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# Discursive strategies: how Israeli soldiers explain what they do and why they do it[1] (draft)

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Abstract

This paper will focus on the dominant discursive strategies that Israeli soldiers use when giving account of their daily tasks and operational activities in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT). The occupation itself and the presence of the soldiers in the OPT require soldiers to carry out nightly arrests, to man checkpoints and to patrol Palestinian towns and villages. During these constabulary tasks, they are constantly confronted with the 'other': the Palestinian. These meetings have a high potential to lead to violent interactions, either verbal or physical. This paper deals with the way soldiers give account of such 'violent meetings' and their military practises in general. I will show in this paper what discursive strategies soldiers use to explain, legitimize or justify their behaviour and thus how they make sense of their actions. Dominant themes in the discourse of soldiers, such as a focus on professionalism or ideology, will be filtered out and discussed in more detail.

## Introduction

When speaking about their experiences in the OPT, Israeli soldiers give account of their behaviour and decision-making by explaining, legitimizing and/or justifying their actions and reactions. In this paper these accounts will be de-constructed in order to filter out the dominant strategies Israeli soldiers use to make sense of their experiences. As these accounts always concern others, most importantly soldiers' comrades and the Palestinian population, they become moral and hence we could even speak of moral strategies.

It is important to note that the themes and strategies that will be discussed are the dominant themes that were found in the soldiers' discourses. There exists a very rich range of discursive strategies, which cannot all be covered. Hence, the dominant themes and strategies that were found to be reoccurring in many interviews were chosen for further exploration. Such strategies are often interconnected, combined by the speakers and can be simultaneously used in one and the same conversation.

[1] This paper is a revised version of one of the main chapter of the dissertation "Morality and Normalcy in a-symmetrical Conflict: Israeli soldiers dealing with moral pressure and personal integrity in the practice of occupation", which is a work in progress.

On the surface, Israeli soldiers seem to take a passive stance towards the situation they find themselves in; as soldiers serving in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, as controllers of another people. As we shall see later, utterances such as 'There is nothing I can do', 'You have to do it' and 'You have to do your job' are abundant in their language. The occupation of the territories by the Israeli military stays relatively unquestioned by the soldiers and is instead taken by most as a given; as a situation they cannot change and within which they need to work due to factors beyond their control.

Notwithstanding, the occupation and the presence of the soldiers within the OPT bring certain practices with them. Such constabulary tasks include manning checkpoints, patrolling villages and cities, and carrying out nightly arrests. These are the daily practices of the soldiers and they carry consequences with them on several levels, most importantly for the Palestinian civilians the soldiers are confronted with and for the soldiers themselves.

The manifold consequences of the practise of occupation for all parties involved[2], such as the daily hardship for the Palestinians, but also unsafe situations for the soldiers, need to be dealt with by the soldiers; decisions have to be made and actions have to be carried out. The situations they find themselves in cause dilemmas of a moral nature, but can also, as will be shown further on, leave soldiers indifferent. From observations, human rights reports and soldiers' testimonies, it becomes clear that the behaviour of soldiers is often violent, either verbally, physically or both. Sometimes this violence is inherent to the activities they perform, but sometimes it is random and motivated by frustration, fear or anger for example. Soldiers are then in need of strategies to explain, justify and legitimize the suffering they witness or cause.

Before going into these discursive strategies I will discuss some theory concerning the accounts by perpetrators and bystanders of violence and suffering. These can help us interpret the discursive strategies used by Israeli soldiers.

Moral disengagement and denial

As a social psychologist, Albert Bandura focuses in his work on the capacity of people to refrain from a-moral behaviour (moral agency) and on the "…psychological manoeuvres by which moral self-sanctions are …disengaged from inhumane conduct" (1999: 193) - moral disengagement. He places these issues within their social surroundings and thus claims to look at actual conduct instead of abstract situations.

Bandura's moral disengagement is a "…cognitive restructuring of inhumane conduct into a benign and or worthy one" (2002: 101) through several different mechanisms. Each of these

[2] This is not to say that the consequences for both parties should be perceived as equal. It is taken as a given that the position of the Israeli soldier is one of power of which the Palestinian citizen is dependent.

mechanisms has as its goal to disengage one self from self-sanctions, which we all have. Our self-sanctions, in general, keep our conduct in line with our internal standards; our values and morality. If we, through various mechanisms, such as moral justification, euphemistic labelling and displacement of responsibility, disengage from these self-sanctions, we are able to behave in ways that are different from what our internal values prescribe. This behaviour has a potential to be immoral and even violent.

Although Stanley Cohen (2001) is also concerned with strategies used when explaining immoral behaviour, he looks at this subject from a sociological point of view. More then Bandura does, he looks at the actual behaviour and speech of people of which he gives ample examples in his work. He furthermore discusses the issue of bystanders; people who witness suffering and atrocities and their actions or in-actions. He thus connects his theory to real life situation that are recognizable for most.

Cohen concerns himself with the different states of denial human beings find themselves in or better yet, create for themselves (2001). These states of denial can exist on a personal level, on a political level and even on the level of a whole state or society. For our purposes personal denial is the most interesting form, as we are looking at soldiers' discourses. However, as we shall see, soldiers at times adopt official or ideological language that is commonly used by institutions of the state.

