Research Article

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Meaning and inconsistencies of meaning – exploring the perspectives of Norwegian veterans in Afghanistan

Abstract: This qualitative study explores the meaning-making process of veterans to address the positive aspects of military service in international operations. Thirteen veterans from a Force Protection Unit in Norway were interviewed about their deployment to Afghanistan. A thematic analysis revealed three main themes reflecting meaningful aspects of the service. "Confirmation of ability" refers to finding meaning by coping with stressful situations and being recognized for it. "Cohesion of peers" refers to finding meaning by belonging to a team and giving mutual support within the team, such as backing up each other and caring. "Significance of effort" refers to finding meaning by seeing their efforts as a contribution, as well as by receiving recognition and gaining status for their efforts. The analysis also revealed accompanying themes of inconsistencies, which in turn activated different coping strategies. The findings have been substantiated through a functional exposition of meaning: purpose, value, efficacy, and self-worth, as advocated by Baumeister (1991), and are discussed in the context of previous research and a theoretical concept of meaning making. Steps for future research are proposed.

Keywords: meaning, inconsistency, coping, veteran, military

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1 Introduction

Military personnel from several nations have been deployed to different conflict areas abroad, such as Afghanistan. The personnel who have worked in a threatening environment or have been exposed to stressful events might initiate a meaning-making process, as such experiences have the potential to be inconsistent with global meaning (Park 2010). Global meaning is described as our goals and the established beliefs about the world, the self, and the self in the world (Park and Folkman 1997). Such goals and beliefs constitute a framework from which we can assess new experiences (Park 2010). A meaning-making process is initiated by an appraisal of an event, and in cases of inconsistencies, coping strategies are used to attribute meaning to the event and ourselves in it. This line of reasoning is found in the cognitive theories of Horowitz' Stress Response Theory (Horowitz 2001) and the Theory of Assumptive Worlds (Janoff-Bulman 1989). The outcome of this process might lead to improved personal skills, resources, and relationships, as well as to new perspectives on life, sometimes called personal growth or benefit finding (Park 2010).

Finding meaning after being exposed to stressful events has been investigated in the military context (refer review by Schok et al. 2008). Veterans report stress responses and positive effects, benefits, or growth after war-related experiences (Aldwin et al. 1994; Elder and Clipp 1989; Fontana and Rosenheck 1998; Forsvarets Sanitet 2013; Mehlum 1995), and most veterans experience more positive than negative outcomes of serving in war (Schok et al. 2008). Qualitative research has explored those aspects of veterans' experience that are found meaningful (Britt et al. 2001; Mooren et al. 2009; Schok et al. 2010a) and how they correlate with positive outcomes, such as stress-related growth and benefit finding (Britt et al. 2001; Fontana and Rosenheck 1998; Schok et al. 2010b). However, in a military context, this area of research seems to be limited, and different ways of conceptualizing meaning sometimes restrict comparison (Schok et al. 2008). This study

explores the aspects of service that veterans find meaningful after being redeployed from Afghanistan. Moreover, it explores inconsistencies in appraisal of meaning that activate coping strategies in order to attribute new meaning to such events.

2 Concept of meaning

There are different ways of conceptualizing meaning (Bellin 2012; Park 2010; Park and Folkman 1997). Mascaro and Rosen (2008) define meaning as the "*possession of a coherent framework for viewing life that provides a sense of purpose or direction, which, if lived with in accord, can bring about a sense of fulfillment*" (p. 578–579). According to Janoff-Bulman (1989), such a framework relates to how we view benevolence in the world, whether distribution of outcomes is a result of justice, control or chance, and beliefs about ourselves regarding morale, self-control, and luck. Several such categories that constitute a coherent framework are suggested in the literature (Park 2010). For instance, Baumeister (1991) points out that we need our life to make sense with respect to four universal needs for meaning: purpose, value, efficacy, and self-worth. Purpose refers to goals described as future objective outcomes, and fulfillment of goals is described as future subjective states of being. Fulfillment is often connected to positive emotions, e.g., feelings of pride in reaching a specific goal. Value refers to the labels attached to some behavior as right and good in order to give a sense of goodness and avoid moral distress. Baumeister (1991) describes a value base as something good in itself that does not need any further justification. Efficacy refers to a belief that one can influence the surroundings and execute a degree of control in certain situations. Self-worth refers to self-respect and respect of others. This often involves ranking oneself in relation to others to feel superior in some domains. In this respect, belonging to a group seems to be important as it gives individuals access to others' perceptions of them and the possibility to draw self-esteem from group membership (Baumeister 1991). Such terms as self-worth, self-esteem, and self-concept are used interchangeably here (Baumeister 1991; Oyserman 2004).

People do not necessarily consciously identify their global meaning structures or think in terms of the needs for meaning (Baumeister 1991; Park 2010). Moreover, meanings can also be uttered at different cognitive levels (Baumeister and Vohs 2002; Vallacher and Wegner 1989). Previous research illustrates the aspects of service that military personnel report finding meaningful. Such

common meaning assigned to service in war seems to concern comradeship and social support, purpose of mission, and significance of work (Schok et al. 2010a). For instance, the gratitude of the local people is meaningful to soldiers, as it seems to be a reward for their presence and efforts (Schok et al. 2010a). Team cohesion and receiving gratitude from locals are also what motivate US combat units to continue fighting (Wong et al. 2003). Britt et al. (2001) also pointed out that in a US peacekeeping operation in Bosnia, meaningful service was related to the significance of the work. Here, significance was described in terms of how soldiers reported the importance of their job, commitment to their job, and how much they identified with the mission.

