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Deposited in *Repositório ISCTE-IUL*:

2019-02-26

Deposited version:

Post-print

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Carreiras, H. (2018). The reflexive turn in the sociological study of the military. In Markus Schulz (Ed.), *Third ISA Forum of Sociology's Common Sessions*. (pp. 145-152). Viena: ISA.

Further information on publisher's website:

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# 17. The Reflexive Turn in the Sociological Study of the Military

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## Introduction

The idea of reflexivity as a surveillance tool in research has been flourishing in the social sciences over the past four decades. But this has not been the case in the social scientific study of the military, where a relative absence of reflexivity in research practices and processes has been identified (Higate and Cameron, 2006). However, recent work in the field reveals a different trend, which can trigger a reflexive turn in the sociological study of the military.

The paper aims to uncover the meaning and importance of reflexivity for the social scientific study of the military, both in terms of past practices—through a selective report on the state of the field—and in terms of the futures we want for this research area.

It argues that far from being a constraint, reflexivity is the very condition for the production of social scientific knowledge and for asserting the validity and reliability of research results. As such, it is a path to be followed and strengthened by those who study the military and its relationship with the broader society.

## What is reflexivity?

In the specialized literature, reflexivity is usually associated with three referents: agency, society, and science (Archer, 2003; Giddens, 2004). It can refer to the general ability of all individuals to reflect upon themselves in the world; to having institutions and social structures as a referent, in particular with regard to their norms, values, conduct, and the effects of their actions; and it can also refer to scientific practice and be understood as an epistemological surveillance tool.

With regard to this last dimension—the one at stake in this paper—the focus of reflexivity is mainly directed at four different domains: *external dimensions*, *scientific field*, *research process*, and *research effects* (Berger, 2015; Bourdieu, 2004; Gouldner, 1970; Mauthner and Doucet, 2003; Wasserfall, 1993; May and Perry, 2011). *External dimensions* refers to the impact that

structural factors, exterior to the scientific field, can have on the production of knowledge. These factors include the researchers' social origins, social class, gender, race, sexual orientation, as well as their social trajectories, values, and identities. The *scientific field* dimension concerns the location of the discipline in the social sciences field, as well as the position that researchers occupy within this disciplinary field and in the narrower subfield of the institution where they develop their work. The *research process* focus is on reflexivity as a tool to make explicit the effect of research contexts and positions on aspects such as the choice of research topics, theoretical frameworks, methodological approaches, access to the field, relationship with the participants, and the way the data are collected and interpreted (Adkins, 2009; Berger, 2015; Day, 2012; Finlay, 2002; Mauthner and Doucet, 2003; Pillow, 2003). *Effects of social research* refers to the internal and external impacts of research. The process of data collection and the dissemination of results can both affect research contexts—such as the stimulus of participants' reflexivity (individual and/or collective), disruption of contextual dynamics, and changes in perceptions, routines, and practices—and produce a number of social consequences and impacts, raising explicit ethical and deontological questions (Brannen, 1988, 1993; Caetano, 2015; Finlay, 2002; Wasserfall, 1993).

In all these senses, reflexivity can be mobilized as a critical instrument, more or less oriented towards social change, and simultaneously as a means for epistemological, methodological, and ethical surveillance, which enables the researcher to anticipate and thus guide and exercise a certain degree of control over the social effects of the knowledge that is produced.

### **The field of armed forces and society: How reflexive has it been?**

In one of the few articles where the question of reflexivity in the social scientific study of the military is explicitly addressed, Higate and Cameron argue that, unlike what happens in social science in general, the effect of the reflexivity concept on military studies has remained marginal (Higate and Cameron, 2006). In their view, this surprising neglect is mainly the result of two factors: the dominant positivist epistemological foundation of the discipline, which assumes the possibility of neutralizing the so-called researcher bias, and the impact of research on explicit military agendas oriented towards making the armed forces more efficient and effective, thus promoting an engineering rather than an enlightenment model of social research. While appraising the interdisciplinary diversity and the intellectual vibrancy of the field, the authors point to the fact that “rarely, if ever, have military sociologists explicitly treated reflexivity as both a resource and a topic in their work” (Higate and Cameron, 2006: 219).

This is an accurate diagnosis if one thinks of the *external* and *research process* dimensions of reflexivity, and especially if one focuses on the research-

er's role and positionality (as the authors do). In this sense, even a quick literature review in the field of armed forces and society reveals a general absence of concern regarding this domain of reflexivity.