What Cohen wants to find out is the way we are able to look away, be indifferent, or stay silent in the face of suffering and atrocities. How can we know about such suffering and then claim not to know or if we admit knowing about it, not act upon this knowledge? In his work, Cohen sets apart different ways of denial people and states make use of, which can help us understand the language of justification, rationalization and normalization on a deeper level.

In Cohen's eyes "…statements of denial are assertions that something did not happen, does not exist, is not true or is not known about" (2001: 3). However, to act in denial could also be seen as "…the need to be innocent of a troubling recognition" (ibid: 33). This means that we choose or want (in some way consciously) to stay in the dark about a fact or happening that is difficult to see or hear about and that could, where we to know about it, force us into some kind of action. His interpretation of denial is a broad one: from literal denial (denying any knowledge about something) to implicatory denial; denial of the implications a certain act has (the act as such is not denied here).

Perpetrators' accounts

Speech acts of offenders can be seen and analyzed as accounts. Within these speech acts, the offender or bystander gives accountability for the actions perpetrated or witnessed. This then becomes, Cohen asserts, a form of moral accounting (2001: 59).

These accounts are products of the social environment in which they are formed. This means that they are not private and particular, but part of a shared discourse. In different social settings, different accounts of the same events can be given, which points at their deep social character.

As I am dealing with soldiers' explanations about their behaviour and motivations for it, the realization that their accounts are social and influenced by their surroundings is very important. Because accounts are "…embedded in popular culture, banal language codes and state-encouraged legitimations" (ibid: 76), keeping the background of the Israeli soldiers in mind is imperative.

Cohen divides accounts in two categories: justifications and excuses. Users of the first category of accounts admit an act was committed, but refuse to see it as wrong. Such accounts are often ideological, aggressive and unapologetic (2001: 59). Excuses try to neutralize and normalize the acts committed, they admit the wrongness of an act but add they 'had to do it' or 'didn't have a choice' (ibid.). As we shall see here, both categories will be found in the discourse of Israeli soldiers serving within the OPT.

Soldiers' talk

Seu argues that the (psychological) explanations given by people and the discourse they use around the confrontation with suffering of others can be seen as constructions of accounts and justifications (2003). The 'talk' of people should be seen as a form of social action and as such, explanations given by people are very important when trying to understand human behaviour. The fact that Seu takes theories from critical discursive psychology as her framework is of interest because critical psychologists "…are much more interested in the way people construct and reconstruct the world and their subjectivity in everyday talk" (2003: 190), an approach I would like to use here.

Seu's ideas about how to look at people's daily explanations and her use of psychological theories are important when looking at the discourse of Israeli soldiers in the field. The 'talk' of the soldiers should indeed be seen as a site for constructing accounts and hence the importance of investigating the way they talk, explain and justify their actions and behaviour. Looking at the way discourse is constructed and not only at the message of the speaker is what is important here.

Moreover, it is important to pay attention to the agentic role a soldier gives himself within the account of his experiences. As we shall see shortly, many Israeli soldiers do not use the 'I' form but the passive 'you' when they are talking about their own personal experiences.[3] For instance, a soldier will say 'and then you go into that house' instead of 'and then I went into that house'. The use of a passive agent is important in the way it creates distance between the actual action and the agent himself. Bandura even warns for the use of the 'agentless passive voice' (2002: 105) within which acts are carried out by nameless forces such as when 'The truck drove into the crowd'. The driver of the truck remains absent and thus innocent here.

**Minimization of moral agency**

As mentioned before, from initial conversations with soldiers a sense of 'accepting passivity' or a lack of agency was noticed when they spoke about their presence and activities in the OPT. They took this situation as a given and no questions were asked relating to reasons or explanations concerning the often unclear situations they found themselves in. Even when the suffering and hardship of Palestinians they witnessed was recognized as such, they did not come into any kind of action. This passive stance could be called a minimization of their agentive role (Bandura 2002: 106), and is the first strategy I would like to discuss. It means that distance is taken from the suffering that is witnessed and responsibility is evaded or displaced (ibid.). The themes related to such a stance are: inaction, apathy, indifference and feelings of helplessness that feature in the discourse of the soldiers. Besides being insensitive or indifferent to the suffering of others, a lack of agency could also mean *a sense* of inability to do anything while acknowledging pain of others.

'*Ma la'asot*' (What can you do?) or '*Ein ma la'asot*' (There is nothing you can do)

*"In the [Gaza] strip it's also intensive (Q: What did you do?) [Worked on D9, bulldozer] we were in the area of Netzarim, at the entrance of Netzarim. There was shootings and explosives on buses; 200 m from the road they cleared everything. Houses, groves, everything. Except for one mosque, they didn't touch it. It was like a flat plate. So we took down houses and olive trees. (Q: How did you feel?) You know for an Arab what is important is first of all his olive trees. After that come his wife and the house. Its not nice, I started to work with gardening[4], so its not nice, but we had to do it,* ***what can you do****. It would happen anyway. (Q: Did you meet with the civilians who owned the lands?) Yes for sure, there were families hanging in the trees. Children in the trees, they wouldn't come down. Then infantry soldiers would come and shoot teargas at them, they would get them out of there and then*

[3] With thanks to Avichay Sharon of *Breaking the Silence* who pointed this out to me.
[4] This soldier explained in this interview how he took up gardening as a hobby, which, he claimed, made him understand the connection of the Palestinians to their groves and trees more deeply.