Categories of global meaning might also be related to incongruence or inconsistencies of meaning. Global meaning directs what to expect and, consequently, allows one to determine whether the appraised meaning in a certain situation is regarded as consistent or inconsistent with global meaning (Park and Folkman 1997). For instance, an experience might be inconsistent with global meaning if it involves loss of meaning, fear for one's life, or a feeling of helplessness, which indicate a loss of control, as found among veterans with stress symptoms (Fontana and Rosenheck 2005; Schok et al. 2010a). Thus, coping with stressful situations is meaningful as it gives a sense of control. According to Janoff-Bulman (1992), control and predictability are the most important global categories of meaning. Meaning-making coping strategies refer to the effort to reduce any presence of inconsistencies between global meaning and situational meaning (Park 2010) so that congruence of meaning can be restored (Skaggs and Barron 2006). The outcome of this process might be twofold: finding new global meaning or situational meaning (Park 2010). However, several meaning-making coping strategies are described in the literature (Park 2010). Park and Folkman (1997) refer to positive appraisal, revision of goals, and planning of goal-directed problem-focused coping, as well as activating spiritual beliefs and experiences, as meaning-making coping. The use of attributions or reattributions is often seen as applying cognitive strategies to establish causality and responsibility for an event to change situational or global meaning, something that often relates to the perception of control (Park 2010; Park and Folkman 1997). According to Baumeister (1991) and Sommer et al. (2012), the need for value might be satisfied by externalizing responsibility for one's own behavior or stating one's own good intentions in cases of failure, and the need for self-worth by comparing oneself with others less fortunate, thus asserting superiority or assuming credit for success.

3 This study

Being deployed to a war zone likely includes experiences of stressful situations. Some of the experiences will be found meaningful, as documented in previous research (Britt et al. 2001; Schok et al. 2010a; Wong et al. 2003). However, people who have experienced stressful situations often initiate a meaning-making process as it might challenge established meaning structures. Experiences appraised as incongruent with such established meaning structures are here termed as inconsistencies of meaning. Previous research also includes examples of what veterans report as inconsistencies of meaning (Schok et al. 2010a) and general descriptions of meaning-making coping strategies used to restore meaning congruence (Park 2010; Park and Folkman 1997; Skaggs and Barron 2006). The problem statement of this study is twofold: what aspects of the service do veterans find meaningful, and how are these meaningful aspects related to inconsistencies of meaning and meaning-making coping strategies? To answer these questions, 13 members of a Norwegian Air Force Protection Unit were interviewed about their service in Afghanistan, as described later. The findings in this study have been substantiated through a functional exposition of meaning: purpose, value, efficacy, and self-worth, as advocated by Baumeister (1991).

4 Method

4.1 Context

From 2008 to 2013, personnel from an Air Force Protection Unit in Norway took part in three military operations under the Norwegian military engagement in Afghanistan. Some participated in a Force Protection Company (FPCOY) in Maymaneh, serving for 6 months. The overall mission of FPCOY was to protect the camp and adjacent areas, as well as providing escort service to and from Maymaneh City. Some personnel participated in the Task Unit (TU) in Maymaneh, serving for 6 months. The TU conducted operations all over the province of Faryab, sometimes in cooperation with, or as protection for, other military units. Some participated in the Fly Away Security Team of the Tactical Airlift Detachment (TAD) for the Hercules transport aircraft based in Mazar-e-Sharif, for 2 months at a time. FAST teams guarded the aircraft and aircrew during flights and at airports all over Afghanistan. In the following, such service is referred to as Force Protection and Security Operations.

4.2 Participants

After a presentation about this study at a regular company meeting, half of the veterans present volunteered to participate, and 13 were randomly selected. The selected veterans signed a voluntary declaration according to the ethical guidelines and approval protocol of the Norwegian Social Science Data Service. The veterans were low-rank personnel on contract as well as officers. Nine had two or more deployments, but their most recent deployment was service in FPCOY, TU, or TAD. The veterans had worked in a threatening environment, and the majority of the respondents spoke about at least one highly stressful incident, e.g., handling a mass demonstration outside their camp that resulted in injured Norwegian personnel.

4.3 In-depth interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted in September 2013 at the Air Force Academy or the respondents' home base, depending on the choice of the respondents. We identified resource personnel (military priest, military psychologists, and medical personnel) at these locations before conducting the interviews, as a service to the respondents if requested. Semistructured interviews were conducted, recorded, and later transcribed by the first author (RL). An interview guide that included questions concerning experiences they remembered well and would describe as meaningful or meaningless was used.[1] Questions also included communication with other military personnel, team members, and family and friends during and after the deployment to Afghanistan. The interview guide was only a basis for the interview as other topics emerged according to the veterans' answers.

