Towards a postmodern military? Examining motivations among conscripts and professional soldiers in the Norwegian armed forces.

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Elin Gustavsen  
Ph.D. candidate, Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies.  
egustavsen@ifs.mil.no.

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Introduction

The transformation taking place within western armed forces have prompted scholars to claim we are moving from a modern to a postmodern form of military organization (Segal, Moskos, and Williams 2000). A key development in this process is the shift from an invention defence-based concept, in which the institution of conscription played a vital role, towards an expeditionary force-based defence, where professional soldiers is the crucial resource (Sookermany 2011).

In debates among sociologists over the status of the armed forces, the issue of mandatory service has been an important element. How to recruit for military service is not merely an organizational question, but ties into broader and more profound questions regarding citizen obligation and civil-military relations. The conversion of the US armed forces into an all-volunteer force in 1973 sparked a renewed debate about the citizen-soldier tradition, as well as the significance of conscript service (Krebs 2009; Moskos 2002, 2005, 2006; Segal and Tiggle 1997). After the end of the cold war, the majority of European states have followed the same path by terminating the draft. Sweden, in 2010, and Germany, in 2011, was the latest countries to abandon conscription in favor of a voluntary service model. Norway, on their hand, remains one of few Western states\(^1\) that hold firmly on to the institution of conscription. All male citizens are formally obliged to serve and Norway shows a strong commitment to the institution.

This being said, the system has been significantly adapted over the last decade and there has been a marked decrease in the number of people taken in for service. For the purpose of deployments and participation in operations abroad, Norway relies heavily on contracted personnel, who are people who continue to work for the armed forces as professionals after their mandatory service. As a result of Norway’s engagement in Afghanistan, there has evolved a new group of professional soldiers over the past ten years who are highly trained and specialized, and who comprise a vital part of the operational environment in the armed force. In light of this development, Norway represents an interesting case when it comes to personnel structure. The mandatory service system makes them an anomaly among western militaries, at

\(^1\) Besides Austria and Greece, Norway is now the only European country that formally drafts men for national service.
the same time as the emergence and increased reliance on professional soldiers conform to the ‘postmodern’ development of other armed forces. How service members are recruited and the attitudes they have towards serving have been central factors in the sociological examination, and diagnostization, of the armed forces. The military personnel experience the armed forces as a social organization (Moskos and Wood 1988, 3). The armed forces represent a high-risk environment that places an extensive demand on its members. Motivation is, therefore, of particular importance and a key concept to understand the behavior of military personnel and how they manage the unique expectations of the armed forces (Battistelli 1997, 469). This paper investigates motivations and attitudes towards service among Norwegian conscripts and professional soldiers. Conscripted personnel represent the human side of a modern armed forces, while professional soldiers are distinctive of a postmodern military organization. The paper builds primarily on qualitative data, supplemented with some additional survey data to corroborate the findings. After presenting the attitudes of the two groups, the findings are briefly assessed in light of Moskos (2000, 1977; Moskos and Wood 1988) and Battistellis (1997) theoretical perspectives. It is obvious that the two groups investigated are markedly different and that their motivations, consequently, will differ. It is not an ambition to compare attitudes; rather, the objective is to examine how the two types of personnel discuss their service. Although service motivation has been much researched internationally, and especially within the American context, little has been published on the Norwegian case. Given that the armed forces have not developed at the same pace as other western militaries, the issue is worth scholarly attention.

Before turning to the data, I start by taking look at how recruitment to the armed forces, and in particular the institution of conscription, have played in debates over the status of the armed forces, followed by a brief overview over how recruitment to the Norwegian armed forces have been organized.

**From a modern to a postmodern military organization**

Charles Moskos is, perhaps, the most influential figure when it comes to describing and discussing the momentous changes taken place within western armed forces over the past
century. Using the US as a point of reference, he argues that the military organization have evolved from a modern, via a late modern and towards a postmodern form of organization, a trajectory that results from changes in the perceived threat, force structure and mission assignments (Moskos 2000).

How service members are being recruited is an important aspect in terms of force structure. Conscription represented a distinguishing feature of the modern armed forces. The citizen-soldier tradition served as an ideological fundament, according to which participation in national defense is viewed as an inherent aspect of being a citizen. Charles Moskos writes, “the hallmark of the Modern military was that of an institution legitimated in terms of values and norms based on a purpose transcending individual self-interest in favor of a presumed higher good” (Moskos 2000, 27). In a postmodern military, on the other hand, the link between military service and citizenship is no longer authoritative. Military participation is no longer viewed as an essential feature of citizenship, instead soldiering is treated as a professional occupation for those who choose so themselves (Moskos 1977; Moskos and Wood 1988).