*you take down the trees. Or also in buildings, you give the house a blow with the tractor, you shake the house, they come outside and then you destroy the house."(emphasis added)*

In the language Israeli soldiers use, '*Ein ma la'asot*' or '*Ma la'asot*' ('There is nothing you can do/ What can you do?') is a frequently recurring theme, which soldiers use when confronted with situations they see as problematic or painful, such as the suffering of Palestinian civilians whose house they invade or whose groves they destroy, as seen in the quote above. Often such phrases are added after a description of an operation within which civilians were involved. The soldier then typically tells about the operation he participated in, in an unemotional manner, adds information about the civilians that were present, for example a family in a house that was entered at night for a search, and finishes with the sentence 'There is nothing you can do' or 'What can you do'. In such accounts where activities are carried out in groups, the division of tasks diffuses responsibility. Attention is given by the speaker to the factual details of the operation and not so much to its meaning and actual consequences (Bandura 2002: 107).

When we thus look more closely at the moral strategy that is used here, we can firstly see that the soldier acknowledges the suffering of the others, or their discomfort. Then, however, he goes on to state that this is out of his hands; the work has to be done and as such it is morally justified (Bandura 2002). That there is some suffering involved seems unavoidable. As the soldier is quoted saying in the above quote: 'It would happen anyway'. This strategy is a typical example of what Cohen calls implicatory denial. As mentioned before, within this type of denial the general interpretation of an act is acknowledged, but responsibility for it is not taken. Its moral implications are interpreted as unimportant, untrue or exaggerated.

In the following example, a soldier tells about his experiences at checkpoints in the OPT. From this quotation we can conclude he feels strongly that checkpoints exist for a good reason, even though the work linked to them was not always easy:

*"There, you really feel you have to be there. You check trucks and cars and what can you do, they are all potentials*[5]*. So we check the car, we don't turn everything up side down, check it like we supposed to, I really don't remember something happened in instances like that. It's not like you take this guy into an alley and beat him up. You don't do things like that, there is always a reason…you do what you have to and let the guy go. In Bethlehem and Hebron, sometimes there were sudden checkpoints that we put up and we had to stop people, also in the entrance to Jerusalem. There was a taxi that passed and there was a woman that had a miscarriage and they took*

[5] By potentials this soldier means possible terrorists, the passersby could all potentially be suicide bombers or they could be aiding a terrorist attack.

*the foetus with them to burry in the village, and one of my friends had to check the box. These are instances that there is nothing you can do."*

He emphasizes that he and his comrades were never brutal 'for no reason'; if they were forceful it meant they had a reason to be. He senses the difficulty of the situation when a soldier has to stop a woman at the checkpoint with her lifeless child and check her. However, it is clear from his words that he feels the inspections that these Palestinians are subjected to are justified, difficult as they may be for the Palestinians but also for the soldiers. Again we come upon a form of moral disengagement as Bandura calls it, in the form of moral justification within which the role of the perpetrator in the harm caused is minimized and "…pernicious conduct is made personally and socially acceptable" (2002: 103).

When the soldier in the following example relates about working in a so-called 'straw widow'[6], he describes the situation as difficult for the soldiers from a few different perspectives. But, he adds, '…the situation made it necessary', in other words; there was nothing else he and his comrades could do, the situation they were in made it impossible for them to act otherwise:

*"It was hard, it wasn't easy, from a mental perspective, from a physical perspective, and also if you sleep in a house with all your things on you, you don't sleep well. You spend a few hours there and then you go back into the field, that's hard. But the situation made it necessary it was like, there is nothing you can do (ein ma la'asot), this is the necessity, the situation, we need it. It's either us or them at the moment. It's the black and white, either us or them, there aren't a lot of options."*

Using sentences as 'There is nothing you can do' or 'What can I do?' seem to indicate the feeling of soldiers that the situation is out of their hands; they cannot change it in any way. This feeling can of course indicate a real lack of power to change a certain situation, but it can also be imagined or evoked by the soldiers in an effort to distance themselves from any responsibility. In the perception of the soldiers, the situation is acknowledged and the suffering or hardship involved is not denied. However, the situation comes from a necessity (such as security considerations) and as such their actions within it are perceived as justified. The theme of self defence is also used here: 'It's either them or us', which enhances the feeling of the soldiers that

[6] This term for a house that is abandoned by its inhabitants and used by the military for strategic reasons presumably comes from the term grass widow: "The grass widow is a wife whose husband is away often or for a prolonged period. The origin of this expression comes from the unmarried mother of the 16th century. A child created out of wedlock was assumed to have resulted from a couple's adventures on a bed of grass and not the proper marital bed, hence, grass widow. This can be compared with the German *strohwitwe* or straw widow." From http://www.tribuneindia.com/2004/20040417/windows/roots.htm as accessed on 17-12-2007.

they have no other choice than to act as they do. It is very clear that the soldiers take no responsibility whatsoever for their actions or the situations they find themselves in. Again a case of implicatory denial (Cohen 2001) is at play here; the suffering and activities causing it are acknowledged, however, responsibility is not taken. A clear lack of agency from the soldiers is present.

In both quotations it also becomes clear that while acknowledging the suffering or the difficult situation the Palestinians are in, the real difficulty the soldiers speak of is the difficulty of themselves as witnesses or as reluctant inflictors of this suffering. Here part of the blame for having to perpetrate harmful activities is, surprisingly enough, placed with the victims. Because of their presence as a generalized entity, as Palestinians, as 'the other', the soldiers have to do what they do (Bandura 2002: 110).