4.4 Analysis

The software NVIVO Version 10 was used for data analysis. The data were analyzed according to open and axial coding (Corbin and Strauss 2008). This included writing notes that included the description of codes, possible underlying mechanisms, or use of language, and later,

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1 Several respondents seldom used the words "meaningful" or "meaningless" when speaking of their experiences but rather used "positive", "negative", and similar terms to express their feelings and thoughts. Thus, we often used questions, in particular follow-up questions, during the interviews that reflected these words used by the respondents.

relation to other codes (Smith et al. 2009). For instance, "caring", "cohesion", "recognition", "coping", and "ambivalence toward action" were codes that emerged early in the process. Later, patterns across all the interviews were used to establish a simple matrix of themes and categories. Codes were compared with others for similarity in words, content, and frequency. Interpretation of codes into categories and themes started early in the process, but this was more prevalent during the final stages of the analysis when determining categories and linking to previous research and theories within this field (Creswell 2013). Statements that were presented as significant, meaningful, and important, or otherwise a positive experience, in relation to the service were included as potential meaning themes. This also included goals that the veterans set for themselves during service and the motivation to serve in such operations in the first place. Statements that were presented as meaningless, a source of frustration, or disappointment, or otherwise a negative experience, were included as potential inconsistency themes. Moreover, descriptions and explanations of how to think or act on such inconsistency themes were included as meaning-making coping strategies. The most frequently used themes and categories were used to establish a final matrix as presented in the findings that follow.

5 Findings

As illustrated in Figure 1 below, we identified three main themes of meaning, each theme being specified with keywords for each of the categories. The themes of meaning were as follows: 1) "Confirmation of ability", 2) "Cohesion of peers", and 3) "Significance of effort". We also identified three themes of inconsistencies, specified here with a brief description of what constituted the inconsistency theme and an accompanying meaning-making coping strategy. The themes of inconsistencies were "Risky confirmation", "Impaired cohesion", and "Little significance".

We believe that the themes of meaning and the themes of inconsistencies are interrelated as illustrated. The number assigned to each category indicates how many of the respondents have at least one quote within the category in question. In the following sections, each of the themes is described more thoroughly and exemplified with quotes from the respondents, designated by numbers 1–13, starting with the first theme of meaning and then the first theme of inconsistency. During these descriptions, we also use the following wording about frequency: "Most respondents" is used when referring to at least seven respondents. "Many" refers to five or six, "some" refers to three or four respondents, and "few" refers to one or two respondents.
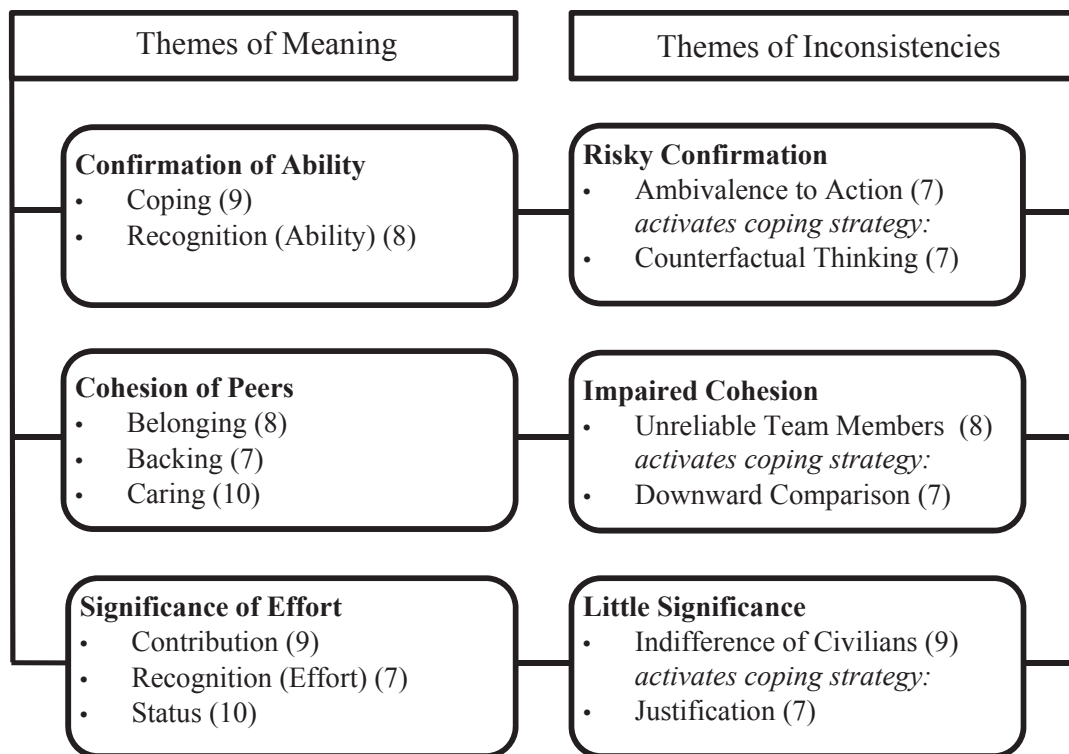

Fig. 1: Themes of Meaning and Related Themes of Inconsistencies and Coping Strategies.