Moskos’ Institution/Occupation (I/O) thesis captures, in many ways, the same trends reflected in the modern-postmodern model. If viewed as an *institution*, service in the armed forces is treated as an engagement transcending the self-interest. The words “duty, honor and country” are defining, and members typically follow what they perceive to be a higher calling. If regarded as an *occupation*, on the other hand, service is legitimized through a marked place logic. Individual interests are prioritized over the institution itself, and economic rewards represent the main incentive for enlisting (Moskos 1977). The I/O thesis rests on the presumption that institutional attitudes are loosing territory to occupational motives. According to Moskos, a “major thrust” in the direction of an occupational model for the US armed forces was the termination of the draft (Moskos 1977, 44). The transition to a voluntary recruitment system radically altered the premise for military service and from being ‘more than just a job’, service became similar to any other occupation. Moskos has later stated that to treat the military as either an institution or an occupation is an injustice to reality, rather the thesis must be viewed as a continuum and that the armed forces are usually somewhere in between the two poles (Moskos 2001).
Building on Moskos’ framework, Battistelli (1997) suggests to expand the I/O dichotomy into a trichotomy to include a dimension that captures motivation of postmodern nature, characterized by “the desire for adventure, new and meaningful experiences” (Battistelli 1997, 470). According to Battistelli, Moskos original model fails to account for the post-materialistic values that has emerged since the silent revolution, which have lead people to be more preoccupied with self-fulfillment and individual experiences (Inglehart 1977). This orientation has affected how people approach military service, and people who enlist today are not just motivated by normative aspects or financial reward, but also by an adventurous desire. Battistelli’s expansion of the I/O model has been well received by researches who study service motivation.

**Recruitment in the Norwegian armed forces**

Norway has a longstanding tradition for conscription. The practice is embedded in the constitution from 1814, where it is stated that all male citizens are required to participate in the national defense, regardless of status and social background. Over the years, compulsory service has been practiced in various ways, however, rarely to the universal extent first intended. Its ‘golden era’ was from the early 1950s and until the middle of the 1970s, and during this time the majority of each cohort was drafted for service. Since then, the military technology has become increasingly more complex. The end of the cold war fundamentally changed the security environment, and the armed forces has been faced with tougher financial constraints. As a result, there has been a steady drop in the number of people drafted for service. In 2002, less than half of the eligible cohort was required to serve. Since then, the number has been reduced with an additional 20 percent (Johansen 2000; Forsvaret 2012).

This being said, although the mandatory service system has been adapted to better fit today’s reality, the number of conscripts do remain comparatively high. In 2009 changes were made so that also women are obliged to meet for the conscription board, and hence forced to take an active stance in terms of whether or not they want to serve. While service for women is still voluntary, the present Minister of Defence, Espen Barth Eide, has stated on numerous
occasions that he will be an active advocate for gender-neutral conscription. A newly released Government document addresses conscription in these words: “A military defence is a crucial task the citizens should be united on. Conscription shall contribute to the armed forces embeddedness and legitimacy in society, by ensuring a broad recruitment base, reflecting the people.” The document sustains the stance that national defence should be viewed as a citizen responsibility and that it is a goal for the military to be representative of the society it which it exists.

As the document shows, conscription continues to have strong political support. At the same time, the Norwegian armed forces has been through substantial changes over the past two decades, which has significantly affected the force structure. From being a mobilization-based mass army, predominantly concerned with homeland defence, the operative focus has largely shifted towards participation in operations abroad. Due to the need for more highly trained personnel – as opposed to short-term conscripts – the number of contracted members has more than doubled over the past seven years. The Norwegian armed forces does not have a NCO system, but hires people on a contract basis to serve in lower rank positions after their mandatory service. The contracts normally run for three years and can be renewed up to three times. A significant share of contracted personnel serves in operative roles as professional soldiers, and constitute the ground force of Norway’s contribution to the operation in Afghanistan (Gustavsen 2011). As a result of the increased dependence on this type of personnel for operative assignments, conscript members are used as a recruiting pool for further service. The stated goal is to draft “those best qualified and most motivated” and who is inclined to want to continue after their mandatory service is over (Forsvarsdepartementet 2012, 19).

Method

This paper is based on interview data from two sets of data; one study of conscripted men collected in 2009, and one study of contracted men and women collected in 2011. 17 conscripts

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from the Air Force and 14 men and women working as professional soldiers in the Army were interviewed. Although the interviews were conducted in relation to two separate projects, all participants were asked about their motivation for serving and why they wanted to join or work most of the participants were in their twenties, although some of the conscripted men were slightly younger and some of the contracted personnel a bit older. The interviews would last from 20 minutes and up to an hour, with an average time of about forty five minutes. The paper also consults with survey data from the same two personnel groups in order to support the findings (mediesenter 2010; Gustavsen and Johannessen 2012).

