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## Transforming masculinities after scandal: the response to Australia's war crimes in Afghanistan and the possibility of change in military masculinities

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# Transforming masculinities after scandal: the response to Australia's war crimes in Afghanistan and the possibility of change in military masculinities

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## ABSTRACT

This article focuses on what role masculinities might be playing in Australian war crimes in Afghanistan, and whether it is possible to shift such masculinities after the revelation of scandals. It makes the argument that although masculinities have been central to these war crimes, attempting reform at the moment of scandal is unlikely to lead to necessary structural reform. Rather, this article argues that responses focused on masculinity at the moment of scandal are likely to constitute what Jamie Johnson (2016, 705) refers to as 'line-drawing manoeuvres', thereby singling out extreme acts of excessive violence to re-legitimise the institution which produced such violence. Therefore, the Brereton Report demonstrates the need for structural changes addressing the foundations of violent masculinities within the Australian Defence Force and not ad hoc efforts to remedy its most extreme excesses.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

Masculinities; gender; war crimes; military; feminism

The scandalous revelation of alleged war crimes in Afghanistan committed by Australian Special Forces personnel that came to public attention in November 2020 has led to a public reckoning about the root causes of military abuse and what might be done to address it. The Brereton Report, which investigated allegations of war crimes in Afghanistan committed by Australians, highlighted the presence of persistent operational, organisational and cultural issues that led to allegations of 39 civilians being killed with at least 25 Australian Defence Force (ADF) personnel implicated in some way. These allegations have not been proven in court, have only resulted in one direct prosecution at the time of writing (excepting for a whistle-blower David McBride), and are likely to be difficult to demonstrate in court for a range of reasons (Taucher and Aszkielowicz 2022). While the report suggested 'it cannot and does not find guilt in any individual case', it expressed considerable confidence regarding the overall substance of allegations: when what the Inquiry has found is taken collectively, the answer to the question 'is there substance to rumours of war crimes by elements of the Special Operations Task Group' must sadly be 'yes, there is' (Brereton Report 2000, 27).<sup>1</sup> In explaining these actions, the final report emphasised the

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cultural causes of such abuses and particularly the promotion of a ‘warrior culture which enabled the criminal conduct’ (Brereton Report 2020, 500). The particular emphasis on culture, looked not only at the acts of killing themselves but also perceived issues, as discussed by Wadham and Mackenzie in this issue, such as a lax standard of dress, poor personal hygiene and alcohol use (Brereton Report 2020, 495).

Public response to the report has paid attention to the perceived cultural ‘root cause’, with several media publications emphasising the gendered nature of ‘toxic forms of military identity and masculinity that contributed to these crimes’ (Wolfendale 2020). The dynamic highlighted in these media representations replicates a common-sense narrative of violent masculinity: a male-dominated culture, fraternal bonding, hazing rituals, pernicious backlash against those who broke the code of silence and tacit support from institutional leadership.<sup>2</sup> The emphasis on cultures of violence and abuse is significant within the context of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) where previous discussions on instances of violence have centred on individual bad men, rather than cultural, institutional or structural issues within the forces at large (Goynes et al. 2017). While Wadham and Mackenzie’s contribution in this issue explores the shift to culture more broadly, the allegations also demand focused reflection on whether it is possible to shift violent masculinities in the moment after the revelation of scandals. In particular, it asks the question: considering the patterns of violence, abuse and policing of behaviour within military units and the established research on the role of militarised masculinities in making this violence possible, how should we understand claims that violence by the Australia Special Forces in Afghanistan are new revelations which require an exceptional response?

