

The Fine Line between Funny and Offensive Humour in a Total Institution

An Ethnographic Study of Joking Relationships among Army Soldiers

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A total institution (Goffman, 1961) is an isolated and enclosed place where a group of people work and live close together, and where most aspects of their daily lives are under bureaucratic control. Military camps are a classic example of a total institution. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, this article explores how a unit of soldiers who live together in gender-mixed rooms in Army barracks in a rural place in northern Norway use humour to (1) cope with the deprivation of privacy, (2) negotiate their relations to each other (especially the opposite sex) and (3) handle their lower hierarchical position.

It will be argued that the use of humour is an important coping mechanism that helps soldiers to deal with the special features of the total institution. It is used to “save face” in embarrassing situations where intimate limits are crossed, express disagreement and conflict with peers in a non-threatening way, maintain autonomy, and reduce the social distance from the non-commissioned officers.

However, the use of humour leads to risky “joking relationships” (see Radcliff-Brown, 1952) in which the soldiers balance on a (very) fine line between what is funny and helpful for bonding and coping with the special situation, and what is insulting and offensive. By exploring the risky joking relationships that emerge in the context of a gender-mixed total institution, this article aims to gain a better understanding of a paradox found in previous research on military culture : namely, that humour is experienced as both a good and a bad feature of the military culture.

Numerous studies have found that the military culture is experienced as rough, hostile and abusive, and thus causes challenges regarding retention of soldiers, in particular of women, often faced with sexual harassment.¹ Some researchers have pointed to the prominent use of humour as an inseparable part of the military culture.² This prominent humour seems to be marked by sexual overtones and smutty talk, as well as aggressive jokes that one is expected to “shrug off” and be able to deal with if one wants to be a soldier. Accordingly, it has been stressed that the military “suffer” from an aggressive and sexist “macho culture” that is exclusionary for women, but also that men have reported that they have no taste for the violent and vulgar tone that characterizes social relationships in their unit (Rones, 2015).

¹ Ellingsen, Lilleaas & Kimmel, 2016 ; Fasting & Sand, 2012 ; Hanson, Steder & Kvalvik, 2016 ; Lilleaas & Ellingsen, 2014 ; Sand & Fasting, 2016 ; Sasson-Levy 2003 ; Serrato 2016 ; Steder, 2015.

² Ben-Ari & Sion, 2005 ; Harsvik, 2010 ; Hellum, 2016 ; Totland, 2009.

On the other hand, research has also found that the military fosters strong friendships, enjoyment, and experience of having “the best time of my life” ; in particular, Norwegian military women report high (job) satisfaction.³ Considering the role of humour in this regard, Ronés (2015) found both men and women arguing: “*that a culture characterized by a direct, sharp and ‘brutal’ humour where one can fling jokes at each other was one of the things they liked about the military*” (p.285). In other words, the humour seems to cause both job satisfaction and dissatisfaction for both men and women. Thus it is necessary to better understand the role it plays in the military context, and how soldiers balance on a fine line between funny and offensive jokes.

Even though humour is a basic element of human interaction, and several studies have found it to be a prominent and important, yet sometimes problematic, characteristic of military culture, there does not appear to be any detailed and sustained treatment of humour in military contexts. This is pointed out by Godfrey (2016) in one of the few studies exploring its role in armed forces. He writes that learning to use humour is part of the military socialization process and argues that humour serves as a gatekeeper to inclusion in military sub-groups through coded speech, acts and performances that maintain levels of performance while also serving to exclude that which might disrupt the effective functioning of the unit (p.171). Moreover, Godfrey claims that humour contributes to establishing lines of normalization and allows for a controlled form of resistance against the rule-bound and hierarchical organizational structure. Ben-Ari and Sion’s (2005) research seems to support this by claiming that humour allows soldiers a measure of control, by permitting them to complain and criticize the conditions of their service. Further, Ben-Ari and Sion write that drollery and amusement often provide fruitful entry points to examine taboo themes as well as troubling and worrying issues and the muted conflicts that emerge in the framework of a military organization. They suggest that the obscenity of dirty jokes and horseplay may conceal that non-sexual information about the group and its internal relations is being conveyed. Also, Ben-Ari and Sion argue that humour and expressive behaviour simply allow troops a release from the boredom and tediousness that mark their daily lives. In addition to this, Priest and Swain (2006) found that new cadets at the United States Military Academy who use humour as a coping strategy during stressful new cadet training were more likely not to quit.

Outside military contexts, humour as a theoretical concept is far more established. Morreall (1983) provides insights into humour’s effects in *Taking Laughter Seriously*, where he suggests it promotes physical and mental health, fosters mental flexibility and serves as a social lubricant. British anthropologist Alfred Radcliffe-Brown (1952) introduced the concept of “joking relationships” in his encounter with primitive tribes in the mid-twentieth century. He describes how banter is being integrated and ritualized into social interaction through such relationships, in order to sustain social stability when and where there is potential conflict.

³ Hanson, Steder & Kvalvik, 2016 ; Hellum, 2014 ; Ronés, 2015.

In organizational research, humour and its effects have been studied and analyzed for decades. Romero and Cruthirds (2006) write in “The Use of Humour in the Workplace” that humour is an important part of the organizational culture of successful companies, and that *proper* use of humour can provide valuable benefits to organizations, such as motivating the staff, communicating effectively, mitigating discord, reducing stress, enhancing leadership, increasing group cohesiveness, improving communication, boosting subordinate satisfaction and building organizational culture. Romero and Cruthirds identify specific humour styles and describe how these can promote different organizational outcomes if applied.

Regarding the armed forces and our research inquiry into risky joking relationships (i.e. the fine line between funny and offensive humour), the distinction Romero and Cruthirds draw between the two styles of “*aggressive*” and “*mild aggressive*” humour is of particular interest. These two styles share the characteristic of being aggressive, but only the “*mild aggressive*” is associated with positive outcomes. Aggressive humour, they say, can be used to victimize, belittle and cause others disparagement. This type of humour is negatively related to pleasantness and conscientiousness. Mild aggressive humour, on the other hand, can have several positive functions. With reference to research results, they point out that observing other people being ridiculed is related to confirming behaviours, which is constructive in cohesive teams. When manifested as satire or teasing, mild aggressive humour can thus communicate a forceful reprimanding message, but with a humorous and positive tone. Additionally, and in line with what has already been introduced from other researchers, this form of humour allows one to express disagreement and conflict without negative effect, since the message is delivered in a playful manner.