5.1 Confirmation of ability

The first theme, Confirmation of ability, relates to how the veterans confirm their personal abilities through Coping and Recognition of abilities. This is accomplished by handling one's job well when working in a threatening and demanding environment and being involved in hostile acts, often termed as action.[2]

5.1.1 Coping

Most of the veterans expressed a desire to cope with stressful situations, as illustrated in the following quote:

> I don't have a good explanation for this, but it's something I have always wanted to try. To see whether I cope (in combat). And if I don't handle it well, then I quit, it's no worse than that, but I actually believe I can handle this very well. (10)

The quote points to a specific goal to confirm that he can cope in combat. To achieve this goal, it is necessary to experience such stressful situations. A few who had experienced combat describe this in positive terms for such reasons:

> What should I say? To know that you cope with the situations you have been through, so that you can use what you have, what you are working and training towards all the time when you are in the Armed Forces, and that you get to practice this, you can say. (2)

Veterans often referred to coping with stressful events as a way of testing themselves or testing prior training, and a few spoke of an end state of "making the grade". Here, we relate coping to purpose and efficacy. Personal goals are also often seen in relation to efficacy (Sommer et al. 2012). In general, efficacy is a perception of being competent to complete a certain task (Bandura 1997), and coping with a challenging task is a strong confirmation of one's sense of efficacy (Crescioni and Baumeister 2013).

5.1.2 Recognition (ability)

Here, recognition reflects the importance of others confirming their ability. Such recognition of ability refers to feedback often given within a team or unit.

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2 This included specific tasks of a team outside camp that involved potential or actual threat, e.g., contact with enemy forces, handling mass demonstrations, or handling improvised explosive devices (IEDs).

> In (name of unit) we had much direct feedback, and there you got feedback on what you were bad at and good at. (....) And I find it satisfying when the boys and the lower-ranked personnel give me positive feedback. I appreciate that a lot, more really, than when superiors say I've done a good job. (1)

Such recognition often referred to the performance of the work and not only the effort, as found in this quote: "what you were bad at and good at". Several of the veterans pointed to the importance of receiving such recognition from other team members. In general, feedback is related to efficacy when it is task and context specific (Bong and Skaalvik 2003), as indicated in the first part of the quote. However, feedback from significant others is also an important source in the formation of self-concept (Bong and Skaalvik 2003), as indicated in the last part of the quote. Thus, one's own team members may provide feedback that relates to both efficacy and self-worth.

5.2 Risky confirmation

We have connected the theme of meaning Confirmation of ability to the theme of inconsistency Risky confirmation. Risky confirmation relates to how confirmation of ability is only accomplished in the presence of risk. This fact seemed to be on the veterans' mind, described through an ambivalence toward action that activated a meaning-making coping strategy referred to as Counterfactual thinking.

5.2.1 Ambivalence toward action

Most respondents wanted to experience action to confirm their own abilities. However, most of the veterans also uttered an ambivalent attitude to experiencing action as, at the same time, they feared the possible consequences of the risk involved.

> ...you hope that something will happen but at the same time you hope that nothing will happen, if you understand. It's a little like that. Yes, it's a little strange really. I think so, I believe it matters a bit. You're there, at least I'm there to try to test myself and what limits I have. And if nothing happens, you can't do that. (11)

This quote illustrates the fact that the veteran both wanted and did not want something to happen during his deployment. The veterans related this ambivalence to the risk involved. To deal with such conflicting thoughts, the veterans often used the strategy of counterfactual thinking.

5.2.2 Counterfactual thinking

Counterfactual thinking refers to a possible outcome that did not happen, e.g., a possible (counterfactual) negative outcome (Teigen 1998). By imagining a negative outcome, the veterans could assess their experience in positive terms, whether or not they had been involved in action-related situations.

> In a way, everybody wants to be part of action and something cool. That is, until it happens. But nobody it has happened to thinks it's kind of cool afterwards, so it's like that, one is lucky if nothing happens. (9)

Here, the respondent utters a general wish to experience "action and something cool" but also believes that those who have experienced action do not find it "cool afterward". Thus, the respondent refers to the good luck of not having experienced action. Perception of such good luck is dependent upon a counterfactual negative outcome, referred to as downward counterfactual thinking (Teigen 1998). A few of the veterans who had experienced action, e.g. combat, also expressed their concern due to the risk involved. They also used downward counterfactual thinking and referred to their good luck after having experienced action that went well. Thinking of a counterfactual negative outcome might be a result of a reduced perception of control and function as a mood repair strategy (McMullen et al. 1995) and a self-enhancement strategy to boost self-esteem (White and Lehman 2005).

5.3 Cohesion of peers

The second theme Cohesion of peers relates to bonding, trust, and mutual support among personnel within a unit, both in operations and in camp. In general, cohesion is viewed as a sense of belonging and helping behavior (Chan et al. 2006) and is revealed here through the veterans' expressions of "Belonging", "Backing", and "Caring".

5.3.1 Belonging

Here, Belonging reflects the veterans' explicit or implicit description of bonding or having a sense of belonging to their unit. Most often, belongingness was described implicitly:

> It's most about that, now, one does the job together with the guys, you know. After practicing and working hard, now one finally is out and gets a real feeling of us being on a journey. (5)

Here, a sense of belongingness is disclosed through such utterances as "together with the boys", "a feeling of us being on a journey". Phrases such as "together with" and the use of the pronoun "us" indicate a sense of belonging to a specific group (Brewer and Gardner 1996). Other such oft-used implicit terms that reflected belongingness were descriptions such as "being united", "comradeship", and "friendship".