**Motivation among conscripts**

Since only a minority of those eligible for service are now being drafted, it is considered a relatively uncomplicated matter to escape duty if one is adamant about not serving, Therefore, to ask conscripts about their ‘service motivation’ or ‘decision to enter the military’ is not strange, even though formally service is mandatory.

All the interviewed conscripts exhibited a very similar stance when it came to their motivation for serving in the military. The common theme in their answers was the different ways they believed conscript service would benefit them on a personal basis. Talking about why they decided to enter the armed forces there was not a single participant who invoked a sense of citizen obligation; in fact, the closest any of the men got to even refer to the existence of a male service requirement was a few men who stated that they were there because they “had no reasons why not to”. One interviewee said:

“I saw that I had received the notice and thought ‘well, well’ [...] I am not the person to lay down and cry and scream to get out of something, so I decided to try and make the best out of it...” (N – 17).

However, most of the interviewees pointed to the positive consequences they believed this year would yield to them on a personal basis. Two factors were frequently mentioned: to build a good resume and to meet new people. Many stated that they thought conscript service would look good on their cv and that it is a good experience to have with you later on. Most

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4 (p. 19). Authors own translation.
conscripts conduct their service right after high school graduation and the armed forces is often seen as an unique arena to meet completely new people from all over the country. The chance of making new acquaintances was seen as very positive.

“Well, I really just thought to get a better resume. It’s nice to have that on your resume and it’s a good thing with new people you know – or that you get to know new people. It [military service] is just good to have under your belt” (N – 05).

Some participants would attribute their participation to more private circumstances and, for different reasons, they considered service to be “a good option” at time. One man said he decided to serve:

“…mostly because I flunked New Norwegian, so then I didn’t get into any schools, so it’s really a year off before school” (N – 06).

Others viewed mandatory service as a good alternative, because they didn’t know what else or had any concrete plans when they got the notice.

“I guess it was because I lacked alternatives. I had just graduated high school last year, in 2008, then I had ... I could have started my studies, but I was too tired of school for that. I worked from June to the end of September at a grocery store, so I was pretty tired of that, so I was kind of ready for something new, so when I got the notice I could at least try, I didn’t have anything to loose by that” (N – 16).

None of the participants that were interviewed presented motivations that emphasized any sense of patriotism or commitment. Normative aspects or talk about the greater significance of military service were completely absent from their discussion. The conscripts’ approach to military service is, in many ways, captured by the following quote:

“I thought this year would do me good, both socially, physically and experience-wise. I do not have a strong desire to go to Afghanistan or fight for my country, or things like that” (N – 10).
Survey data from an annual questioner distributed to potential recruits and conscripts who have just started their service confirms the same attitudes as presented by the interviewees. In the survey, respondents are asked about their anticipations and what they have positive expectations about. It is natural to assume that what respondents have positive expectations about are the same factors that also motivate them to serve. The results show that “getting to know new people” received the highest score (41.1%). Second highest was “interesting assignments” (33.8%), closely followed by to “try something new” (31.3%). In contrast, only 13.4% replied “the opportunity to get military training and classes” (mediesenter 2010). Respondents could select as many alternatives as they wanted, yet, the very core of conscript service, which is to get a military training, was for most respondents not part of their motivation. We see that both the interviews and survey data confirms the same finding, namely that it is the personal experience that largely motives conscripts to serve.

Motivation among professional soldiers
The professional soldiers exhibited a different view on military service and emphasized other aspects as important for their motivation. The majority of the interviewed soldiers pointed to the social environment as crucial. To most participants, the strong feeling of camaraderie was integral to both why they wanted this job in the first place and what they value about the profession.

“The unity and the special [bond] you have with your colleagues, that I think ... I value that a lot, I don’t think you’ll find that in any other job than in the military. We become a little, great family in a way, where you know each others positive and negative sides, given that you have been out for a week with no food and sleep. That unity is what I particularly value about the job” (H-07)

Many believed that the sense of unity and tight bonds they experience in the armed forces can not be found any other places.

“The unity I find to be very special, I haven’t experienced that any other places. People are treated very well, everyone are like brothers [that] makes very strong ties” (H-14)
Even though the social dimension of military service was important to both conscripts and professional soldiers, it was discussed in two different manners. To the conscripts, the armed forces was viewed as a place to meet new people; whereas the contracted soldiers valued the connection that arise between the people who work together in this unusual environment.