Yet, compared to the cases on which Morreall’s (1983), Radcliffe-Brown’s (1952) and Romero and Cruthirds’ (2006) studies have been carried out, military life is full of physical, psychological and social challenges, deprivations and hardships, and in particular conscripted⁴ soldiers are not free to quit the job or go home at night. Therefore, Ben-Ari and Sion (2005) warn that we must not lose sight of the extent to which, and the mechanisms by which the soldiers are controlled and find themselves unable to change fundamentally the conditions that concretely affect their lives. This points to important characteristics of the total institution, and our claim is that the risky joking relationships that emerge among soldiers must be understood in the context of the total institution they have to deal with. In other words, we argue that the special institutional framework that

⁴ While the end of the Cold War caused a shift from conscription to all-volunteer forces in many countries in Europe, Norway decided to keep conscription, though it has gradually changed from an all-male draft to a selective gender-neutral conscription system. Women had been allowed to voluntarily sign up for conscription in 1985, taking on the same service duties that applied to men aged between 18 and 44. In 2008, it was decided that all women born in 1992 or later would be obliged to enrol in the National Service Administration main list and have their fitness for military service examined (Forsvarsdepartementet, 2008-2009). In June 2013, Parliament overwhelmingly voted to extend conscription to women and Norway became the first peacetime European and first NATO country to make military service compulsory for both genders. The gender-neutral conscription was made applicable from 1 January 2015, and applies to Norwegian women born on 1 January 1997 or later (Forsvarsdepartementet, 2013-2014).

separates the armed forces from civilian workplaces and educational establishments must be included as a factor in the study of the interaction that emerges between military personnel.

The concept of the total institution was developed by sociologist Erving Goffman (1961) in his encounter with a psychiatric institution through fieldwork in the mid-1950s. He defines total institution as “*a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life*” (Goffman, 1961, p.xiii). A central feature of the total institution is that the inmates must undergo a common disciplinary process in order to fit in and function together in the administrative system. This process involves the inculcation of standardized behaviours with an explicit focus on equal style and attitudes, equal system and order, and equal daily routines. However, Ronés (2015) found in her doctoral thesis that this world of equality was challenged in a platoon where men and women lived together in gender-mixed rooms.⁵ This was due to the *unequal* expectations of men and women regarding proper behaviour, with different “social requirements” of style, system and order, and daily routines (pp.294-296). The findings further suggested that several of the gender-related adjustment problems, as well as tensions between individuals regardless of gender, seemed to be related to the requirements of the total institution rather than to the profession the soldiers participated in or to the jobs they held. One of the challenges the armed forces encounter in this regard is that the total institution breaks down the barriers that usually separate work, leisure and rest, including sex and other intimate aspects. As a consequence, the soldiers were exposed to embarrassing and tense situations that are usually not shared with colleagues and particularly not those of the opposite gender. For instance “everybody” knew who had had sex or diarrhea, and when and where. Hence, the need to “save face” and negotiate their relations to each other increased. Yet, this total aspect of the soldiers’ service conditions and living situation has received scant attention. Thus, Ronés called for further research that could explore how the characteristics of total institutions, in particular the breakdown of barriers between service, leisure and privacy, affect men and women’s lives in the military.

⁵ The use of gender-mixed rooms in the Norwegian Armed Forces has been studied by Lilleaas and Ellingsen (2014; see also Ellingsen *et al.*, 2016) and Hellum (2014, 2016). In contrast to Ronés (2015), they find that the gender-mixed rooms have a de-gendering effect, taking the emphasis off gender differences, enhancing tolerance between the sexes and reducing stereotypical thinking, sexual tension and sexual harassment. Lilleaas and Ellingsen’s work, and Hellum’s 2014 study were carried out in units where women were in the minority and had to adjust to the men’s standards and routines, while Ronés’s findings on gender-mixed rooms are from the medical battalion where women were in a slight majority (pp.275-283). In this unit, the women defined the standards and daily routines, and the men, who had to adjust themselves to the women, found their female roommates annoying and requested to change to all-male rooms, arguing that the women were unfit for military service and engaged in sexual harassment. Hellum’s 2016 study, carried out in a unit with a 50:50 share of men and women, supports Lilleaas and Ellingsen’s work and Hellum’s 2014 findings. This study differs from Ronés’ in that the high proportion of women was due to a planned, leader-initiated experiment, and this may be an explanation for the more positive findings regarding gendered conflicts and sexual harassment. At the same time, Hellum’s 2016 study supports Ronés’ findings that men and women have different daily routines, and that conflicts do emerge between soldiers regardless of gender due to different personalities and needs for privacy in a cramped space.

Albeit Starr (1982) writes that, while many studies of military socialization have either explicitly or implicitly used the total institution model to describe the socialization process, few studies have explored the relationships that emerge among soldiers when off duty. Although Ben-Ari and Sion (2005) argue for the importance of studying the informal side of military units, a study that would explicitly analyze the totality of soldiers' everyday life with an explicit focus on the informal side still seems absent. With the integration of women in this context, such a study is even more needed. To the best of our knowledge, no previous research has explored the relationships that emerge between soldiers who live together in gender-mixed rooms in a total institution framework.

This study has sought to fill that gap by embedding a young researcher (Bjerke, 24 years old) who could more naturally “hang out” with the conscripted soldiers in all three phases of daily life (service, leisure and rest) at a Norwegian military camp where men and women live in gender-mixed dorm rooms. Through Bjerke's (2016) ethnographic fieldwork, which is the result of unique access to the informal side of Norwegian military life, this article seeks to answer the following research question :

What role does humour play for soldiers who serve and live together in the context of a gender-mixed total institution, and why is the humour experienced as both a good and bad feature of the military culture ?

Methods and Methodological Reflections

The study reported in this article continues from Rones' (2015) ethnographic study⁶ of non-commissioned officer (NCO) candidates where some lived in gender-mixed dorm rooms at Army barracks in a rural and isolated military camp at Setermoen in northern Norway. This study focused on gender and professional identity and found that several conflicts among candidates had emerged during their spare time due to different needs for rest and privacy, and that the scepticism of many older officers towards female integration was mainly related to the issue that young people who lived in barracks did not manage to separate spare time from service. This resulted in love affairs, jealousy, drama and tension spilling over from spare time to professional tasks, followed by crying episodes in the senior officers' offices, and officers who had to engage in solving personal conflicts among soldiers to get their platoon working together as a unit. Apart from NCO candidates, it is basically conscripted soldiers who live in barracks. Most of them are 18-20 years old, and most often their squad leaders are 19-25-year-old NCOs. An issue of gendered concern for older officers was also the relationship between these two close-aged groups. Therefore, to gain better access to the young soldiers' spare time, we found it advisable to embed a young researcher who could dig deeper into the social relationships that emerged from the young soldiers' everyday life.