To do this, this article first explores how masculinity(ies) can be read within the Brereton Report, which largely does not address gender. Then it will explore how masculinities facilitate violence within institutions like the military, patterns of violence within counter-insurgency (COIN) campaigns and the debates on shifting such masculinities. Finally, it will make the argument that although masculinities have been central to alleged Australian war crimes in Afghanistan, attempting reform at the moment of scandal is unlikely to lead to the kind of structural reform necessary to prevent its future occurrence. Rather, due to the nature of responding to military scandals, the article will argue that responses focused on aspects of masculinity are likely to constitute what Jamie Johnson (2016, 705) refers to as ‘line-drawing manoeuvres’, thereby singling out extreme acts of excessive violence to re-legitimise the institution which predictably produced such violence. In the case of masculinities, it will be argued such an exercise plays into harmful narratives of toxic masculinity being exceptional and divorced from ‘regular’ forms of violent masculinity which are necessary and legitimate. Instead of such limited action, I argue that the crimes revealed by the Brereton Report suggest the need for structural changes addressing the foundations of violent masculinities within the ADF and not ad hoc efforts to remedy its most extreme excesses.

## **Gender and the Brereton Report**

In the 465 pages of the Brereton Report, gender is not explicitly mentioned and more focused terms such as masculinity or manliness do not appear. The report mentions the gender of victims only in a few instances. Women are mentioned 10 times, though usually when recounting historical war crimes for context and often alongside children

to distinguish adult men. This treatment mirrors Enloe's argument that victims in war are often constructed as the monolithic 'womenandchildren' (Enloe 1990). Similarly, the gender of those perpetrating violence is rarely mentioned, excepting accounts that refer to groups of service personnel as 'men.' In total, the gender of perpetrators and victims is invoked less than 50 times in 465 pages. Further gender is never directly analysed in a substantial way such as looking at how identities, social characteristics, structures, practices, norms are attributed to men, women and those who fall outside those categories (Connell 2017, 4–7). This is not to say that the report has nothing to say about gender, far from it, but that gender must be read into descriptions of practices, attitudes and cultural norms in a report that did not apply a gender lens.

Throughout the Brereton Report, it makes clear the challenge of investigating the illegal application of violence during COIN operations, disregard for human life and failure to report breaches due to the 'closely-bonded, and highly compartmentalised Special Forces community, in which loyalty to one's mates, immediate superiors and the unit are regarded as paramount, in which secrecy is at a premium, and in which those who 'leak' are anathema' (Brereton Report 2020, 37). Similarly, while characterising the root causes of violence during operations, the report emphasises the particular group dynamics within the relative units, such as the 'the dominance of a clique of non-commissioned officers', the promotion of a "warrior hero" culture, 'the disempowerment of junior officers', and 'misguided loyalty that placed relationships and reputation above truth and morality' (Brereton Report 2020, 325). Read without a gendered lens, these might be interpreted euphemistically as 'cultural issues', or the inevitable deleterious outcome of challenging operational circumstances. However, when gender is introduced, the image emerges of a masculine institution which celebrated fraternal bonding that allowed for violent initiation rituals, collective celebration of the manly warrior. It also shows an institution which justified operational freedom for Special Forces leading to a plethora of infractions from minor issues like substance abuse or poor standards of dress to significant transgressions such as use of throw-downs (planting weapons on civilian bodies to justify their slaughter) and massacre of squirts (civilians who run away from armed forces), and a culture of silence that brutally punished any betrayal of male peers by reporting to an outsider.

Though not explicitly named, these patterns draw directly on key aspects of mainstream masculinity within Australia, and particular qualities associated with martial masculinities. Again, this analysis on masculinities compliments Wadham and Mackenzie's contribution to this issue. They focus on the broader use of 'culture' as a form of 'cover' or camouflage in that institutions use the term to exceptionalise dysfunctional behaviours and deflect attention to systemic problematic behaviours. My analysis digs deeper into the role of masculinities; I argue that key aspects of soldier behaviours, while disturbing, are not unique to the units referred to in the Brereton Report. Due to this concurrence of gendered factors, just as others have done with attention to violence and abuse within institutions like law enforcement, the clergy, and sport, the Brereton warrants attention to how masculinities might be shifted to address violence (Death 2014).