Participation in international operations was another important motivation. Contracted personnel who serve in operative positions – which include the participants in this study – are likely to deploy during their service, especially in the period Norway’s decade long involvement in Afghanistan. At the same time, contracted personnel do not sign up for international service *per se* and they are not guaranteed to be deployed during their contract time. The prospects of participating in operations abroad were, still, a decisive reason for why many of the interviewed soldiers wanted to continue their service. To some, the excitement of going abroad was the appealing factor.

“Before I entered the armed forces I really wanted to joint the Telemark Battalion and participate in international operations, because it sounded very exciting, even though I didn’t know much about it then. [I have] many buddies who have been abroad before, from the same place as I, so it seemed very exciting, so than this was what I did” (H-09)

Others would emphasize the military experience and the opportunity they would get put their training to use and actually practice what they have learned.

“At first it was mostly about the excitement of working in the Army, the operation in Afghanistan and all that, but after having worked here it becomes more about getting to do what your actually work as, and not just go around pretending and practice some unlikely events. [...] It’s about practicing your profession, which is to be a soldier. Than there are some side effects, which is you get to take some courses, you make money and you have a lot of fun, but what I mean should be the driving force is that you get to practice what you are here to do”
One man explained that he initially got accepted to the Officer Candidate School, but turned it down to get a “reality check” and a chance to work as a professional soldier.

“I was accepted to the Officer Candidate School, but turned it down because I rather wanted to come and work on a contract, to experience that part and work as a professional soldier, as it so nicely is called, instead of walking around in a shield of world and do officer things. Get a little reality check in terms of what’s going on in the [spisse enden] av the armed forces” (H-09)

Survey data of contracted personnel in the army confirms much of the same findings as the interview study. Respondents were asked about why they wanted to sign up for the contract-based service, and also what motivates them in their daily work. What motivated most respondents to continue after their mandatory year was that they “really liked it in the armed forces” (84.6%). Many also had a strong “desire to participate in operations abroad” (67.9%) and “to work as a professional soldier” (58.1%). Financial rewards was not something that weight in heavily in their decision and only 23.2 % had listed “to make money” as a motivational factor. In their everyday work, 72.1% replied that they were motivated by “my colleagues”. Second on the list was “to become as good soldier as possible” (60.9%).

Discussion of findings
The data presented reveal that Norwegian conscripts and professional soldiers talk about their service in two different ways. None of the two groups were predominantly motivated by “duty, honor and country” or by financial incentives, hence does not confirm to Moskos’ I/O model. Norway is one of few western militaries that still practice mandatory service, which makes it especially interesting to see with which attitudes the conscripts approach the armed forces. Although the institution of conscription rests the belief that it is a citizen obligation to partake in national defence, Norwegian conscripts does not possess anything resembling institutional attitudes. They were not driven by a sense of commitment, rather, their motivation was distinctly individualistic and rooted in what they believed they, themselves, would gain from it. Their motivation corresponds well with Battistelli’s postmodern type, characterized by a desire for personal experience.

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5 Befalskole
Even though mandatory service from a political stance is considered to be a citizen obligation, the data presented in this paper show that the sense of commitment is not shared by the draftees. Although the institution is embedded in the citizen-soldier tradition, the conscripts, themselves, frame it as a matter of self-fulfillment. Battistelli, came to a similar conclusion with regards to the Italian draftees and called this an “ironi” (Battistelli 1997, 475). Using a perspective from van der Muelen’s (1988) account of the Netherland armed forces, the Norwegian military is institutional on the outside, postmodern on the inside.

The professional soldiers discussed their service less as an adventure, and focused instead more on the social context that they were a part of. Many participants emphasized the social environment in the armed forces and described the feeling of unity and camaraderie as highly motivating. Much research has been done on the importance of unit cohesion for battle morale and combat motivation (see e.g. Henderson 1985; Wong et al. 2003). The Norwegian soldiers discussed this as motivating in a more general sense and presented it as integral to why they entered this profession. The opportunity to practice what they have trained for was another reason why many of the interviewees wanted to work as a professional soldier. It might be argued that their focus on the operational aspect represents an occupational orientation, as might be seen as way for the soldiers to investigate in their career by gaining a pivotal, military experience. The participants, however, did not link this to a long-term career plan or talk about it within a wider time frame. To them, it was a matter of doing what they were supposed to do, namely soldiering. Looking at it this way, their attitude seems to signify a commitment to their profession, which is more in line with an institutional approach.

Conscripts and professional soldiers are, of course, in two different situations and it is only natural that their motivation diverges. Conscripts are new to the armed forces, whereas the soldiers have served in the organization for some time. The nature of their service varies significantly, and might account for some of the variation documented here.
Bibliography