'Lo na'im' (Not nice)

Often to a phrase like 'There is nothing you can do', the expression '*Lo na'im*' or 'It's not nice' is added. This expression is used as in 'It's not nice, but there is nothing you can do'. The theme of '*Lo na'im*' shows an acknowledgement of the soldier for the suffering or hardship he has caused or witnessed. However, followed by '*Ein ma la'asot*' (What can you do) this acknowledgment stands on its own and the soldier using the expression takes no responsibility for the situation. Furthermore, we cannot confuse this with a sign of guilt or remorse. It is more a statement of acknowledgment and a subsequent acceptance of the situation as it is.

The concept of '*Lo na'im*' also conveys a reluctance of soldiers to do the work they have to do. They are not proud of their work, which can be labelled as 'dirty work' (Hughes 1958), work that society and often the workers themselves identify as being less worthy than other work, because it literally involves dirt or because of its moral taint.

However, the hardship or suffering witnessed or caused seems merely a necessary evil in this dirty work the soldiers have to carry out. In the following quote a soldier from a naval commando unit expresses his opinion on the humaneness of the IDF. He acknowledges that the operations carried out by the Israeli military are hard for the Palestinian population (or 'not nice' as he phrases it), but all in all he wants to make clear that the Israeli military is a very humane military, too humane even, a clear case of implicatory denial (Cohen 2001):

*"We, I don't know about other units, we are humane, and even too humane. We treat them…I believe the whole military works like that. And no one comes and shoots at children, and not at women and old people and also men that…like you don't like a guy and you shoot his foot to shut him up. There is no such thing. Women and*

*children, we even don't bind their hands or eyes. To the old people we give a chair, so they can sit outside. Of course it's not a nice thing, imagine someone coming to your house and saying go outside and they search your house. I understand the population that doesn't like it (lo na'im la), and of course they don't understand me that I don't want a terrorist to blow himself up in my house tomorrow or in Tel Aviv. But that is the 'best of two evils' I have to do it. So we tell them to get out outside, we tell them to take their shirt up, to lower their pants, not like in a humiliating way, but because there were instances of suicide bombers. And also women and also like you saw on television probably, a child of 15 with explosives. We also don't tell them to take their underwear off or anything, only the pants. Even though I have heard they have made underwear with explosives…So on one side it's not nice (lo jafe) and I think we are humane anyway, we could also say 'take down your pants and underwear' and also to women and humiliate them completely. But we don't do such a thing."*

Apparent from this example is a feeling that 'It could be worse', in the sense that the soldiers acknowledge the fact that their actions are harmful to others but not nearly as harmful as others' actions. This strategy Bandura calls advantageous comparison where the way "…behaviour is viewed is coloured by what it is compared against" (2002: 105). When you contrast your actions with other, much more severe actions, your actions won't look as bad.

Indifference

Up until now, almost all examples given showed soldiers who in some way or another were troubled by the suffering they witnessed, even if they legitimized it. However, what we can also find are soldiers who are indifferent to any hardship or distress of the Palestinian population. In the following example from a testimony collected by *Breaking the Silence*[7], a soldier explains how his service in Hebron was marked by orders, which he would execute without questions:

*"I admit that Hebron is not divisible into periods, for me, it's like one long line. As far as I was concerned, I wasn't sensitive enough to it at the time, to when curfews were imposed, when curfews were lifted. It only affected me when I would go on guard duty. All I knew was that before going on guard duty… I'd ask: is there a curfew? Is there no curfew? There's a curfew? Cool, I'll enforce it. No curfew? Cool, be on your way. Most of the time there was a curfew."*

This indifference does not mean the soldier was not sensitive in any way to the situation of the Palestinians who were affected by the curfews he mentioned, but he chose not to be

[7] Breaking the Silence is an organization by former combatants from the Israeli Defence Forces who collect testimonies from soldiers in order to bring more awareness about the situation in the OPT and the soldiers' experiences there.

concerned with it and to just literally follow the rules. Here we see a form of numbing of the senses that results in sheer detachment and indifference.

Cohen adds another description to the notion of indifference; also when one does not fully realize the immorality of his or her actions, this falls under indifference. The acts someone performs are then neutralized and normalized because everyone is doing it, without having any other (ideological) motives (2001: 100).

On a different level, a sense of indifference can also come from a bigger entity than one soldier or a unit. As Cohen shows us, when a whole society uses collective denial and activities are thus performed within a moral vacuum, there is no possibility to see one's actions are morally wrong (2001: 10-11). In the case of the Israeli military this is an important point, as many activities of the soldiers are legitimized under the cover of 'security'. By a (self chosen) lack of deep knowledge of the situation they are, furthermore, often approved by the Israeli public. Israeli soldiers then find themselves in a situation within which, because of normalization, they cannot or only very difficultly make out if their actions are morally wrong or not.