## **Masculinities and violent institutions**

While scandals such as the alleged Australian war crimes in Afghanistan focus on the individuals enacting the most extreme manifestations of violence, quite mainstream

manifestations of masculinity and the organisational structure of male-dominated institutions that produce such violence are often intimately intertwined. In recent years, public discussion on masculinities have often to centre on the concept of confronting 'toxic masculinity' a framing that is widely challenged within scholarship on masculinities (Waling 2019). Such an approach emphasises the individual toxicity of those enacting certain kind of masculinities and the harmful outcomes they produce. Contrasting this public usage, various (and sometimes contradictory) uses of the term by scholars have tended to place far more emphasis on aspects like the social construction of identity, norms around men's behaviour, stereotypes, ideals and practices (Flood 2002). This article adopts Raewyn Connell's (2017) approach which emphasises the structural composition of gender in society, arguing that masculinities are not individual conceptions of how men should behave, they are sedimented patterns of practice. By this account, masculinities are the multiple positions within gender relations associated with men (though not always occupied by them) and are emphasised 'as a structure of social relations' (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005, 19). These positions shape men's engagement with particular social roles and responsibilities, for example encouraging some men (often along race and class lines) to adopt physically demanding professions to demonstrate manhood while for others emphasising intellectual acuity or verbal communication (Connell 2009). These sedimented patterns of practice may result in masculinities that endorse certain forms of violence or idealise other attributes associated with men (such as control of emotions, or professionalism). The range of positions within gender relations available to men (masculinities) will vary by context, tend to be contested with multiple contradictory forms of masculinity co-existing in opposition to one another and reflect how gender intersects with other structures. This social composition of masculinities (and femininities) is what Connell (2017) refers to as the gender order and is seen to exist both across society at large, and within institutions that rely on multiple articulations of gender to function. To understand how the Australian Special Forces came to centre a masculinity that prioritised ritualised violence, loyalty to one's peers and celebration of the warrior we need to first situate militarised masculinities within society at large, and Special Forces masculinities within the armed forces.

Masculinities which centre a capacity to engage in violence do not start with military training. From an early age, boys in patriarchal societies are often socialised to participate in violence through mainstream institutions such as state education, religion and the family (Kimmel and Mahler 2003; Messner 1990; Plummer 2016; Sabo 2004). What might later manifest in terms of brutal violence in all-male settings if primed by subtle acculturation in mainstream institutions, including simulated forms of violence in young boys' play during schooling, or expectation to endure and inflict violence in boys contact sports (Barry 2010). For some groups of men, Plummer and Geofroy (2010) find that violence within peer groups can be a key component to the transition from boyhood to manhood. Due to these experiences, from an earliest age men may be raised to prioritise all-male spaces (Greig 2001; Kaufman 1987; Sabo 2004; Tomsen 1997). These processes are key to shaping what then occurs when men join military institutions, they establish the pre-conditions for directing men towards different forms of military masculinities. As Teresia Teiawa (2005, 206) reminds us, the imbrication of mainstream masculinities and militarism results in 'both a disciplining of bodies and a disciplining of social relations', a two-way process where the values essential to military

service are imbued from an early age and the particular form of military masculinities is determined by masculinity at large. Further, as her research demonstrates, the different military masculinities this produces are contextual, it is shaped by the form of masculinities present within a given society and the form of militarism.

How then should we understand the emergence of what the Brereton Report (2020, 325) explains as the problem posed by ‘misguided loyalty that placed relationships and reputation above truth and morality’? The report frames this dynamic as a particular pattern within the Special Forces units it is interrogating. However, masculinities scholarship would suggest this is a core component of many social spaces, instilled at a young age and encouraged across a range of contexts through men’s lives. Because military units require intense bonds between groups of men (though increasingly women also), often under situations of intense pressure, this can produce what Higate (2012) describes as ‘close, yet sometimes competitive brotherly relations’ that both create intimacy and police divergence from the gendered and racialised norms of behaviour. The policing of close bonds within military units has resulted in the widespread patterns of military hazing, bullying often leading to cultures of silence around violence and abuse (Alvinus and Holmberg 2019; Pershing 2006; Stuart and Szeszeran 2020). Within a range of male-dominated institutions and social spaces men’s performances of masculinity are also often intimately intertwined with violence and often punish men for challenging the violence present within the group (Bird 1996). Exploring how men’s relationships with each other impact their perpetration of violence against women Towns and Terry (2014) have shown that ‘loyalty to mates’ is a key factor that undermines men’s ability to challenge one-another’s violence against women and is often policed through violence or its threat. The promotion of these forms of gendered practice in society at large helps to produce the sediment pattern of practice that then manifests within certain roles within the military (Connell 2017).