A few of the veterans explicitly described how they were integrated in the unit:

> .... they were very including from the start, from the leadership and down through the hierarchy in that unit. So it was easy to become part of it, you know. (2)

This quote is an example of an explicit description of how one participant is "becoming a part of it" as a consequence of other team members being inclusive. In general, belongingness is related to self-esteem (Baumeister 1991) and collective self-esteem, also given the term "social identity" (Abrams and Hogg 1988; Crocker and Luhtanen 1990). A few veterans also described the effect of such belongingness on future deployments:

> I'm part of the team. And if I'm not there filling my spot, others have to do it for you. So, it's perhaps a sense of duty. (4)

This quote shows that group membership is a motivation to make a contribution to the team (Baumeister and Leary 1995), indicating that such a sense of duty might also give some veterans a sense of purpose and direction (Baumeister 1991).

5.3.2 Backing

Backing reflects the trust among peers to support each other during missions, if necessary (Siebold 2007), and relates to the instrumental aspect of cohesion (Siebold 2012). Reference to backing each other up was normally made in cases involving threat. The following quote is an example:

> It becomes a special comradeship, when you live so close together and have to trust each other with your life when you're out there. In that way it was awesome. You know that the guys you're out there with, they would support you if you were exposed to something. But that's not always the case back home. (8)

Illustrated in this quote, we find that the "comradeship" is unique and that team members have to "trust each other with your life" and believe that they will be supported if needed. The willingness to back up each other was often

described as an effect of comradeship or being united, as the quote describes. How teams achieve common goals relates to collective efficacy (Bandura 2000; Griffith 2007), and this idea of having each other's back describes the essence of cohesion (Siebold 2007).

5.3.3 Caring

Here, caring reflects the emotional support through conversations among peers during the deployment. Caring reflects a trust among peers to support each other emotionally during missions, if necessary (Siebold 2012). Most veterans mentioned the act of caring:

> By the time we had been in MeZ (Mazar-e-Sharif) for some days, the largest demonstration started, where, for example, this one guy was wounded and injured. He was from our troop, so the positive in that situation was perhaps that we got, he was sent to a hospital in MeZ. So at least, we got to meet him and talked with him, and tried to support him in all that. (7)

The quote describes how an injured team member is supported emotionally by other team members. Most respondents said they talked to others about feelings and thoughts from experiences during action and missions, in addition to recognizing the importance of doing so. Support given through this type of caring was primarily received through conversation with team members one could trust and, thus, was more typical in informal contexts than in formal debriefing. Such emotional support is often related to psychological health, but also reflects acceptance, belonging, and a way of being esteemed and valued (Langford et al. 1997).

5.4 Impaired cohesion

We have connected the theme of meaning Cohesion of peers to the theme of inconsistency Impaired cohesion. Impaired cohesion relates to how trust and bonding might be broken within a team, described through "Unreliable team members", and this activates the use of a meaning-making coping strategy referred to as "Downward comparison".

5.4.1 Unreliable team members

The respondents found meaning in experiencing cohesion in their unit. However, most respondents also told stories about personnel within their unit who were perceived as unreliable during stress and did not earn the respondents' confidence when it came to their safety.

> Yes, because I didn't feel as safe among the guys then. It went well, also then, on the whole. There wasn't anything, (name) was injured, and of course the guy from the (name of unit) who was injured. But it turned out OK, we solved the situation well I think. There was nothing about it, the tactical dispositions and such. But I didn't feel as safe in that situation, almost less than I did when I was shot at (during another deployment)... (1)

The quote describes one veteran who feels unsafe around some of the personnel in his unit. Several stories like this were told by the respondents wherein they felt unsafe or otherwise did not receive the necessary support in situations due to others' lack of individual military skills, their inability to perform under stress, or their lack of experience in a particular job position. This mostly concerned their team members but, sometimes, also senior officers. In general, trust in peers' skills relates to perception of collective efficacy (Bandura 2001), but belonging to such a group might also affect their self-esteem (Baumeister 1991). To deal with such an inconsistency, most respondents typically used downward comparison.

5.4.2 Downward comparison

Downward comparison refers to comparing oneself to others who are worse off (Buunk and Gibbons 2007).

> ...If we had been in the established teams, at first, had the capacity ready, then we would have been much more prepared, mentally and much more familiar with the personnel we were working with. And we would have avoided bringing, call them empty shells, with us. It's a cruel expression, but we're talking about people who are not capable during stress situations. When there is more than one thing to think about. (6)

The quote describes a veteran who had to cooperate with personnel other than his regular team members from the home base during the deployment. Some of them are described as "empty shells" as they are not perceived as being able to handle stressful situations adequately. Similar characterizations were "people off the street", "paper pushers", and "old men", and these refer to active downward comparison, the creation of a downward target through derogatory comments or mocking (Buunk and Gibbons 2007). This might represent a strategy to distance themselves from a specific prototype and the group it represents, indicating that this relates to a threat to self-esteem (Buunk and Gibbons 2007; Gibbons and Gerrard 1997). Some of the veterans also said that

they did not want to redeploy if it involved being part of such ad hoc teams, something that might be regarded as a problem-focused coping strategy if faced with the same threat.