The strategies covered by the theme of the minimization of moral agency such as implicatory denial, moral justification, advantageous comparison and displacement of responsibility are thus on one side characterized by acknowledgement of the difficulties Palestinian civilians go through on a daily basis as a result of the Israeli occupation of the OPT and the operations of the IDF. On the other side there is a deep passive acceptance of the situation as it is, no responsibility is taken, and no change is pursued. This acceptance, combined with a feeling of inability to change the situation can be based on the positioning of the soldiers within a hierarchical situation with not much room to manoeuvre. However, it is also used by soldiers to divert responsibility away from them. For when you are in a situation you are unable to change, as they argue they are, even if you would want to, you can hardly be taken as responsible for it. Furthermore, the perception of the soldiers and often the whole society of their activities as legitimate and necessary for the greater good (security of the state) also contributes to the diversion of responsibility elsewhere.

## **Professionalism (*miktsoayut*)**

*"(Q: Would there be talk about political ideas among the soldiers?) not so much, more also, there are different opinions, that's obvious, but the moment the operation starts everyone forgets everything, everyone knows that you have to do exactly what is needed, you don't take it into the operations, you try not to deal with it, you know that you will do what you need to do. Also if it goes against your opinions."*

The second discursive strategy I will discuss is the discourse of professionalism, which soldiers often use. Within the theme of professionalism, many sub-themes used by them to explain their behaviour or make sense of it can be grouped. Besides using the actual term of professionalism '*miktsoayut*', soldiers use many related terms while explaining their actions and decision-making in the field. I will make a distinction between two different levels in soldiers' discourse within which the overarching theme of professionalism is used. The first one is the 'bottom-up' approach a soldier uses when telling and explaining in his own words about his direct behaviour and surroundings. The second level entails a more strategic discourse, used by soldiers, but more often by their commanders, within which more general and strategic considerations are made.

Bottom up: soldiers' talk

The type of speech that is referred to here, could also be called a layman's perception on the activities soldiers perform in the OPT. Furnham defines this term that he developed within several contexts, such as psychology, medicine, and economics, as "…implicit, informal, 'non-scientific' explanations" of "…certain behavioural phenomena" (1988: 1).

*It's a job/Doing it right/Doing a good job*

In the discourse of soldiers, their perception of their activities as 'a job' is striking. It first of all tells us a lot about the status they give their work and second of all it naturalizes their military activities. The activities of the soldiers become ordinary performances without extra ordinary meanings. Furthermore, perceiving military work as just a job can point to the use of a discourse of professionalism as a legitimizing factor. Within this frame of mind then, the work the soldier performs is a job he has to do without having a real say in the matter. To use Cohen's work again, such a strategy could be called a form of interpretative denial, where facts are acknowledged but their meaning is neutralized, a strategy also seen before under the notion of indifference.

In addition, a clear displacement of responsibility is at play, as the job is usually done to answer an order given by someone else, someone who then should take responsibility for its consequences. To illustrate the use of the idea of 'It's a job' I will give a few examples of its use:

*"I'm a person who wants to be professional, I'm not there to make peace, I'm there to do my job. So if someone wants to pass the checkpoint and he's not supposed to pass there and he has 3 boxes of cigarettes, I could professionally say I won't check all the boxes one by one. But I want to make a statement, so I let this guy sit for*

*an hour and a half and I check every box, because explosives can be found in anything and show him I'm not playing games. We check everything and that through this checkpoint no terrorist will go through, here there will be no mistakes. They can go through another section but here it won't happen. So people come with vegetables and we search all the coconuts and through all the lettuce, to make sure a tomato is a tomato."*

This soldier explicitly uses the term 'professional' in this example. As a commander in the artillery, he sees himself as such and speaks in terms of 'doing his job' and 'not making peace', making clear he is there to carry out his mission as given to him by decision makers above him. He aimed to be a professional and this meant to aim at his mission; making sure that his checkpoint would deter terrorists from attempting to cross it, while simultaneously setting an example for his soldiers.

Another soldier tells how his commanders explained the situation in the territories during the beginning of the second *Intifada*[8]:

*"This is the situation, this is what we have to do, and there is no political explanation. A platoon commander comes and does his job and the soldiers the same." (8)*

In short, the reasoning used by this soldier's supervisors was also that there is a job to do and that this is all you need to know. Their message was that the soldiers shouldn't look at the political side of what they are doing; they as soldiers should follow the orders, do their work and that's it. This clearly facilitates a distances between the soldier and the consequences his activities have. The situation is simplified for the soldiers and diminished to 'just perform the job', diffusing responsibility for the consequences and decision-making concerning this job to the upper echelons. It is another example of implicatory denial as defined by Cohen (2001).

Thus, when using phrases such as 'I'm just doing my job' or 'It's a job', Israeli soldiers use a professional discourse that in fact makes their military activities 'normal' jobs. This normalization, furthermore, gives them the opportunity to distance themselves from the activities they carry out. When one is 'just doing his job', the performer does not take responsibility for this job and the way it is carried out; people higher up gave him the orders and hence he is not the one to hold responsible or even obliged to explain his actions.

Using such a professionalized discourse, as we shall see further on, makes military activities more detached and less personal. Responsibility for action and its consequences is displaced and its meanings are neutralized. A job has to be carried out and factors around it, such

[8] *Intifada* is the Arabic word for uprising, which is used for the Palestinian struggle against the Israeli occupation, the first that broke out in 1987 and the current one, which started in 2000.

as the suffering or hardship of people involved, for example a family that is woken up in the middle of the night or a truck driver who has to wait hours with his truck at a checkpoint, cannot be considered, they are at most a 'necessary evil'.