To understand the presence of the kind of specifically violent patterns of practice that characterised the Australian Special Forces in Afghanistan it is not enough to only highlight the link between militaries and masculinities at large. While all militaries are violent (see below), the particular patterns of violence alleged in the Brereton Report (throw-downs after killing civilians, shooting of squirts and brutally punished any who break the code of silence for example) are far from universal. Within the armed forces, there is not one singular model of masculinity. Rather, different roles within the forces tend to emphasise certainly qualities as the height of manliness, challenging the practices of others. Frank Barrett in his (1996, 138) early study of military masculinities found that within the US Navy officers from different roles would emphasise certain qualities as manly while downplaying others. Supply officers for example would emphasise technical rationality, while those in risk-taking roles described them as ‘supply pussies’ who couldn’t handle danger. The presence of contradictory masculinities, that demand very different practices and opposing values, is not accidental, but productive and essential to military functioning. As Ramon Hinojosa (2010) argues, different branches of the armed forces and different roles within them require different skills and practices to function, the presence of multiple masculinities allow the armed forces to mobilise aspects of mainstream masculinity when it is salient to the role they wish to promote. The fact that other aspects of the ADF routinely reject elements of Special Forces masculinities does not suggest that they were exceptional,



but is reflective of their structural position within the armed forces (as discussed later) and the essential contestation of masculinities that facilitates military functioning.

### **'Accidents', COIN and reforming masculinities**

The Brereton Report asserts robustly that persistent operational, organisational and cultural issues led to the forms of violence alleged against the Australian Special Forces in Afghanistan. While the Report concedes that these issues were not simply caused by individual transgression, as both the pieces by Zeweri and Gregory's show it positions the forms of violence alleged to have been committed by Special Forces as exceptional. Such violence was framed as resulting from systemic failures, that such actions violated the norms of the ADF and contravened the normal behaviour of Special Forces in a zone of conflict like Afghanistan. While such an approach is an improvement over the individual bad apple model of military abuse as Warham and Mackenzie argue, the suggestion that violence committed against civilians by Special Forces, then covered up by a code of silence within close-knit military units is the exceptional does not fit with existing evidence on the presence and predictability of violence against civilians within COIN operations.

Attempts to address military violence against civilians have often been stymied by the way military violence against civilians is framed. Even in conflicts where violence against civilians is anticipated, occurs routinely and the actions which are undertaken directly contribute towards it, it is often framed as exceptional, that is anomalous, unexpected or extraordinary. This has particularly been the case for COIN operations, defined as 'asymmetrical warfare by a powerful military against irregular combatants supported by a civilian population' (Khalili 2011, 1471). COIN is often portrayed as a particularly difficult form of warfare to prevent violence against civilians due to the blurry lines between the irregular combatants and the populations supporting them (Downes 2007). The aim of COIN operations is to win over the 'hearts and minds' of civilian populations that has roots in colonial modes of warfare which Laleh Khalili (2011) has argued is deeply intertwined with gendered, raced and classed hierarchies.

In COIN operations like Afghanistan, military violence against civilians is often portrayed as necessary to protect the civilian population, with distinct strategies aimed at civilian protection. This has resulted in new forms of military masculinities and femininities, such as those seen within the Female Engagement Teams aimed provide culturally sensitive protection for Afghan women, alongside intelligence gathering and surveillance (Dyvik 2014). This positioning has allowed militaries to portray men in the armed forces as masculine protectors of civilians despite routinely undertaking actions that foreseeably result in their death (Young 2003). As Owens (2003) has argued, to maintain the idea of contemporary counter-insurgencies being liberal, benevolent and rational intense efforts have had to be undertaken to frame the anticipated violence against civilians as accidental rather than foreseen. Even though deaths of civilians are anticipated, even expected as an inevitable outcome of waging war Owens (2003, 596) argues that: 'because specific non-combatant deaths were not willfully intended as unique events, they should be classed as "accidents"'. Particularly when COIN operations are positioned as ethical or even selfless undertakings on behalf of those in the states which international militaries are intervening, the framing of 'accidents' has been politically salient. The sincerity of the idea of



protection has been challenged by scholars, such as Maja Zehfuss (2018, 17) who questions ‘can others’ humanity be protected by using force on their behalf that also risks killing them?’ However, many of the dynamics which are highlighted in the Brereton Report should not be unforeseen, or unanticipated for Special Forces during a COIN operation.