As the study's aim was to inquire further into some of the results pointed out in Rones' doctoral thesis, participant observation and an additional six interviews, with three

⁶ Data for this study was gathered through multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork, with 72 days of participant observation spread over 12 months and including 65 interviews.

men and three women, were conducted at the same military camp, i.e. Setermoen. Bjerke stayed in one unit for 18 consecutive days, and lived together with conscripted soldiers in a dorm room for six, inhabited by three women and two men (excluding the researcher herself). The total gender ratio in the unit was 37 men to 6 women. Access to the field was gained through the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment's (FFI) research program on age cohorts that aims to identify factors that can hamper or promote recruitment and retention of men and particularly women into the Norwegian Armed Forces (FFI, 2014).

Considering the study's aim of investigating the soldiers' interaction and behavioural patterns in light of the 'total institution' character of the armed forces, it was essential to follow the conscripts between the spheres of service, leisure and rest. The researcher followed the conscripts on both military grounds and outside. This, combined with the researcher living among the subjects, makes it a full-time participant observation study (Fangen, 2011). Thus, the boundary between private life and life as a field researcher was more or less non-existent, and so the researcher became almost in the same situation as the soldiers, opening up opportunities for being in close company with them.

Obtaining intimate knowledge of what one studies by getting involved and familiar with the informants can be a strength in understanding the current way of life and patterns of action. At the same time, the researcher tried not to lose all the analytical distance. Prior to the fieldwork, some considerations were therefore given to the researcher's role. As a researcher, one will inevitably affect the social dynamics as soon as one enters the "room", and thus the importance of not standing out or being a disruptive element meant it was found both most natural and best for the researcher to act as a "partial participant observer". This provided the opportunity to take part in the social interaction and interplay of the observation objects and follow the implicit social rules, without "going native" as a soldier.

Adopting such a stance implied that the researcher depended on informal entry into the social community of the unit (in addition to formal access to the field). In the first days of her fieldwork, she therefore explicitly emphasized transparency about the study, while at the same time trying to blend in as the most natural social actor. She tried to restrict the role as a researcher as much as possible, and rather show a personal side, as necessary to developing trust and openness with the informants while avoiding uncertainty about her presence. Gaining analytical distance after first having entered the field rather personally proved to be surprisingly difficult, as the researcher quickly became part of the total institution herself. However, through this specific bodily participation, the researcher was confronted with a number of the same challenges as the informants experience daily. These practical and mental experiences helped to highlight a number of aspects regarding the total institution and led directly to the research question on the role of humour in this framework.

However, an important aspect to reflect upon is how characteristics of the researcher (age, gender, class, ethnicity, etc.) open up access to certain people, situations and information, and limit access to others (Nordberg, 1999). In this case, gender and age

in particular might have played an essential role. As an example of limitation, she could not take part in a purely male environment, as her presence by definition would have changed this, and insight into how masculinity is expressed in all-male situations was therefore difficult. The researcher simply had to rely on the men's own narratives, which as Nordberg (1999) states can be utilized to advantage by consciously or unconsciously exploiting one's gender to inquire further into something, or to get something explained. Further, Nordberg points out that the informants not only will relate to her as a researcher, but perhaps first and foremost as a woman. One must therefore reflect on what it means that, in this case she, as an interviewer and observer possessed a female-defined body. Would she ask different questions, and would the answers have looked different had she been a man? The researcher experienced several occasions during conversations with men when they would ask her "*as a woman*" what she thought and meant about something, and in conversations about women she was aware that the men were very conscious of how they phrased their views, to ensure that she would not resent or misunderstand their meaning. In addition, she also witnessed several cases of "you know how it is" comments referring to her sex/ gender, which she tried to be conscious of, both in terms of how she could optimize the interview and observation situation, but also in terms of how to avail herself of the information for analysis.

The researcher found that being in the same age category as the informants was of essential importance, partly because it meant she had the same jargon and quite naturally was able to relate to their everyday and current concerns. As a result, it was more natural for her to be a like-minded comrade than a researcher. The researcher found that, despite the fact that she conducted open participant observation, the informants quickly forgot her role as an observer, which she considered a strength for the study's credibility. So as not to spoil this "mood", she was aware of how and when she took field notes, and she found her cell phone an excellent solution, as using it did not reveal that she was making notes. This was most applicable in relatively intimate and everyday-like situations.

Regarding the interviews, they were all carried out in the barracks where the soldiers spent most hours of the day. Given that the researcher was well acquainted with the informants at this point, the interview situation was relaxed and characterized by low power structure, although the researcher steered the conversation as an interviewer. However, the relaxed atmosphere in the interview situation also had some critical implications. For instance, occupying the formal role of an interviewer seemed unnatural and artificial after having established friendly relations. Consequently, it could be all too easy for the researcher to say, "*I see what you mean*", if the participant could use a pause. Because of this shared basis of experience, she further found that they took for granted that she knew what they were talking about, and often said "*which you know all about*" and "*you've probably noticed it and experienced it yourself*", whether because she was a woman or had experienced the same housing and living conditions as they had. Although this may be a block to good empiricism in an interview situation, she experienced greater benefits in such shared experience and close acquaintance. There was an underlying trust

and openness in the way they communicated with her, as they knew she understood, owing to the fact that they had seen her experience it. This enabled a direct reference to experience, without the need to explain context and background, which allowed a spontaneity and depth in the conversation that otherwise would have been missed. Additionally, it made it possible for the researcher to avail herself of her own experiences and events during her stay in the question formulation.

However, the researcher's relation to the informants posed a number of challenges regarding ethical considerations. The same factors that contributed positively when collecting empirical data, such as the researcher's age, resulted in a rather personal relationship to the informants. As a consequence, the distinction between what, and when, something was said and done as a researcher versus a like-minded peer was most of the time non-existent. Hence, the impression that she was analyzing and exposing "friends" was present and the researcher sometimes had to fight the feeling of having broken a personal trust. However, the platoons concerned were collectively informed of both the study and the researcher's background prior to her arrival, and any questions they had about her presence were openly and honestly answered. To ensure anonymity, neither the exact battalion nor names of any informants are revealed, although, of course, the informants risk being recognized by each other. In this respect, all potentially revealing information (between the informants) was continuously assessed. However, it never became necessary to exclude anything on this basis, as most information flowed freely within the battalion and was rarely a secret between them. Before the gathering of personal data could take place, the study was registered with the FFI's commissioner for personal information protection, who ensures that research follows the applicable standards of ethics and anonymity.