*Following orders*

Not surprisingly, in the interviews with soldiers an often-recurring theme is that of following orders. Soldiers everywhere, at all times in history have learned that one of the most important traits they should master is to be able to follow orders, preferably without asking too much questions. Again and again soldiers point to the fact that they were ordered to perform these tasks they characterize as 'a job' and can therefore not be expected to take responsibility.

Responsibility is very clearly displaced to different parties, mostly up to commanders or even the state. Important here is the location of agency, who does what and who takes responsibility for actions carried out? Trust is put on the commanders for giving the right orders to their soldiers as the latter don't see the situation from a 'system's point of view', a notion that will be discussed shortly, and thus have to rely on the knowledge of their superiors.

Following orders then, is for many soldiers closely related to their lack of ability to deliberate on their activities and their very limited decision-making opportunities. This soldier from the engineering corps, illustrates this in short and simple terms:

*"You don't have so much freedom to choose what you do, you have orders and you do that, after maybe you think whether its good or not. It doesn't matter if you agree or not."*

For the soldier in the next example it is also clear-cut: the job of a soldier is to trust his superiors and not to deliberate about operations.

*"We wanted to know, it wasn't like we really didn't know why we are doing this, we know what this guy did, and why we have to take him outside on this night, we didn't get too much inside it, … we knew that if they say we have to do it, it comes from above and probably they know what they are doing. It's not our task to say no, we won't do it."*

Following orders then is one of the aspects of the 'lay' but professional discourse Israeli soldiers use. We can conclude that doing their job as they are ordered, without hurting others or themselves is very central to the way these Israeli soldiers look at their activities. Seeing their work as a job and not more than that, a job that has to be done with no questions asked, makes

their position regarding the implications of the work more distant. Such strategies then entail implicatory denial (Cohen 2001) and a great amount of displacement of responsibility (Bandura 2002).

Strategic talk

After looking at professionalism from the layman's perspective soldiers have, it is time to look at a more strategic discourse that they use, but that is mostly used by their commanders. With this strategic discourse I would like to highlight a manner of speech that focuses on explaining, in military terms, why certain actions are carried out or why specific behaviour is conducted. Moral explanations and justifications are lifted from a more personal account to a strategic level.

*A system's point of view*

The discourse discussed here is thus more system-like and is as such different from the 'lay' discourse. In this first example this becomes clear:

*"The fear we, as commanders, try to create is a fear of being caught. At this checkpoint we catch you, not at this checkpoint we hit, if you are suspect you will be checked, you will be caught if you are suspect. Not a fear of violence, or shouting. We want order at the checkpoint, because order is professionalism."*

Staying within the realm of professionalism, this commander explains here what soldiers themselves often called a 'system's point of view' or *mabat ma'arechti.* The main objective of his checkpoint is that terrorists should fear going through it because it is so thorough. Most important is the order that has to be maintained at the checkpoint, as this is crucial for working professionally. This point, however, can also be used as a moral justification for activities that may harm others. Soldiers or commanders use such a system's point of view to indicate they speak as part of the system.

In the next quotation, this point of view is clearly visible. A former company commander of an elite unit of the artillery explains a mission from a completely different view than a soldier would see it. He doesn't only look at one checkpoint to see how it functions, but includes the security of the whole section in his analysis of the situation. His point of view is then much broader than of normal soldiers and because of his function he believes more responsibility should be taken by him:

*"The goal of your mission is not to stop the 3 cars you are supposed to stop, but it is to form a security force that checks, that reacts, that forms a broader aspect of security in the section let's call it that. An example: one day a commander came and asked what to do and did the opposite of what happened the day before. After I explained it to him, things started to look different. That's my task to explain how things should happen, what actually happens on the ground, for that you have your commanders. They understand the general spirit (ruah) of what really happens, how many cars go through, that's what the commanders are for."*

Many commanders combine the themes of toughness and professionalism with respectful treatment when teaching their soldiers how they should behave. Their main point here is that they expect their soldiers to work professionally, but to refrain from harming people's property without a good reason:

*"I would use the terms of takifut (assertiveness) and adivut (politeness), on the face of it two opposites, but very complete from my point of view. If there is a mission and we are going to fulfil it till the end also if it means that this person has to wait here 4 hours at the checkpoint because they asks us to keep him, or if we need to check a car, we will get everything out of the car. The question is how you do it. You don't throw anything, you don't start messing in his stuff but you ask the person to take the stuff out of the car. Maybe it doesn't interest the person if you do it in a polite way, but it's more to keep our human dignity (tselem enosh)."*

*Care for the soldiers*

One of the most important issues commanders have to take into account, according to their own explanations, is the safety of their soldiers. No matter what a certain operation entails, the safety and protection of the soldiers within the force takes precedence. There seems to be a moral hierarchy, first the soldiers should be safe, then the Palestinians. The moral strategy used is a moral justification, as actions are legitimized through the use of the 'safety of the soldiers' argument. In the following examples the normality of this strategy becomes clear:

*"There are rules about firing. That is the clearest thing in the IDF. If you are fired on, and you or your soldiers are at risk, you shoot. Or not even the soldiers that are your responsibility, it's your friend! It's very clear. If you think you see someone running to your friend with a knife, shoot at him."*