However, a broader vision of the concept—encompassing other dimensions scrutinized above, namely the *scientific field* dimension—allows for a somewhat different understanding. Even if there has been limited use of the concept, it is nonetheless important to acknowledge a variety of works where reflexivity has been practiced, even if not explicitly framed as such or used in the above sense of a tool for enlightenment.

Attempts at framing the identity of military sociology, or the broader area of armed forces and society, have been overwhelmingly directed towards mapping theoretical and methodological frameworks and identifying core concepts, models, and tools used by the researchers. These efforts have focused on 1) identifying the object and shifts in attention in the study of war and the military, mainly, but not exclusively, through *state of the art* accounts (Lang, 1972; Harries-Jenkins and Moskos, 1981; Edmonds, 1988; Kurtz, 1992; Kümmel and Prüfert, 2000; Callaghan and Kernic, 2003; Caforio, 2006; Kestnbaum, 2009); 2) understanding the social, institutional, and intellectual factors that explain the visibility, salience, or neglect of war and the military as research objects (Dandeker, 2000; Ender and Gibson 2005; Malesevic, 2010); and 3) examining the position of military sociology within the scientific discipline of sociology as a whole or its interdisciplinary configuration (Caforio, 2007). The reflexive practice in the field has thus developed firmly around the *cognitive dimension*, with a focus on the evolution of research topics and paradigms. Without attempting a complete review, it is nonetheless illuminating to identify some of these efforts in greater detail, for illustrative purposes.

One of the first systematic efforts at reflexivity, simultaneously aiming at enhancing a comparative and international approach, is the volume *Military Sociology: The Richness of a Discipline*, edited by Gerhard Kummel and Andreas Prüfert in 2000 (Kümmel and Prüfert, 2000). It collects a variety of contributions on the development and state of military sociology in various countries, as well as a selective mapping of research topics. As in previous works that offered an overview of the military domain in the social sciences (Lang 1972; Harries-Jenkins and Moskos, 1981; Kuhlmann, 1989; Edmonds, 1988), the starting point for this volume is the recognition of the interdisciplinary status of military sociology, considered to be a rich and multi-faceted discipline and not just a mere “hyphen-sociology”; that is, a sub-discipline of sociology.

During the following decade, various other publications followed a similar reflexive path. In *Armed Forces and International Security: Global Trends and Issues*, Callaghan and Kernic assembled a large collection of articles that trace major trends in the development of the study of the armed forces and society since World War II, as well as recent trends and issues in military sociology and

civil–military relations, in what the editors called *an encyclopedic overview* (Callaghan and Kernic, 2003). Two years later, Eric Ouellet brought together military sociologists from eight countries to discuss and illustrate new directions for military sociology in *New Directions in Military Sociology* (Ouellet, 2005). Besides examining the foundations of military sociology, the book aimed to elucidate the potential contributions of interpretative sociology and allied approaches to the study of military affairs. In 2006, Caforio’s edited *Handbook of the Sociology of the Military* consolidated the trend towards deepening the cognitive scrutiny. One year later, another edited volume by the same author, *Social Sciences and the Military: An Interdisciplinary Overview*, elucidated the need to develop interdisciplinary and cross-national studies of the military, underlining the “superiority of an examination of the subject of investigation from different vantage points” (Caforio, 2007: 15). Still another example of this reflexive mode is Kestnbaum’s overview of the “Sociology of War and the Military,” where distinct historical patterns of transformation and development of scholarship domains in the field are examined. (Kestnbaum, 2009: 238).

In the same cognitive vein but with a more specific focus, a variety of works have attempted to define the scope and borders of the field by collecting contributions considered to be representative, such as readers, or by reflecting on reproduction and dissemination mechanisms, as in the case of teaching and publication. Examples of the first category can be found in the reader *The Sociology of the Military* (Caforio, 1998), a collection of essays, including some of the discipline’s most significant studies, on topics from the founding fathers to the most recent writings in the contemporary sociology of the military. A more recent publication is Burk and Segal’s *Military Sociology* (Burk and Segal, 2012). In this four-volume collection, the authors survey the field around four major themes: organization, civil–military relations, direct or mediated experience of war, and the use and control of force.

Examples of the second category—the focus on teaching and dissemination—include articles that present a twofold inquiry: on the one hand, the place of topics related to war and military sociology in sociology textbooks (Ender and Gibson, 2005), and on the other, the way these are included in military curricula. Worth mentioning here is a special issue of *Armed Forces & Society* on teaching sociology at military academies around the globe, aimed at providing “depth and breadth to the understanding of sociology in military officer education” (Segal, 2008: 11).