The analysis of the empirical material involved alternating between reading and coding the empirical material with an "open mind" and interpreting emerging patterns in light of the theory. This means that we began with an inductive process by which we went systematically through interview transcriptions and field notes, searching for repetitive patterns that emerged from the material itself. Having identified theories and concepts that could explain the emerging patterns and themes, we went back to the empirical material in order to apply the theory (deductive process). Yet, in practice, we found ourselves in both stages simultaneously. Although the goal of the inductive process was to let the empirical material govern the development of codes and themes, rather than impose a particular framework on the material, it is important not to forget that we as researchers and private individuals enter the field with a pre-understanding, especially in the form of a theoretical framework, which obviously comes into play and governs our actions. For instance, we immediately recognized topics that fitted with Goffman's framework and which perhaps would not have been that important if we had not started out with this particular framework in mind. On the other hand, we had no initial plans to treat humour and joking relationships explicitly. Yet, as the fieldwork developed, it became increasingly obvious that the banter and messing around was more than just for the fun of it. The free verbal tone, often

sexually charged, and the amount of physical interaction, somewhat exhausting for an outsider, eventually marked the empirical data to such a degree that it led us to conclude that it should be granted explicit attention. This made it necessary to search for theories that could elucidate this behaviour, and we found that it could be explained with inspiration from Radcliff-Brown's (1952) theory on joking relationships. Due to this finding, the purpose of this article is to explore how and why humour and joking relationships emerged as such a prominent topic in the material, and illustrate how the total institution "forces" soldiers into joking relationships, with a constant risk of crossing the line between funny and offensive humour.

We will start by introducing the reader to the field with descriptions of the Setermoen military camp and connect it to the general features of total institutions. This introduction is important in order to understand how the characteristics of the total institution affect social behaviour. Thereafter, humour will be treated in light of the working and living conditions of the total institution. This will illustrate how and why for the soldiers humour becomes an important coping mechanism that leads to the establishment of joking relationships. Finally, this leads us on to the potentially problematic sides of joking relationships, in which the boundaries between banter (mild aggressive humour) and harassment (aggressive humour) become blurred.

The Setermoen Military Camp as a Total Institution : Introduction to the Fieldwork Location

Goffman (1961) claims that "[e]very institution captures something of the time and interest of its members and provides something of a world for them" (p.4). However, some institutions have more encompassing tendencies than others. The encompassing tendency is symbolized by the barrier to social intercourse with the outside world that is often built right into the physical plant, such as locked doors, high walls and fences that restrain arrival and departure. This is what Goffman calls a total institution, and, should a person reside in such a system, it encompasses his or her whole being.

Immediately as one arrives at Setermoen, the visible characteristics of total institutions reveal themselves – physical barriers such as a barbed wire fence and a limited-hours guard station. Thus, even from the outside it becomes clear that inside these fences something takes place that differs from wider society. The area inside the fence is large : in it one primarily finds military-specific amenities, such as large multi-purpose halls for maintenance of tanks, educational buildings, private residences for NCOs and offices. In addition, one finds fitness facilities, a solarium, a food fair, kiosk, football court, billiards room, infirmary and a chapel, with opportunities including Guitar Hero, films and piano – everything so that the inmates, i.e. the soldiers, should not have to leave the area. Not least are the barracks, large square brick buildings, which soldiers call home for a year.

The unit that the embedded researcher (Bjerke) was allowed to follow shared a corridor in one of these barracks, containing about 10 doors to rooms. These rooms were about 20 m², equipped with three bunk beds, a table, 6 closets, two washbasins and a nicely

stacked row of chairs. The boys shared a toilet with 4-5 stalls in the corridor, while the girls had a similar toilet downstairs. For the girls, the toilet had connected to it one lockable room with two showers, both of which were reserved for them. The boys had a larger shared shower with sauna in the basement.

In addition to these physical structures, the soldiers are never free from regulations: total institutions are characterized by authority and regimentation. Goffman describes how, in a total institution, the various tasks are performed in the presence of a larger group of other people who are all treated equally and are set to do the same tasks jointly. Further, all activities are carefully scheduled, imposed from above through a system of explicit formal rulings and a staff. The activities are incorporated in a simple, rational plan, which aims to meet the institution's official goals. In addition, the individual's activity stream is subject to regulations, intervention and evaluation from above and is open to sanctions. Even when off duty, they must comply with orders and follow the rules which apply within the organization, hence their line of actions is under constant surveillance.

On this basis, according to Goffman, entering a total institution leads to a series of abasements, degradations and mortifications for the individual, resulting in some social situations and challenges which demand both physical and psychological adjustments from each individual. Managing a life in a total institution thus requires soldiers to undergo a re-socialization process, socializing them into both the system and group in which they are to function. Characterized by the above-mentioned features, and in line with Goffman's analysis, this re-socialisation involves a regimentation process in order to make the soldiers obey the necessary standardized routines. Similar to Godfrey's mention of the use of humour to maintain levels of performance and exclude that which might disrupt the effective working of the unit, humour (recognized as mild aggressive) was an often-used tool in disciplining the conscripts. An illustrative example from the fieldwork is of a soldier who, after making the mistake of leaving his weapon cabinet unlocked, got his weapon confiscated and replaced with a broomstick with a coke-can taped to it. This was meant as a humorous way of disciplining the soldiers and reminding them to obey the routines. With this, the total institutions also restrict the soldier's ability to present themselves as adults with the power and autonomy to manage their own situation and run their own lives as they see fit.