The presence of abuses committed by Australian Special Forces does not appear to be a unique or particularly surprising occurrence. Globally, Special Forces are routinely implicated in abuses of civilians, extrajudicial killings and other violent abuses despite the shroud of secrecy under which they operate (d’Amato, Gould, and Woods 2015; Bardo & O’Grady 2020). Further, a significant body of scholarship on counterinsurgency has focused on how to minimise violence against civilians during counter-insurgency operations, on the basis that this violence alienates the civilian population and undermines the central goal (Downes 2007). This literature exists primarily because large-scale violence against civilians in the context of counterinsurgency is predictable, commonly occurs and remains a key feature of most counter-insurgency initiatives. This is especially the case for Special Forces who often operate in a secretive fashion and use a high degree of force in areas where combat may not be taken place such as within enemy-controlled territory (a point that the Brereton Report acknowledges).

Significant efforts have been undertaken to interrogate whether it is possible to shift the masculinities that facilitate the kind of military abuses outlined in the Brereton Report. Some scholars working on militarised masculinities have emphasised that change is possible and due to this, we should explore avenues for promoting less violent forms of masculinity in the military. Duncanson (2015, 243) argues that as the notion of liberal war has become more prominent, practices of hegemonic masculinity have shifted accordingly. In particular, she shows that the emergence of a ‘tough and tender’ scholars-soldier within some militaries has required certain contradictory elements to emerge within militarised masculinities (Duncanson 2015, 232). Duncanson does not argue that militarised masculinities have ceased to be violent, but that the pressure to support some aspects of gender equality means that the façade of the macho soldier has begun to clash with other qualities they are required to demonstrate. This, Duncanson argues, provides an opening for new forms of masculinity to emerge, and possibly for less harmful manifestations to become dominant within military institutions.

More pessimistically other scholars such as Sandra Whitworth (2004) and Sherene Razack (2004) Anne Orford (1999) have argued that shifts in militarised masculinities to these sorts of ‘tough but tender’ articulations have merely created a more robust veneer behind which to practice violence. For Razack (2004), this robust veneer has been an essential tool for white Western militaries to justify their continuing violence against racialised populations. Whitworth (2004) suggests that efforts to re-brand the military moving it away from its more explicitly violent origins to a humane and humanitarian institution centred on care and protections have clashed with the enduring gendered nature of what it means to be a soldier. Even with attempts to emphasise the humanitarian aspects of contemporary soldering (Christensen 2015), it has often remained centred on ‘toughness, violence, aggression, courage, control, and domination’ within most armed forces (Eichler 2014, 82). Despite efforts to portray the Australian military in liberal terms, Wadham (2017, 241) reminds us ‘violence *is* the core business

of militaries' and while certain forms of violence might be publicly deemed illegitimate (such as hazing, initiation rites or sexual assault) highly masculinised martial traditions are integral to its functioning.

This is further complicated by the racial dynamics of COIN that the conflict itself. As Dyvik (2016, 47) points out, the COIN operation itself relied on the 'colonial notions of backward and inferior masculinities' of Afghan men to justify invasion. This mirrors the colonial dynamic identified by Spivak (1999, 303) of 'white men, seeking to save brown women from brown men' and has resulted in both the devaluation of Afghan men as uniquely oppressive and the construction of the mission as necessary for other protection. In her account of the counterinsurgent masculinities within Afghanistan, Julia Welland (2015) argues that the positioning of soldiers as 'gentler', protective of civilians and technologically sophisticated was produced in direct opposition to the racialisation of Afghan men. These portrayals of British soldiers, Welland (2015, 294) suggests, relied on the construction of Afghan men as 'effeminate, cowardly and primitive'. While not all masculinities within the context of COIN will necessarily primarily highlight these dynamics or portrayals, they are not exceptional or incidental to the structure of the campaign.