The moral strategy of soldiers is here to take care of themselves first and in order to accomplish this, many actions are legitimized. In the next example the importance of the safety of the soldiers is expressed; if they are in danger you should not think twice and just shoot. The

safety of the soldiers and the accompanying notion of self-defence can thus even be used as a form of explaining and legitimizing potentially violent behaviour of soldiers:

*"The first time that soldiers saw me, let's say…take someone and push him on a couch and search him or even see me cock my weapon at someone; the first time they're in shock. I tried to explain to them all the time, don't be afraid to cock your weapon in someone's face. You don't have a choice. They are a bit afraid but every time when they are in check posts and a person would come for a discussion, immediately cock your weapon and you finish the story, if that doesn't happen then one person starts a discussion and after him another person, there is a situation, another one lets himself into the discussion, then it's a chaos, everything is to safe our lives."*

This notion of taking care of one's own soldiers as a crucial aspect within the units' operations, shows us an interesting professional and moral discourse, which is directed inwards, towards the safety and well being of the soldiers themselves.

To conclude this discussion of the professionalism theme Israeli soldiers and their commanders use, we can say that this discursive strategy gives them an opportunity to distance themselves from their activities that may harm other human beings. Acts are normalized as 'just a job', which has to be carried out without too much deliberation from the side of the soldiers. Even when harm or suffering that is inflicted is acknowledged, the fact that one is doing his job and tries to do it as good as possible, directs away any explicit responsibility. Activities that can harm others can furthermore be explained away and morally justified under the name of professionalism.

**Ideology**

Within the third strategy to be discussed, I will group expressions of patriotism, nationalism and for example emotions of defending the state of Israel as ideological strategies. The cultural schemes that are invoked here to explain and justify behaviour by soldiers are principled by nature and hence, often involve a strong conviction on the side of the soldier.

Sense of mission

When giving accounts of their experiences, many soldiers and commanders described a feeling they called a sense of mission, or '*shlihkut*' that was especially evoked during bigger operations which they felt were important for the IDF and Israel as a whole. With this term, they highlighted a sense of connectedness to the nation, to the aims of the state and the military. They spoke about a feeling that their presence in the OPT had a real, important reason. In Bandura's terms

this is a clear moral justification in which " …pernicious conduct is made personally and socially acceptable by portraying it as serving socially worthy or moral purposes" (2002: 103). This commander, who stayed in the IDF as a professional for several years after his mandatory conscription, says the following about this feeling:

*"That's the base for everything, I wouldn't have stayed in the military if…I don't feel I was in 'keva' (professional service) I just did a longer service. I'm living in a country were you have to serve 3 years and after 3 years I felt it didn't end here. That I didn't give what I wanted and could give more. I said on the day that it doesn't feel like a mission and it becomes a job, I would quit. And I did, even though the temptations were great, I got out at that point, the next phase would be a job, that wasn't a mission, that wasn't living the military."*

Interestingly this commander even states that from the moment he felt that his military service did not feel as a mission anymore and started to be more like a normal job, he quit. This is to say that from the moment his service became normal and not ideological, he felt he did not have anything to give to the IDF, referring to the republican notion of citizenship Israel knows.

Also this commander has a clear ideological motivation for serving and traces this back to his upbringing in a patriotic home:

*"I wanted to be a pilot, I grew up in a 'militant' house. My father is very militant. There were a lot of stories about the army in the house, stories with values. (Q: What values?) Comradeship and brave of heart and love for the country. (Q: Did you feel connected to the state?) Of course, I came from there. I feel a feeling of mission, it holds you in difficult times that you know that if you don't do it and he won't then no one will.*
*I wanted to give as much as possible. I came to the paratroopers. I wanted a military career, to be a platoon commander, but I knew if not that then at least an officer, a company commander." (4)*

Both commanders demonstrate a highly ideologically motivated attitude towards their service. They did not join the military because they had to, but because they really wanted to serve and because they wanted to give whatever they could to the state. This discourse is clearly different from some of the examples given before. It is, however, important to keep in mind such ideologically motivated way of speaking is also at times used by Israeli soldiers. It can, furthermore, easily be used as a justifying or legitimizing discourse. In the next paragraph this feeling of mission is taken a bit further to clarify this point.

Invoking the security theme: avenging attacks Israel or protecting Israeli civilians

One notion that fits in with this ideological strategy within soldiers' discourse is the idea that attacks on Israel have to be avenged. By attacks on Israel one could think of terrorist attacks on buses, hotels or restaurants for example. Such events within Israeli society can have a far-reaching impact on how soldiers in the field feel and behave. A certain 'sense of mission' was said to overcome soldiers when they associated their duty within the OPT with the attacks on Israeli civilian centres. Military activities then became morally justified to them in light of the happenings within Israel.

Suddenly the boring work at the checkpoints or the routine of arrests became more meaningful as the soldiers realized the impact their work could have; they could be stopping or arresting potential terrorists at that very moment.