This regimentation leads to the existence of a system of techniques which the soldiers consciously or unconsciously used as a way of dealing with institutional life. Goffman calls them secondary adjustments. Through secondary adjustments, it is possible to distance oneself from the inferior role and the personality assigned by the institution and they thus become a way for the individual to offer resistance to the institutional threats to the self. Goffman stresses that secondary adjustments do not challenge the staff directly, but allow the individual to acquire prohibited satisfactions, or permitted ones by prohibited means. With the use of various types of adjustments, the individual attempts to maintain the greatest possible control and make the most of institutional life, while at the same time moving unscathed through the stay without too many humiliations of the self. It was clear,

for example, that the conscripts had become familiar with the system as part of these secondary adjustments, and a striking urge to resort to “light” disobedience was observed. This could be simple things, such as curling the napkins and put them over the plate to hide leftovers, thus allowing them to sneak them past inspecting officers and throw them in the rubbish, well knowing this was forbidden. Another example was how they respected the curfew, requiring them to be in bed at 11 pm, only to get up to finish what they were doing once the officer on inspection was out of sight. Another example was how, when confronted by the NCOs, they appeared stressed, showing them that they had obviously hurried and took the matter seriously, while in reality they did not. During room inspection, those conscripts waiting for the NCO in the corridor gave a signal in the form of a small knock on the door when the NCO entered the room next to them, telling the conscripts inside their own room that it was “*time to shut up and stand in position*”. Such adjustments both expanded their personal economy of actions and enabled them to make a judgment of the situation and, where the consequences were considered not too serious, defy the rules, providing them with a sense of control and autonomy. Despite its importance, the focus of this study was not the secondary adjustments manifested in light disobedience, but rather the adjustments developing on the interpersonal level when being subjected to a life in a total institution.

Humour as a Way to Cope with Deprivation of Privacy

One of the most characteristic features of the total institution is the deviation from the social arrangement in modern society, where work, play and rest/ privacy ordinarily take place in different places with different co-participants (Goffman, 1961). This means that what happens in one sphere will be known to the inmates in all the other spheres, and further that the total institution has limited possibilities for going backstage. Backstage and frontstage are the metaphors Goffman (1959) introduces as concepts for social life in his famous dramaturgical analysis in which social life is compared with roles on a theatre stage. Backstage is the room in individuals’ lives where they are not “observed” by an audience and hence do not have to behave and present themselves in a certain way, but can be in total relaxation and need not please anyone but themselves. In a total institution, the self is vulnerable and exposed because the social spheres blend, making the impression management that characterizes frontstage difficult and almost impossible to maintain.

The soldiers’ life was also characterized by very little privacy. Such a life results in mortifications as it involves what Goffman describes as contaminative exposure and forced interpersonal contact, also involving forced social relationships. Unlike their previous existence in the outside world, the conscripts are now unprotected against unfortunate influence, and deprived of the options to control their contacts with others and protect themselves. The individual’s territory, such as body, actions, thoughts and belongings are therefore violated. Goffman says, “[o]bviously, group living will necessitate mutual contact and exposure among inmates” (p.30), i.e. a compulsory social relationship where the individual’s limit for what is private is exceeded. This means that forced interpersonal

contact presents completely different challenges from what one is accustomed to in civilian life. This can be exemplified by people having had to witness others smearing themselves with butt cream or being exposed to the same song repeatedly for 18 days. In this respect, it was evident that the widespread humorous tone helped them to save their own or others' "face" (dignity) in potentially embarrassing situations. The following quote from a male conscript in an all-male room illustrates how an intimate, private and potentially prodigiously embarrassing situation was neutralized by means of humour:

One of my roommates, during drill school, he was bothered by his stuff [penis] getting hard in the morning. It's like, after having been there for a week, he just didn't give a fuck. Then he was like, jumped out of bed and walked around in the military's parachute boxers. And it was pretty visible in every way, really. Then we just didn't give a fuck and we could only joke about it, slap him on the bum while he walked around, you know.

This situation is normally private for a man and not something that is socially acceptable to unmask in front of others. Because polite inattention is virtually impossible to practise with conviction in this cramped space, the process of neutralizing potentially embarrassing situations is therefore central, and the remedy was humour. The excerpt shows how the fusion of the social spheres hampers impression management, making the self vulnerable and exposed. By laughing it away, the embarrassment was removed and potentially stigmatizing situations were smoothed over. Lacking the opportunity to steer away from such situations, such as they would have had in the outside world, humour seemed to be the only tool available to maintain dignity. When they were exposed to each other's body smells, farts and episodes of diarrhoea, they could choose to laugh and forget it, or they could resort to shaming. Having adjusted to the situation, things that had been embarrassing in their previous life, such as farting among others, became a "natural" thing to do. However, for the women this was not fully accepted. Some behaviours, and even ways of speaking, were considered reserved for men. A male soldier expressed it like this:

...then (when you're burping) you're, in a way, more of a lad than the lads themselves when you do those things. And chat about your fanny and that, that's not cool. Then maybe you're more of a girl with a guy's brain when you do that.

Women thus had to balance their anticipated femininity and the hardships of soldier life, as they were not fully granted the same liberties as men.

More challenges follow from not being able to withdraw from the environment. With the lack of a separate backstage, everyday life can get intense with many potential conflicts and disagreements threatening to disrupt their every day. Going for a walk, attaching oneself to the bed with a headset or curbing one's own personality to accommodate the others were all well-used strategies, but nevertheless they were not always sufficient and humour was often applied to avoid unnecessary conflicts. The use of humour permitted them to complain and criticize not only the system and authority but perhaps more importantly each other. For example, if someone put their wet and stinking

socks on the table, this was criticized by an exaggerated use of creative comments and facial expressions. This illustrates more concretely that humour eased social interaction by eliminating the experience of serious anger and insult that the communication otherwise would have had. As John Morreall writes in his book *Taking Laughter Seriously*:

When we have a complaint to make to a friend, for example, we often do so with a jocular gripe. By making our complaint amusing, we show the person that the problem is not of overwhelming importance and that we have maintained our perspective on it – “it is not the end of the world” as we sometimes say. And our humor not only shows that we have some distance from the problem, but it also tends to allow our friend some distance. He isn’t put on the spot and forced to defend himself in the way that people often are when their actions are criticized in a serious tone. By using the jocular gripe we do not set up a confrontation ; rather we invite the person to step back and laugh with us. The tension often associated with serious criticism is thus reduced and the person is more likely to consider the reasonableness of the complaint. Indeed, most people seem able to take almost any criticism from a friend if it is expressed in a humorous way (Morreall, 1983, p.116).

By exaggerating the complaint, or make use of irony, the communication takes on a humorous and less serious character. This allows one to give vent to frustration and irritation, but in such a way that the person it concerns obviously is not supposed to take what is being said as a serious and hostile remark. Keeping in mind the rigid regulations and loss of autonomy, this becomes an important exception. Overlooking and suppressing these disagreements and keeping things polite (as often is the case in civilian life) would not work because the characteristics of total institutions simply create too many such cases.