5.5 Significance of effort

The third theme, Significance of effort, relates to how veterans view the significance or importance of their work. This is described through the veterans' perception of the effect of their job, how they were recognized by others, or how they gained status due to their efforts.

5.5.1 Contribution

"Contribution" reflects the participants' view of their efforts as something important. Often, this was judged by seeing the effect of their job.

> We have driven many important people and kept them safe out there, during escorts through the city. To get things to function, that people can coordinate at high (organizational) levels. We have also helped and contributed to surveying changes in the situation, from before we arrived in Maymaneh and till now. And to hear that there have been improvements, that it's possible to call the police to get help, and such things, that's good to hear. Also, that the ones before us have done the job the right way, that things have improved. And here, I am a small piece in the game having contributed to that. (12)

Seeing themselves and their efforts within a bigger context made the respondents feel they did something significant, in particular, if they could relate to some concrete effects of their job, as quoted here. Potentially, such a contribution can be related to several of the four needs for meaning. Some utterances were seen as support for other military personnel or units, as well as the local Afghan people, again as in the preceding quote. This indicates the need for value, doing something for the sake of others (Baumeister 1991). Seeing some concrete effect of their efforts could be related to collective efficacy, the feeling that they were achieving something or making a difference (Bandura 1997; Baumeister 1991). This also seemed to give some of the veterans a sense of fulfillment, being proud or content with their achievements, indicating that they obtained a sense of purpose from their efforts (Baumeister 1991). However, no quotes referred to a contribution to the overall security development in Afghanistan. On the contrary, a few veterans even said that this was of no importance to them.

5.5.2 Recognition (effort)

Recognition of effort relates to how feedback from personnel, mostly outside the team or organization, functions as a verification of their work having an effect, as the following quotes indicate:

> On the whole, it's to secure personnel on the aircraft, and we got very good feedback afterwards that they (the aircrews) had felt safe, and that is good enough for me. (8)

In this quote, the veteran emphasized that the core mission of his team was verified by others and that this mattered to the veteran. Most of the respondents believed that they had received recognition for the work they had done. Their effort was most often judged in relation to military objectives and most important to them was recognition from other military units they were cooperating closely with. The importance of medal ceremonies was downplayed by some of the respondents, and a few even said the medal ceremony after redeployment did not matter much. In general, feedback from significant others is mostly related to self-worth (Bong and Skaalvik 2003; Sommer et al. 2012), or others' evaluation of the group is related to their social identity (Crocker and Luhtanen 1990), ceremonies included (Griffith 2012).

5.5.3 Status

Having participated in numerous missions, having experienced action, and being exposed to risk were factors that gained the respect of others, as the following quote illustrates:

> But I won't deny that I would like to be part of the troop that went far from the camp. I would like much more to be part of that troop. Because I don't want to get stuck in camp and you know (...). Had respect for all those who did the job out there. (...). But the PRT Chief was very good at praising, there was nothing condescending from him, but anyway I believe everybody goes and thinks that it's ten, twenty or thirty kilometers away that you make a difference, and not just around here. Even if we did have more incidents in the town than they had out there. (13)

The quote describes that service far from camp was regarded as more valid than service close to the camp, as one could make a difference in such operations. Several of the veterans made such comparisons, which upgraded or downgraded the importance of their own efforts. This also included comparison within a team, e.g., the number of missions one went on. A few of the veterans said that such status was seldom addressed directly but seemed to

be an implicit part of stories being told from the service. In general, comparison with other individuals or units relates to self-worth (Baumeister 1991) and social identity (Crocker and Luhtanen 1990).

5.6 Little significance

We have connected the theme of meaning, Significance of effort, to the theme of inconsistency, Little significance. Little significance relates to how the perception of significance of the veterans' efforts is challenged by the indifference of civilians, something that activates a meaning-making coping strategy referred to as Justification.

5.6.1 Indifference of civilians

The respondents found meaning in the significance of their efforts by making a contribution, receiving recognition, and gaining status for their efforts. However, most of the respondents believed that many civilians did not understand why they had deployed voluntarily and that they were generally not interested in their experiences.

> They aren't interested; they don't know what it's all about. Yes, you have parents who certainly do not want you to travel abroad; they're not the ones who especially want to talk about missions abroad. That's one thing you notice, it's not upsetting, but it's kind of strange that people really don't care much about it, what you have done. (3)

According to this respondent, civilians are not interested in hearing about their experience and they do not know what it is all about, something that is perceived as peculiar. Most respondents said they did not find civilians as interested in their service as expected, even though there were exceptions, something that relates to how others evaluate or value the group, termed as "public collective self-esteem" (Crocker and Luhtanen 1990). The veterans' experience indicates a gap between expected and received attention and recognition, something that relates to the value that others place on their social identity (Crocker and Luhtanen 1990). To make sense of these inconsistencies, strategies of justification were used.

5.6.2 Justification

Some of the veterans described the lack of interest from civilians with an account of why they chose to deploy to Afghanistan, as the quote below illustrates:

> You had perhaps, not from family and acquaintances, but generally in society, expected more acceptance for the efforts you put into it, you know. That you, in a way, aren't regarded as a maniac for traveling to Afghanistan. It's the Government that has decided to send us. (7)

This veteran expected more acceptance from civilians and refers to his deployment as a result of a political decision. Thus, his reasoning serves as an explanation that goes beyond personal goals or needs and therefore is justification of his actions. Other veterans externalized responsibility by referring to obligations toward other team members and professional requirements, or they reported their good intentions by referring to the protection of the Afghan people. Such strategies serve to preserve the idea of being a good and moral person (Sommer et al. 2012) and satisfy the need for value (Baumeister 1991; Schwarzer and Taubert 2002).