*"But there were people, especially with the chain of bombings, it started with hotel Park, I don't remember there was this week of another 4-5 bombings, that's it, the IDF now has to take everything down. It's something that you felt. People said come on let's go in, we have to… and all of that…"*

In the above quote a commander who participated in operations under fire during Operation Defensive Shield[9] (ODS) in 2002, recalls the mood of the soldiers around him and the language of avenging that was present. However, not only during such extreme operations this rhetoric can be found. This soldier recalls how soldiers in his unit reacted to talks about morality and proper behaviour by their superiors:

*"And there were soldiers who said 'what, no way, if he has a bomb, I would beat him up completely. Tomorrow he blows up my mother in Tel Aviv' so there would be the commanders that talked about the need to keep up ethics and the purity of arms and the soldiers talked straight from their emotion and their heart."*

A clear association is made by the soldiers who are quoted, between their behaviour towards Palestinian suspects or terrorists and the safety of their own families within Israeli civil society. Also the discrepancy between the 'official' discourse of the moral code and the emotions of the soldiers is touched upon; soldiers speak 'from their hearts' as opposed to using the military code of ethics the IDF knows.

The following example is by a soldier who served during ODS and remembers how he and his comrades felt their work was directly linked to the security of Israel:

[9] During this operation the IDF entered almost all major Palestinian cities as a reaction to several suicide bombings within Israel and in order to stop terrorist activity.

*"It was obvious, everyday there were explosions in Israel; you go to Jenin 2 days after we went there, there was a bomb in Megiddo. The soldiers feel it. It's really not the cliché, 'our soldiers secure the borders of the north so kiyriat Shemona[10] won't be bombed' it was really 'pointed', if you don't chase this guy on the few 100 meters you are in charge of stopping those who run with the farmers, there will be a bomb in Megiddo, just like that."*

Interestingly, a much greater amount of responsibility is taken by these soldiers and commanders for their own actions. As in their eyes their activities are morally and ideologically justified, they seem to have no problem in taking responsibility, thereby legitimizing suffering caused by their actions through the justified cause they are serving.

**Critical voices: moral re-sensitizing**

The final strategy I would like to discuss is the one that contradicts many of the former themes that were explored. It is, however, an important one as it shows us a different side of soldiers' discourse that cannot be ignored. The strategy I'm referring to is that of re-sensitizing, of finding some kind of connection with the victim, of acknowledging the suffering and pain of the other and of truly sympathizing with them. Whereas most soldiers quoted here had some reserves, the ones discussed here had clear doubts about the violence used within the OPT against Palestinians.

You could say that soldiers who use this strategy see the other as a human being, as an individual. They do this, for example, by making a comparison with their own situation to realize more deeply how the other must feel.

*'If it was my home'*

Some soldiers took the step of comparing the situation they were in, for example a Palestinian house in the middle of the night, with their own situation back home. How would they react, they ask themselves, if a few foreign soldiers would suddenly barge into their home and would scare their little brother and sister? How would they react if they saw their elderly father being told to pull up his shirt and pull down his pants at a checkpoint? When such questions are asked, the soldier in question is identifying deeply with 'the other' or the victims of his actions; he puts himself in their place.

The soldiers who made such comparisons usually did so after their service was over and they had had the opportunity to reflect on their experiences in the field from a physical and

[10] Kiyriat Shemona is one of the northern cities in Israel that has often been under fire from Hezbollah forces situated in South Lebanon.

mental distance. During their presence in the OPT such reflection was almost impossible due to a lack of time to think things through or being too tired and numbed by the workload.

Lifton calls this identification with one's victims, re-sensitization (1973) when he explains how soldiers in situations of war and with clear definitions of who was their enemy, could still feel sympathy for members of the other side. Quite some soldiers testified to occasionally feeling such identification. Often, however, this identification came after their discharge from the military:

*"It was bad, it doesn't matter, also if you checked and everything was ok and you didn't hold them up for a minute, they…it's not nice when a boy, I would always think of my father, a boy of my age would come to him, I would imagine my father and a friend of mine he didn't know, who is he to tell him to get his hands up, to put up his shirt till his armpits and turn around, who is he that he will tell him? Where is the respect, and if he looks suspicious and I would put him on the side in front of all his children and I would check with that device and I would have someone else check him and stand in front of him with a weapon just because he grew a beard because his father just died. And I think he is suspicious and he didn't have water to wash so he is dirty…but these are things I know now because I matured and saw other things. Then…you're like 'catch terrorists, respect', that here there won't be [a terror attack]."*

Also this soldier makes the connection with the people he controls and his own family:

*"I'm radical, also with orthodox and also with Arabs, Palestinians. But still it's a human being after all. He has to get the minimal respect, even though you don't like him and …you give him respect, because in the end you have to understand it's a human being that stands in front of you, it can be a man of 80 years old, it could be your grandfather. And I would see the people that would come and give the slap, as a soldier I would stand on the side and laugh but as a commander a thing like that wouldn't be done with me."* (26)

## Conclusion

In this paper several dominant discursive strategies used by Israeli soldiers when giving account of their experiences were discussed. Strategies of passivity, professionalism and ideology were used in some way or another to explain, justify and legitimize actions and decision-making in the field. While most strategies involved acknowledgment of the suffering of the other, in certain instances the victims of actions by soldiers were not recognized as such. Moral strategies that were uncovered showed aspects of moral disengagement, such as moral justification, euphemistic labelling, advantageous comparison and displacement of responsibility (Bandura 2002).

Furthermore, two types of denial Cohen distinguished were also found: implicatory and interpretative denial.

In most cases soldiers realized their activities and presence within the OPT caused harm to Palestinian civilians. This realization, nevertheless, almost never spurred the soldiers into action to change the situation they and the Palestinians were in. A sense of acceptance of the situation as it was, was very persistence and soldiers seemed to not to be motivated or willing to change it.

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