Considering these tensions, any efforts to reform the kind of masculinities that facilitate armed violence risk clashing with the core aims for which Special Forces are deployed. The kind of change advocated by more optimistic researchers, such as Duncanson (2015, 242), is 'rare, and far overshadowed by evidence of soldiers constructing masculinities through "radical Othering"'. For it to occur Duncanson argues it would require the manifestation of tensions that emerge between violent and caring aspects of militarised leading to structural change as less violent manifestations become embedded in hegemonic masculinities within the armed forces. In Duncanson's own words this would focus 'less on getting men to "change their ways" and more on changing their relationships, or, more specifically, shifting from constructing their identities in terms of radical Othering to forging identities through relations of equality, respect, and empathy'. It may be possible to produce these kinds of tensions by explicitly rewarding different understandings of the military, such as aspects of care, protection or professionalism while disincentivising military masculinities centred on killing, fraternal bonding and risk taking as Duncanson suggests. However, such a change seems difficult or impossible to achieve with short-term, shallow interventions, but is likely to require sustained action to shift the structure of an organisation like the armed forces and its role in society.

### **Structural change, pop culture and the social construction of special forces masculinities**

The change necessary to shift the militarised masculinities which facilitated war crimes against civilians in Afghanistan is unlikely to occur in response to the Brereton Report because they would require structural shifts which are difficult to produce at the moment of scandal. While large structural change does occur and has the potential to radically shift the practices which produce different masculinities, they almost always accompany quite substantial shifts in the institutions and incentives that shape masculinity. These changes can be seen in relation to men's relationship with full-time waged labour as economic structures have required men to take up work in sectors such as retail where emotional labour is required (Connell 2005; Roberts 2013). In England,

Roberts (2013, 674) argues that as historically working-class jobs in manufacturing and heavy industry have declined the available jobs for working-class men shifted to the service sector. This shift, while initially manifesting large-scale economic shifts, has resulted in working-class masculinities shifting, rewarding men who were able to manifest more caring forms of masculinity that fit their new roles. In this context, Roberts does not argue that pre-existing forms of masculinity centred on toughness have entirely atrophied, but that these structurally significant changes created new possibilities for alternative masculinities to thrive and the rewards for existing forms to recede. This change is not simply the result of men being told by an elite figure that they should be more caring (though some have certainly done this), or even the conclusion of agentic choices from young men who want to shift from more brutal models of manhood (though some have also made such choices). Rather they reflect the centrality of structural conditions in leading to significant and enduring changes in masculinities. For a similar shift to occur for masculinities in the Special Forces, this would require a similar shift, that structurally disincentivised commitment to male peers, valorisation of violence and the kind of “warrior hero” culture’ recorded in the report (Brereton Report 2020, 325).

Unlike some other branches of the armed forces, it is difficult to see how the Special Forces would be able to place the practices of care and protection as the centre of what they do, what is rewarded and prioritised in recruitment. More than many other organisations within the armed forces the Special Forces core work is killing, often behind the veil of secrecy, and built on deep fraternal bonds. Creating the necessary changes to allow alternative masculinities to emerge would not mean just tinkering with the edges, softening the superficial bravado. Rather it would require creating incentives that push in an entirely different direction to the key practices which constitute the Special Forces. This places the expressed goal of changing institutional culture at odds with the structural incentives which are currently so conducive to promoting violent articulations of military masculinities in the Special Forces.