6 Discussion

This study explored the aspects of military service that veterans find meaningful. The findings show that meaning was found in the following themes: Confirmation of ability, Cohesion of peers, and Significance of effort. We believe that the following aspects of service satisfy the needs for meaning: purpose, value, efficacy, and self-worth (Baumeister 1991). We have further explored how some experiences are inconsistent with such meaningful aspects of the service and found one theme of inconsistency for each theme of meaning, specifically, Risky confirmation, Impaired cohesion, and Little significance. We also found that these inconsistencies of meaning activated certain meaning-making coping strategies. The coping strategies found in this study, Counterfactual thinking, Downward comparison, and Justification, are described as meaning-making coping strategies used to alter the meaning of a situation by reappraisal of an event (Baumeister 1991; Park 2010; Park and Folkman 1997). The veterans' description of inconsistencies of meaning and coping strategies does not indicate any contemplation over the global and appraised meanings of their experiences. For example, indifference from civilians is coped with by justifying one's own choices. In this lies a sense of acceptance of reality. In comparison, Schok et al. (2010a) reported that veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms were more preoccupied with negative notions that also had an emotional impact, such as feeling disconnected from the civil society and being irritated by ignorant and spoiled civilians (Schok et al. 2010a).

Finding meaning in a military context might be somewhat different from other contexts. Military personnel are not random victims of negative life events. They are selected and trained to cope with stressful situations (Larner and Blow 2011). Thus, soldiers have probably already found some purpose for the mission before being deployed. In this study, Coping, as a test of oneself, was sometimes phrased as a goal. Here, Coping connected prior training to active service in war, as well as personal qualities to qualities needed in the role of a soldier. To our knowledge, finding purpose in coping as a test of oneself has not previously been found within the research on meaning-making process in a military context. However, it has been documented that soldiers who volunteer for military service abroad are sometimes motivated by the adventure and opportunities to test themselves in a stressful environment (Battistelli et al. 1999). On the other hand, the importance of cohesion resonates with previous research on meaning making, whereby strong cohesion or comradeship represents trust and safety during the deployment (Schok et al. 2010a). Such commitment to each other's safety and common goals are in the soldiers' self-interest (Siebold 2007) and might be viewed as a reasonable adaptation to the context. However, only a few of the veterans spoke explicitly of this theme as a goal. The theme Significance of effort relates to how the veterans established the belief that their efforts had an effect. Knowing that your efforts matter is probably important to most veterans as it gives a sense of purpose to the mission (Schok et al. 2010a), making the burden, stress, and risk involved in such deployments worthwhile. In this study, some veterans expressed a sense of fulfillment, indicating that they had found purpose in their deployment.

Furthermore, finding meaningful aspects of the service, such as value, efficacy, and self-worth, also fulfilled the other needs for meaning (Baumeister 1991). First, meaning was found in Confirmation of ability through the experience of Coping and Recognition of ability. This indicated that the veterans confirmed or enhanced their perception of their efficacy and self-worth. This theme was related to the inconsistency theme Risky confirmation, which related to a reduced perception of control and an effort to reestablish self-esteem through Counterfactual thinking. Second, meaning was found in Cohesion of peers through Belonging, Backing, and Caring. This indicated that the veterans enhanced their perceptions of collective efficacy and collective self-esteem. This theme was related to the inconsistency theme Impaired cohesion, which possibly concerned a reduced perception of collective efficacy and collective self-esteem through

unreliable team members, as well as an effort to reestablish mainly collective self-esteem through Downward comparison. Third, meaning was found in Significance of effort through Contribution, Recognition of effort, and Status from effort. This indicated an enhanced perception of value, collective efficacy, self-worth, and collective self-esteem. This theme was related to Little significance, which was possibly related to the reduced moral value of their efforts and a strategy of Justification to defend this reduced moral value.

We argue that meaning constructs and the meaning-making process are to be understood in terms of needs for meaning. However, people rarely think and speak in such terms (Baumeister 1991; Park 2010). For instance, people might report thoughts and behavior known as coping strategies, but they are not necessarily aware of why they are using these strategies (Park 2010). Thus, we can only substantiate the connection of meaningful aspects of the service to such needs for meaning. At the same time, we might not pick up important nuances when using the wording of the respondents. In this study, recognition was expressed as an important part of the experience, but there might be a difference between positive feedback received for one's skills or effects of efforts, and the gratitude received from people who are personally affected by the war. The former might mostly respond to the need for efficacy and self-worth and the latter to the need for value. Gratitude is described as a response to moral behavior and an emotion that connects people to society, as people might be grateful toward people they have never met (McCullough et al. 2001). Thus, feeling a sense of value in this particular context might be largely dependent on gratitude from people outside the military organization. This might explain why recognition from civilians seemed to matter so much in this study. In comparison, medal ceremonies were sometimes described as being of little importance. Such ceremonies can probably refer to several needs for meaning, but recognition from people who are personally involved and have first-hand knowledge probably matters more than recognition from others. Thus, medal ceremonies might be perceived as a result of institutional practice rather than personal involvement.

