drills in fact ensured that people did get killed unnecessarily. However, from where he was positioned, these deaths were unavoidable and necessary. The unnecessary ones to which he refers are those of his own troops. It is interesting to note Paul's positioning within the killing discourse when he was positioned as victim rather than perpetrator.

The process of numbing so evident in Paul's experience and positioning within the killing discourse broke down when confronted with the death of his own men. Ironically, these men were shot by a gunner from their own helicopter who opened fire on Paul's troop. Paul felt "incredibly angry, I was really freaked out ... I mean I really threw a tantrum at the headquarters". His reaction contrasted noticeably with the "rather neutral emotion" he experienced on killing someone himself. Paul reacted to their deaths in a very personalised way, unable to muster the mechanisms so prevalent in his previous positioning. No longer were the men who died "just a hassle". Rather, "it's always a loss, you feel it's a waste, you know. It's like you've been through all this together and that sort of sense of camaraderie and friendship".

The men who died were not dehumanised but were Paul's friends. His attitude to trying to save them was therefore fundamentally different to that in the case of the enemy. His own men were in fact far more seriously injured: "half of this guy's head was blown away, but he still lived for a couple of minutes. I mean that was really disgusting, but I mean in such a situation I don't think I would have considered finishing him off, since he's sort of on your side, you at all costs try to save him. Whereas I suppose the enemy wouldn't really go to such extremes to try and save him".

The deaths of his own men also increased Paul's death anxiety (see Lifton, 1973) because "when somebody else is killed it's also a reminder of, well it could happen to you". This anxiety was fended off partly through the emotional investment Paul had in the group itself. He described how when going on leave the men would visit the wounded from his unit at the military hospital. These visits strengthened the "sense of affirmation of the friendship and camaraderie ... so that I suppose created a sense of belonging, a sense of real security". However, constant exposure to death and mutilation increased his anxiety when he himself was in the hospital. "Every second person was



either without eyes or without legs or without arms, it was just incredible ... every second guy there is mutilated you know and that really got to me eventually. I mean just thinking, 'fuck this is too much', you know".

In order to prevent such death anxiety from becoming overwhelming, the soldier relies not only on mechanisms of numbing, doubling and dehumanisation, but also on killing the enemy in such a way that he is spared the trauma of observing a protracted death. Paul discussed the various methods of killing and concluded that a rifle shot was the most humane not only for the victim, who dies instantly, but for the soldier for whom it "spares the agony of the other person, of having to watch how somebody dies".

It is interesting that Paul's reference to this agonising experience was made in the context of his own men's deaths and not those of the enemy. Perhaps if Paul had observed one of the enemy dying a slow, painful death, the numbing would have broken down. However, this in itself is an unlikely scenario because of his ability to muster blocking mechanisms and to act with his rifle. These mechanisms interlinked with his positioning and investment in the killing discourse excluded the possibility of Paul experiencing the killing of the enemy in a way that might have prevented him from repeating such actions.

## CONCLUSION.

This paper has attempted to demonstrate the possibility of integrating some of the theoretical contributions in this field. As such it runs the risk of proposing an explanation for the phenomenon which it examines that is simultaneously too complex and over simplified. The complexity arises in part from the nature of the theory itself as well as the difficulty of attempting to explain the relationship between multiple discourses, positionings and investments without degenerating into total confusion. The simplicity stems from the lack of focus on critical aspects such as the psychoanalytic component.

This research has addressed an issue which has long perplexed social scientists and psychologists alike. It does not claim to have revealed truths overlooked by others. It does, however, suggest an alternative way of understanding the problem which makes sense of the actions of ordinary soldiers rather than attempting to unravel the mystery behind their "uncharacteristic" behaviour. It presents an explanation which avoids and goes beyond the dualistic assumptions which underlie most social psychological analyses. The integration of social constructionist theory with concepts employed in advanced atrocities research provides a potentially more sophisticated analysis of one of the most concerning issues of our time.

The war in which the subjects participated is over, yet its effects continue to pervade our society. Those who were conscripted to fight are faced with the task of making sense of their experiences and negotiating their own peace - with themselves. Perhaps the psychologists' task is just beginning.

#### **Note.**

1. The precise definition of the term "discourse" is sometimes unclear in publications. My usage of the term is best outlined by Swartz (1989) who defines it as a "set of terms, statements, or signifiers reflecting a set of attitudes, meanings or beliefs. It moulds the individual's perspective in that particular area, and positions him/her, allowing certain things to be said/ seen/ known/ communicated, and disallowing others. It creates areas of silence, ellipses in knowledge, gaps in lived experience, while drawing attention to experience/knowledge salient to that discourse" (p19).

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