Joking – Negotiating their Relationships with One Another

Due to the humour and banter that marked the soldiers’ interaction, it became evident that it was reminiscent of what anthropologist Radcliffe-Brown described as a “joking relationship”. He defined joking relationships as a “*relation between two persons, in which one is by custom permitted, and in some instances required, to tease or make fun of the other, who in return is required to take no offence*” (Radcliffe-Brown, 1952, p.89). The relationship often involves free verbal and/or physical interaction and may be symmetrical or asymmetrical. Furthermore, he writes that the joking relationship is...

a peculiar combination of friendliness and antagonism – the behaviour is such that in any other social context it would express and arouse hostility ; but is not meant seriously and must not be taken seriously. There is a pretence of hostility and a real friendliness (Radcliffe-Brown, 1952, p.90).

It seems as if the cramped space, lack of privacy, interpersonal (also sexual/gendered) tensions and episodes of boredom that emerged in the context of the total institution “forced” the soldiers into joking relationships. This was a relationship in which it was permitted to test each other’s boundaries, in sometimes extreme ways, as the field note below on a “Christmas finger” episode illustrates:

Shouting can be heard from the hallway. I'm in bed and just as unaffected as the others in the room. More shouting now, and gets closer. Doors are getting banged open and shut and we hear more shouting and bellowing, interrupted by swearing. Some are laughing. All we hear is what can only be described as a tremendous commotion. We are just as unaffected as before. This only lasts for a short time (hard to be exact as I was pretty unaffected) and not until X (male soldier) bursts in do we ask what is up. He explained that, "the fucker X, and X is trying to give me a Christmas finger. Holy fuck, they're such assholes, I can't be bothered with it." He hangs about our room a few minutes while chatting with us. Just as he opens the door to leave, the only conclusion to be drawn from all the immediate bellowing outside is that the game wasn't over.

A Christmas finger is in short when a person surprises another by moving a finger with full force up their ass from behind, a sexually charged and supremely physically marked "joke" (or "surprise gift", therefore named a Christmas finger). This practice illustrates a joking relationship which, as a strong and positive one, can be seen as a sign of acceptance when, though it assumes such an extreme form, the joking can be seen as comfortable. The most frequent jokes were also the ones closest to, or even across, gender. This and other forms of a physical joking relationship can be seen as the hallmark of bonding and a way of negotiating their need for intimacy without losing control and crossing the line to "serious intimacy".

Another less physical test of boundaries was when a male and female conscript intentionally irritated a fellow female soldier by repeatedly placing her newly washed duvet on a dirty mattress, well knowing this was one of her trigger points. This went on until she had finished changing her bed, and can be seen as a way of teasing her for (womanly) exaggerated cleanliness. Testing each other's boundaries gave the soldiers predictability and control over the people that surrounded them 24 hours a day, who all had their own different standards, "hang-ups" and trigger points. According to Radcliffe-Brown, a joking relationship is typically characterized by a disjunction, something contradictory. He writes:

Any serious hostility is prevented by the playful antagonism and teasing, and this in its regular repetition is a constant expression and reminder of that social disjunction which is one of the essential components of the relation, while the social conjunction is maintained by the friendliness that takes no offence at insult (Radcliffe-Brown, 1952, p.92).

Through a gender lens, this relationship can, however, be granted further meaning. The interaction between men and women was often marked by teasing and insults, typically with sexual overtones, in which the man was usually the initiator and was also allowed to ridicule things that were typically important for women but not for men, such as, for example, brushing one's hair and putting on make-up. However, slightly differently from the Radcliffe-Brown quote, the women were allowed and to some extent expected to act offended, though not for real, confirming that they accepted the insult as friendly. If the women conveyed that they were offended for real, the men denied any hostile or unfriendly intention, saying things such as "*it was only a joke*" and accusing the women of lacking a sense of humour.

Such interaction can be understood as a need for distance, as a way of having to deal with the other sex (or individuals) under such intimate and challenging circumstances as total institutions are apt to generate. Thus, one can talk about a relationship in which the contrast between the two groups of men and women (or between two individuals) is emphasized, but open conflict is avoided by establishing a relationship in which the participants are allowed to insult each other without really offending each other, or being offended. They act out conflict to prevent disjunction. By not taking offence, they express genuine friendliness. Joking relationships, then, seemed to be a way for them to openly act out and express frustration and disagreements associated with their clash of interests, without leading to real hostility. As such, it also points to a strategy for bringing these disjunctive components to light and as a way of handling them without being someone who causes problems. In cases where it was said that the line had been crossed, the message of the joke was quickly dismissed as conveying the truth with statements such as “*it’s only for a laugh*” (you should know), making it a way to preserve distance, and simultaneously deny it.

But, due to the joking relationships’ insulting character, Radcliffe-Brown points out that they can also be dangerous because they navigate in a borderland with invisible lines between funny and inappropriate/hurting jokes. Thus, by practicing a joking relationship, they play with boundaries and, because there is a degree of antagonism involved in the joke, it is potentially perilous because crossing this line can cause serious quarrels or bad feelings. The challenge seems to be that they do not operate by any defined or clear rules for what is accepted in which situations, and so these joking relationships differ a bit from those observed by Radcliffe-Brown. In his cases, age was something one was expected to joke about, and there were social rules for who should joke with whom, and about what (for example, fathers and sons-in-law joking about age). No such rules seem to be known or successfully incorporated among the soldiers, making these joking relationships risky. Two examples can help illustrate this. The first is when a female soldier was asked by a male fellow soldier something like, “*by the way, it is okay if I call you an army slut?*”, to which she replied, “*yeah, sure*”. The other example is of a female soldier who was on her way from the shower to her gender-mixed room dressed in underwear and a cardigan. On her way (about 10 metres) she met a male fellow soldier who stopped, looked at her and said in a rather serious tone “*Jessica, you should put on more clothes*”. She walked straight into her room rather frustrated saying, “*It’s not worse if a girl wears few clothes, than if a guy wears only boxers, is it? He must have been joking ... but, argh, I get so annoyed*”.

In his case study, Lyman (1987) points out that if the cue “this is a joke” is ambiguous and not recognized or accepted, the aggressive content of the joke is revealed and generally responded to with anger or aggression, endangering the relationship. In the case with the cardigan, the female soldier became uncertain of the degree of truth; the content of the joke, which signalled a division between proper behaviour for men and women, hurt the female soldier and she had to assume it was meant as a joke. It is in situations such as these – where the joker crosses a line without knowing it, and the receiver cannot tell whether it was a joke – that the joking relationship falls short as an

approach for adapting to the situation. Compared with the acceptance of being referred to as an army slut, this example illustrates that it is not the crudeness of the joke but other factors that define whether the joke was a success or not.