In addition to the barriers which exist due to the purpose of the Special Forces, the social understandings of what the Special Forces are created further impediment which would inhibit less violent alternative masculinities from arising. Far more than other branches of the military, the Special Forces occupy a place in the public image that is associated with violence, danger, autonomy and aggression (Newsinger 1997). By interrogating the pop cultural representation of the Special Forces in Britain, John Newsinger (1997) argues that through representations in film, personal memoirs, fiction, survival manuals and TV documentaries constructs a myth of the Special Forces as a symbol of national virility centred on their risk taking, capacity to do violence, ruggedness and extreme lifestyle. Similarly in interrogating the significance of the Special Forces for public understanding of masculinities, Rachel Woodward (1998) argues that their perceived rugged ability to pursue adventure away from surveillance in challenging circumstances has been key to their popularity. The particular appeal of the Special Forces also relies on perceptions that the military at large has been feminised, made soft by the presence of women and the kind of tough and tender soldiers that other aspects of COIN necessitate (Woodward & Winter 2007, 9). Not only are the portrayals of Special Forces incompatible with promoting a softer form of military masculinity which might centre care, they are intensely popular, appearing across Hollywood cinema, best-selling novels, reality television resulting in what Pears (2021, 13) describes

as a “societal fetishisation” of elite soldiering’ that celebrates a particularly ‘Spartan version of soldiering’. The popularity of such portrayals not only suggests that shifting the military masculinities associated with the Special Forces would not only require internal changes within the ADF, but broader social shifts regarding what it means to be a member of the Special Forces and the kind of practices which exemplify it.

### Changing masculinities at the moment of scandal

So far, this article has suggested that although masculinities are central to the kind of violence alleged against the Australian Special Forces in Afghanistan, shifting them to ameliorate the chance of such violence occurring in the future is fraught. There is one more concern that needs to be addressed, the role of producing structural change after a scandal and the risk that responses to military scandal end up becoming what Jamie Johnson (2016, 705) refers to as ‘line-drawing manoeuvres’. If change in militarised masculinities is urgently needed to end the conditions under which extreme violence is committed, then immediately after a scandal might appear to be an opportune time for such work to be undertaken. After the revelation of scandal within a public institution, there is often a process of reckoning with what factors contributed to it and what steps might prevent its future occurrence (Johnson 2016; Maesschalck 2002). These instances provide rare moments where political discussion can shift from the immediate moment to primary prevention, trying to identify the root causes of violence or abuse and creating change. Increasingly where the scandal involves the use of violence within male-dominated institutions such as the police, political establishment, the church, and the armed forces such revelations lead to a conversation about what role masculinity might have played and how it might be confronted. By interrogating how men behave, the incentives and punishments surrounding such behaviour and the narratives which shape such behaviour, feminists have advocated for working with men and boys so that masculine institutions might change (Burell, Westmarland, and Ruxton 2021). In short, scandals often create new opportunities, allowing for forms of change to the venerated institutions that would otherwise be unthinkable. However, when it comes to shifting military institutions after scandal the risk is that efforts aimed at reform end up serving to legitimise the institution, re-establishing the acceptability of ‘normal’ practices within it while excising those who have transgressed from the whole.

In understanding the political significance of the scandal, Jamie Johnson (2016) has argued that in responding to military scandal fail to address the root causes of military abuse, but instead serve to legitimise and necessity of military violence. In making this case, Johnson (2016, 705) draws on Jean Baudrillard’s account of scandals as a series of line-drawing manoeuvres. When a military scandal occurs, Johnson (2016, 706) argues that the first manoeuvre which takes place is to secure the idea that it is scandalous, that is that a line has been crossed. By this Johnson (2016, 706) means that by stating something is a scandal it re-establishes idea that military violence has ‘overstepped a line that marks the boundary between permissible and impermissible forms of conduct’. This not only functions to make the violence that has occurred in a particular instance hyper-visible (stating it is scandalous and deserving attention) but also functions to make other forms of violence that are not termed a scandal un-visible (by highlighting killing of civilian captives as scandalous, the regular killing of civilians as collateral