Among the variety of contributions to this *scientific field* domain of reflexivity it is possible to already detect efforts to address aspects pertaining to the *external* and *research effects* dimensions, such as the use or publication of sociological findings, the characteristics of researchers, the relation to institutional frameworks, and the diverse paths that research configurations take in different parts of the world.

However, it was only in the second decade of the twenty-first century that greater attention came to be directed towards the *research process* dimension of reflexivity and systematic explorations of methodological questions developed. The scope and rhythm of such explorations seem to justify the identification of a new trend, one we may call a reflexive turn in the sociological study of the military.

### **The reflexive turn in the sociology of the military**

During the second decade of the twenty-first century, interest in the *research process* dynamics in military studies received a sudden boost. Different works raised questions from the point of view of the positionality of researchers (Henry, Higate and Sanghera, 2009) or their engagement with the military (Ben-Ari, 2011). Following the organization of panels and debates in major conferences, two other volumes were published that represent a turning point in terms of reflexivity in the study of the military. The first was *Qualitative Methods in Military Studies* (Carreiras and Castro, 2013), which was soon followed by *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in Military Studies* (Soeters, Shields and Ritjens, 2014).

In *Qualitative Methods in Military Studies*, Carreiras and Castro bring together researchers with different disciplinary, geographic, and intellectual backgrounds to reflect on the conditions under which qualitative research methods are used and how they are carried out in military-related contexts. The book is explicitly presented as an exercise in reflexivity and presents it as a way to improve the quality of, and accountability in, the research process (Carreiras and Castro, 2013: 3).

The volume *Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in Military Studies*, organized by Soeters, Shields, and Ritjens, examines a full range of methodological approaches and is one of the most comprehensive and pragmatically oriented efforts in addressing research methodologies in military studies. While it is mainly concerned with the examination of applied methodological strategies and tools, it also explicitly addresses reflexivity (Soeters, Shields and Ritjens, 2014).

In 2016, two new books were released that reinforce the orientation toward strengthening the reflexive focus, bringing new questions and perspectives into the debate. *Researching the Military*, edited by Carreiras, Castro, and Frederic, examines the conditions under which research takes place, not only through mapping transformations in the dynamics of the scientific field, but also through looking closely at the research process and the positionality of the researcher. A second volume, *The Routledge Companion to Military Research Methods*, edited by Williams, Jenkins, Rech, and Woodward, provides an overview of methodological approaches to critical studies of military personnel and institu-

tions, engaging in particular with the growth in qualitative approaches to research on military topics conducted outside military institutions.

All these developments are a promising avenue for the sociological study of the military. By enabling a better understanding of the interplay between social, scientific, and policy dynamics, such enhanced reflexivity leads to greater awareness and conscious choices regarding the future of this field of study, strengthening both its appeal to younger scholars and its ability to help us understand a complex and fascinating research object.

### Concluding remarks

This paper examined the extent to which reflexivity has been mobilized as a tool in the social scientific study of the military, through a selective and illustrative review of the existing literature. This scrutiny revealed a dearth of explicit reference to reflexivity, a dominant focus on the *scientific field* dimension, and the emergence, in recent years, of a renewed emphasis on reflexivity more related to the *research process* domain. We considered this a promising avenue for the future. However, a note of caution is also needed with regard to the supposed virtues of reflexivity.

Reflexivity is an ongoing and unfinished process that has its own limitations. Although indispensable for the self-monitoring and self-critique of social research, reflexivity should not, on the other hand, be seen as a cognitive tool capable of solving all research obstacles (Day, 2012; Lynch, 2000; Pels, 2000). Its exercise requires particular cautiousness at two levels: it should not become a rhetorical strategy to support the credibility of the results produced, but rather an actual practice of scientific validation; and it should not be a narcissistic exercise in which the researcher gets lost in infinite processes of intellectual deconstruction (Finlay, 2002). Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that there are different degrees of reflexivity depending on the distance of the researcher from the research undertaken (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003). Certain types of reflection can only be feasible with some physical and temporal distance from the research context. Reflexivity, as a “sensitising device” that gives visibility to research components that would remain hidden if they were not the object of an inquisitive look, should focus not only on the grounds and procedures in which the production of knowledge on social reality is anchored, but also on the limitations that these elements introduce into the knowledge itself (May and Perry, 2011). This constitutes both a challenge and an agenda for future research in military studies, while at the same time enhancing cooperation and articulation with other sociological fields.

## Note

This paper builds on previous work and debates on the topic of reflexivity and on the sociological study of the military, namely the contribution by Carreiras and Caetano to the volume *Researching the Military* (Carreiras, Castro and Frederic, 2016).

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