To make these boundaries even more challenging, insufficient degrees of toleration were not accepted. Just as there exists an invisible, undefined threshold for when the joking goes too far, there is a corresponding limit to how much the recipient is expected to withstand, with the failure to withstand enough seen as the mark of a touchy and sensitive person.

Joking as a Means to Compensate for Hierarchical Distance

Above, we showed how a joking relationship was practised to create a social distance, or establish and negotiate relations between peers. A joking relationship can also contribute to *reducing* the social distance, and this was especially apparent in the relationship between the NCOs and the conscripts.

As part of the total institution's regimentation and authority, the conscripts are often excluded from knowledge of their fate, which, together with the general loss of autonomy, gives the NCOs a basis for distance. Considering the conscripts' position first, the interaction was, as described under the introduction to the fieldwork site, characterized by a striking urge to resort to light (humorous) disobedience. In addition, the interaction was marked by something that appeared as an extreme interest in their various superiors' traits, interests and so on. These were popular conversation topics, which excited the conscripts a lot. The researcher often had to give her reaction to various superiors' personal traits and how they behaved when in civilian roles. Moreover, the conscripts would sit and wait for their superiors in the local bar at the weekends, hoping one of them might stop by. Hoping to spice up an otherwise rigid and at times extremely boring existence, making the superior say or do something that revealed the person behind the formal military role was a way of personalizing him. By doing so, they lowered the threshold to initiating a joking interaction, reducing the social distance between them. A male conscript expressed how great it was having a joking relationship with an NCO, and being able to say, "*fuck you*", as to a brother.

Nielsen (2011) has studied humour in prison and argues that the illusion of humour being "unreal" is important. This applies equally well to the armed forces, as that illusion provides a way for superiors and conscripts to engage in positive and non-authoritarian communication without violating the norms and formal distance that is expected in the contact between them. Nielsen writes:

The officer-prisoner joking relationship allows officers and prisoners to step out of their official positions and briefly meet as equals [...]. The interaction is defined by a play frame that makes it possible to erase negative implications with reference to the unreal qualities of humour. As such, the play frame preserves both the conjunctive and the disjunctive aspects of the relationships (Nielsen, 2011, p.508).

In other words, humorous exchanges allow NCOs and conscripts to temporarily suspend their official roles as a superior and subordinates and meet in a room where they for a moment can view unofficial and personal characteristics and traits, showing who they are as private individuals. For the conscripts, getting the NCOs to step out of their role and treat them as equals was thus perceived as an achievement and, consequently, this was an exciting thing to try. It was – for a moment – about overcoming authority. This interest in NCOs provided the soldiers with important knowledge, such as how far they could push the limits of disobedience, and what the consequences might be, or which corner each NCO checked for dust during room inspection. This seemed to give them a certain control, autonomy and freedom in an otherwise rigid and all-encompassing existence.

Although the NCOs are above the conscripts in rank and therefore have authority and power over them, they are only slightly older than the conscripts. For the NCOs, establishing a joking relationship with the conscript could thus be a means to reduce the (unnatural) authoritative distance required in the formal hierarchy and express a personality that reflects their age and similarity with their subordinates. However, that relationship was not symmetrical, and this makes this joking relationship even more risky than between peers. In particular, the empirical data frequently pointed to an asymmetric relationship, consisting of sexually suggestive jokes from NCOs targeting female soldiers, in which the woman found herself in a situation virtually surrounded by men and felt very limited in how she could respond. In the following quote, a female soldier opens up about such an event:

Female soldier : (...) to me then, what was it [he said] the other day... hmm, yes, he uses this umbrella over the cannon commander hatch, and he'd brought the umbrella in and was like "*this looked a bit like a black dildo, doesn't it Martine ?*". And all the other guys were there so he could've asked any of them. And then just like "*you like black dildos or what ?*". Yeah, he is pretty mad when it comes to that. He's the worst of them all. But I'm like, okay, I'll just laugh at it, because otherwise it just becomes awkward, right ... So I just laugh and get on with it.

Interviewer : But what would the alternative be, if you actually had felt offended or got upset ?

Female soldier : Yes, what are you supposed to do ? I mean, yeah ... what else can you do, it'll just be really awkward, you know.

As she points out herself, the NCO could have approached any one of the boys, or the soldiers as a group, but chose without any attempt at disguise to direct the joke at the only woman in the group, whose best, and perhaps only, option to avoid an awkward and unpleasant atmosphere was to laugh and shrug it off. This seemed apparently to work fine for this particular woman, but at the same time she recognizes the insulting character of this "joke", and continues that she knows other women who like this type of humour even less and, with the lack of non-confronting alternative actions, do not know what to do in such a situation.

Female soldier : But it's all right for me, but like I know for example Eva, she hates to get this kind at her. She finds it way over the line. But, like, I don't care. I just brush it off.

Interviewer : But, doesn't she speak out ?

Female soldier : No, she just becomes speechless. Last time, she just got devastated ; she doesn't know what to say.

It appears from these excerpts that the women did not find these kinds of jokes from their superiors funny, and particularly not gender-neutral. Yet, when the women experienced degrading statements and offending jokes as victims, they seemed to tell themselves that it was only meant as a joke and not an offence from the men's side. The women grabbed onto a supposed good or humorous intention, rather than admitting the actual effect the joke had on them. This was the case whether the joker was a male peer or a male superior, but it was particularly so when the joker was a superior that the woman became speechless and unable to strike back. Because they do not want to appear as "the touchy one" or a victim, the best way of handling the situation therefore was to define degrading statements and harassment as a rather poor joke, laugh and shrug it off. This also seemed what the men expected, in line with the discourse that if you are about to become a soldier you must be able to take any shit "*like a man*".

Conclusion and Discussion

The main objective of the study presented in this article was to investigate how features of a *total institution* (Goffman, 1961) affect the social interaction between soldiers who live together in gender-mixed rooms in Army barracks. The fieldwork and subsequent analysis revealed that humour played a major role in the soldiers' everyday life and relations to each other and their NCOs. Thus, the purpose of this article has been to explore what role humour plays for soldiers who serve and live together in the context of a gender-mixed total institution.