Another problem of connecting meaning to needs for meaning is that some experiences of the veterans might be substantiated within several needs for meaning. In this study, the inconsistency theme Unreliable team members was presumed to predominantly affect collective efficacy when experiencing lack of trust and backup from other team members. However, the strategy of downward comparison indicated a need to protect one's

own self-worth. Efficacy and self-worth might often work together in real-life experiences. The situation of unreliable team members might comprise a threat to both collective efficacy and self-esteem, as it might be perceived as both a threat to trust in others' support and a threat to belongingness to the team. In general, group belonging provides a basis for receiving support (Haslam et al. 2005), but support also functions as an affirmation of group belonging (Thoits 1986). Alternatively, there is a close relationship between the constructs of self-efficacy and self-esteem (Bong and Skaalvik 2003; Judge and Bono 2001), even though they are also described as two separate constructs (Chen et al. 2004). The same connection is found between self-esteem and value, whereby self-enhancing evaluation, such as perceiving one's action as morally good, might be viewed as maintenance of self-esteem (Sommer et al. 2012).

7 Limitations and future research

The findings in this study are the result of researchers' interpretations and abstractions and might be biased due to leading questions and experimenter expectancy (Kvale 1996). This is a well-known criticism of qualitative research, for instance, when preconceived attitudes and insider perspectives influence the research process (Flick 2009). However, being an insider from the military organization might also be an advantage as trust can be established with the respondents. This research also involves researcher subjective abstraction during analysis, e.g., the abstraction of quotes to coding and coding to themes of meaning. In this study, the second author investigated the proposed coding and themes to ensure that they were grounded in relevant quotes (Creswell 2013), as well as including discussions on alternative understanding.

The retrospective nature of this study also has its limitations. Development and refinement of meaning structures over time is an important attribute of the meaning-making process (Park 2010; Skaggs and Barron 2006). Thus, a longitudinal design with two or more concurrent measurement points could have reflected this process better. For instance, longitudinal research using measures from the pre-deployment to the post-deployment periods would allow for examination of change in meaning structures over time. Moreover, even though we identify inconsistencies of meaning and accompanying coping strategies, we do not capture the end state of this meaning-making process. Thus, this study does not document whether the coping strategies are effective and result in successful integration as we have anticipated (Park 2010). However, we believe that this study concerns veterans without severe stress responses and acknowledge at the same time that the meaning-making process, in particular, of veterans with stress responses, also covers other categories or needs for meaning than those chosen in this study, e.g., as found in the study by Schok et al. (2010a). Furthermore, meaning structures are also constructed within a particular social context (Bartone 2005; Weick 1995) such that there may be differences in the beliefs and goals of soldiers from different nations, branches, and units. The veterans in this study have returned to the same home base unit, which also represents a certain social context. A comparison group of veterans could have demonstrated influence from different social contexts on meaning making, for instance, a study of veterans having served within the same unit but returning to military versus civilian lives afterward.

The findings of this study are in line with those of Schok et al. (2010a), who explored the meaning-making proess among Dutch peacekeeping soldiers in Cambodia, in particular, the themes Cohesion of peers and Significance of effort. Bearing this in mind, one should note that in our study, the veterans most often saw their efforts in relation to lower-level military objectives and not the overall development in the country as found in the study of Schok et al. (2010a). Further research might reveal whether military campaigns regarded as unsuccessful in the overall mission by the majority of the veterans (Forsvarets Sanitet 2013) intensify the veterans' focus on lower-level mission objectives, as found in our study. Further research could also explain differences between these two studies, such as the theme Confirmation of ability, which was found in our study but not reported in the study by Schok et al. (2010a). Furthermore, finding meaningful aspects of the service is associated with better adjustment to stress and personal growth, in particular, for units experiencing high-threat situations (Fontana and Rosenheck 1998; Schok et al. 2010b). Finding meaning is also related to personal growth, such as the enhanced self-esteem and self-efficacy among Norwegian veterans having served in Afghanistan (Forsvarets Sanitet 2013). The findings in this study and previous research indicate what might be regarded as common aspects of meaning found by veterans. A measure covering such common aspects of meaning might be constructed for use in quantitative surveys to explain what part of the experience leads to such personal growth in terms of purpose, value, efficacy, and self-worth.

8 Conclusion

We have explored the aspects of military service that veterans find meaningful and how these aspects are related to inconsistencies of meaning and meaning-making coping strategies. We found that meaning and inconsistencies of meaning relate to such themes as Confirmation of ability and Risky confirmation, Cohesion of peers and Impaired cohesion, as well as Significance of effort and Little significance. We also found that veterans use different meaning-making coping strategies, such as Counterfactual thinking, Downward comparison, and Justification in an effort to restore meaning congruence. To the best of our knowledge, no other research has explicitly separated themes of meaning, themes of inconsistencies, and coping strategies, as done in this study. Thus, we argue that the current study contributes to a thorough understanding of the difference between meaningful aspects of the service and the process of meaning making. This seems to be important within a field of research with different ways of operationalizing meaning. It also lays the grounds for further investigation into how meaningful aspects of the service and the meaning-making process independently might be determinants of personal growth among veterans.

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