damage disappears from view). The second line-drawing manoeuvre of the scandal according to Johnson is redrawing the lines. When scandalous violence is made hyper-visible Johnson (2016, 708) argues that 'the observation of transgression therefore offers us privileged insights into the existence, prevalence and location of these lines'. This means that while the moment of scandal is one of critique it functions to re-establish a line, behind which any behaviour is re-rendered ethical, legitimate and beyond reproach. Importantly, this is not simply the process of highlighting a pre-existing line, through the process of scandal Johnson argues that scandals are not simply reflections of norms and principles that exist, they reproduce them. This can be seen socially in the response to public scandals like #MeToo which not only reflected societies opposition to sexual violence and abuse in professional settings but fundamentally shifted opinion on it. Finally, Johnson (2016, 711) argues that the third line-drawing manoeuvre is holding certain actions for an account. By this Johnson suggests that after establishing something as scandalous, re-drawing the lines of what is acceptable, the scandal works to hold the now exceptional violence to account imposing sanction or redress to move on from has occurred. In doing this, the response to violence is reduced to a form of 'moral accountancy' which can demonstrate publicly that the violated principles are re-established, they expurgate moral anxiety that our society endeavours might be unethical and create an acceptance with the new status quo (Johnson 2016, 711–712).

Taken together these three line-drawing exercises in the response to scandal should be seen as not simply serving to address unethical behaviour but functioning to reproduce the notion that the remainder of military behaviour beyond the scandal remains ethical. This creates the distinct risk that response to scandal may end up 'singling out the illegality of certain acts of excessive violence is to offer all other acts of war the appearance of legitimacy' (Johnson 2016, 712). This poses a distinct challenge for attempting to challenge military masculinities in the moment of scandal. As this article has argued, the scholarship on military masculinities does not seem to indicate that the problem is with a small set of exceptional masculinities which transgress. Rather, it is that mainstream masculinities, both within the military and society at large create the conditions for military violence and abuse. As Melanie Richter-Montpetit (2007, 38) argues while military abuse might not be explicitly condoned by state institutions, it follows a 'pre-constructed, heterosexed, racialised and gendered script' that is not exceptional, but the norm. While we might want to respond to militarised masculinities the moment of military scandal, efforts that re-legitimises the conditions that produced militarised masculinities in the first place are likely to fail.

### **Conclusion: challenging military masculinities beyond the moment of scandal**

This article has argued that the war crimes alleged against Australian Special Forces reflect well-established, pernicious and wide-spread masculinities which appear to have calcified within the Special Forces and the context of COIN. It has been argued that this particular articulation of military masculinity is not exceptional but exists in relation to and in continuity with mainstream masculinities that centre violence, toughness, aggression and fraternal bonding. Further, it has argued that while addressing such masculinities is essential, it cannot be done in isolation by looking at problematic military

units alone, it must reflect the structural position of masculinities within the Armed Forces and society at large. Finally, it has argued that although change is essential, the moment of scandal is an inopportune instance to foster the kind of change required to create long-term shifts in violent masculinities. The arguments contained here might appear to suggest that militarised masculinities are static, or too virulent a problem to address, this isn't what is intended.

Military masculinities are not immutable, the gendered underpinnings which led to the particular dynamics within the Australian Special Forces can and do change. Work in states emerging from political conflict shows that under the right conditions, with sufficient time and political will, violent masculinities may recede in importance or manifest through different dynamics (Ashe and Harland 2014). Further, work on alternative masculinities has shown how articulations which centre care, reconciliation or opposition to violence can flourish when the conditions allow (Kunz, Myrntinen, and Udasmoro 2018). With withdrawal from Afghanistan, and the failure of the coalition forces to permanently defeat the Taliban, it may be possible for substantive structural change to occur. However, in pursuing this goal it is key that we 'do not reproduce the conditions of possibility for the very practices that they seek to contest' as Johnson (2016, 722) argues. This will require more than an immediate response to scandal and a broader understanding of the roots of military violence.

## Notes

1. The remainder of this article will use the terminology of 'war crimes' to describe the incidents that the Brereton Report suggests were substantiated by their findings. In using this it does not indicate that any specific individual is criminally guilty.
2. This article is focused on violence. While its primary concern is the direct force (killing, maiming, infliction of pain, etc.) its understanding of violence and violent masculinities is broader. Violence includes structural violence, the social structures and institutions which deny people their basic needs (Galtung 1969). Violent masculinities are understood to be those which valorise, rely on, or result in violence either direct or structural (Pease 2019).

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## Notes on contributor

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