The article has illustrated that the Setermoen military camp has the features of such an institution, and accordingly breaks down the barriers between service, leisure and privacy that usually characterize everyday life outside the military institution. This "forces" the soldiers into close and intimate relationships, with limited opportunities to withdraw to backstage arenas where one is not observed. In order to adjust to the situation, the soldiers experience a secondary socialization, which is central to the development of tolerance vis-à-vis each other and the environment. The deprivation of privacy and autonomy leads however to certain behaviours, with humour as a prominent characteristic of the social relationship.

Firstly, the soldiers used humour to protect themselves and save each other's "face" in embarrassing situations where intimate limits were crossed. Secondly, the cramped space, lack of privacy and interpersonal (also sexual/ gendered) tensions "forced" the soldiers into joking relationships where playful antagonism and teasing were allowed. The joking provided an outlet for frustration, releasing the tension they felt. It allowed them to

test each other's boundaries, negotiate the loss of control over their own life, maintain a distance to others and emphasize contrast and conflicts between individuals or groups in a non-threatening way. In other words, the joking relationship was a way to negotiate and stabilize social relations and express disagreement, while open conflict was avoided. Thirdly, the conscripts' extreme interest in NCOs and sometimes striking urge to resort to light (humorous) disobedience seemed to be associated with a need for predictability, autonomy and freedom in an existence characterized by inferiority and lack of control. The formation of joking relationships between soldiers and NCOs seemed for the conscripts to be a means of maintaining a feeling of autonomy, while for the NCOs it was a means to express a (cool) personality that reflected their age proximity and similarity to their subordinates. In other words, the joking relationship reduced the social distance for both groups, allowing the two positions to meet through positive and non-authoritarian communication without violating the formal hierarchy.

However, because joking relationships are tinged with playful hostility and insult, they are potentially risky and problematic, because one navigates a terrain without any clear lines over what is acceptable and what is not. Our research has shown that the line is often crossed, sometimes resulting in the experience of being insulted and harassed by both fellow soldiers and superiors. In that way, humour was experienced as both a good and bad feature of the military culture, resulting in either a good laugh that promotes friendship and (job) satisfaction, or in belittling, exclusion, hurt feelings and distrust.

Finally, and in line with previous studies,⁷ we have also observed the opinion that rough, sexist humour is something you should be strong enough to shrug off and handle if you want to become a soldier. In that regard, Romero and Cruthirds' identification of how different styles of humour can promote different organizational outcomes is important. In particular, one should take notice of the distinction between *mild* aggressive humour and more markedly aggressive humour, where only the mild version is connected to positive outcomes, such as increasing group cohesiveness, improving communication and boosting subordinate satisfaction. Aggressive humour, i.e. the humour used to victimize, belittle and cause others disparagement, was on the other hand negatively related to pleasantness, conscientiousness and group cohesion. Therefore, and for other reasons such as respect,⁸ single female soldiers should not have to take dildo jokes aimed at them from NCOs just because "*that's how it is in the military*", and otherwise you are "*being touchy*" and not mentally strong and fit enough to be a soldier. In so far as group cohesion and subordinates' satisfaction are important, there *is* a boundary for what soldiers need to tolerate, and one must learn to better identify the blurred border between constructive and destructive disparaging jokes that cross the line from humour to bullying and harassment.

Formally, the Norwegian Armed Forces have zero tolerance for bullying, victimization and sexual harassment, because it is acknowledged that these will "*reduce job satisfaction and morale, affecting the job performance, lead to reduced efficiency and*

⁷ Totland, 2009 ; Harsvik, 2010 ; Rones, 2015 ; Hellum, 2016.

⁸ Respect is promoted as the first of three core values in the Norwegian Armed Forces.

increased absenteeism” (Simonsen, 2016, p.7). Several policy documents and guidelines on how to work against and handle unwanted incidents accordingly exist.⁹ Despite that, Hanson and colleagues (2016) find in their survey of the Northern Brigade (of which the fieldwork site is part) that while 15 percent of their informants mentioned experience of bullying in the year prior to joining the Army, 23 percent among them reported they had been bullied during the first nine months of their military service, and that the increase applies in particular to women, where the proportions are up from 8 to 38 percent. Broken down by places of service, the numbers are in line with the annual National Conscript Survey. The example supplied above of a sexual joke from a male NCO to a female conscript also illustrates the gap that still exists between theory and practice, illustrating how NCOs set the scene and define the standard for what is and what is not permissible when women are on the receiving end of such jokes.

An implication of our findings is accordingly that humour, as both an important and a problematic part of military culture, needs both to be better understood and better managed by military leaders. The first calls for further research, the second for better training of NCOs and soldiers with regards to what is acceptable, and what is not. The research findings suggest, however, that the armed forces must not treat all cases of humour according to the same rule. As the article has shown, an apparently aggressive and sexist comment can be accepted as a joke, while an apparently neutral comment can be experienced as an act of discrimination. This means that it is not necessarily the roughness and sexual tone in the words used, nor the joker’s intention that makes a joke insulting. It is the whole context and the social relation it is expressed within. This makes the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable jokes difficult and blurred, and humour must accordingly be treated as one of the more complex features of human relationships.

This study has been exploratory and its limitations provide opportunities for future study. Firstly, it points to the need for deeper analysis of those cases where the joking relationship worked and those where it did not, with the aim of better understanding the patterns that “determine” whether a joke comes out as a success or an insult. Further, since there exist different expectations of proper behaviour for men and for women, we need more research with a gender perspective on humour, particularly in the military. For instance, our fieldwork material contains the opinion that “*it is a bit tiresome with women in the military because they giggle and laugh at silly and unserious things*”, while it seems as if men’s childish and frivolous humour is not being recorded as tiresome, suggesting that men’s style of humour has been naturalized and hence no longer seen as something disturbing. A consequence was that women were seen as less “*serious*” than men, despite the fact that the latter also “*laughed at silly and unserious things*”. Romero and Cruthirds (2006) further warn that the initiator of a joke must be aware of the audience’s composition. There should therefore be a closer investigation of humour in relation to processes of change in social composition. Humour is often based on the distinction between *us* and *them*, and therefore research on processes of inclusion and exclusion

⁹ See, for instance : Feltprestkorpset, 2014 ; Simonsen, 2016.

should pay attention to the use of humour as a double-edged tool. Finally, we suggest that the institutional context that deprives soldiers of privacy and autonomy ought to be included as a factor in analysis of the social interactions and joking relationships that occur in the military.

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