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The Part Humour Plays in the Production of Military Violence

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This article explores the connections between humour, gender and the violent function and practice of military institutions. As such it departs from a more typical theorisation of humour in international politics as a practice of rupture or resistance. Whilst humour can contest prevailing power structures, institutions, systems of oppression and violence, this article reveals the opposite. To do so, references to humour in the Ministry of Defence's official obituaries for British fatalities from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are analysed and discussed. Firstly, conceptualisations of humour, gender and violence are considered and an approach to humour as gender practice is detailed and situated within a feminist approach to gender and military violence. Secondly, through the MOD obituaries the article then explores how humour can contribute to the violent function and practice of the military institution and the broader social and political legitimacy of the institution and its violence.

Introduction

Whilst it is common to theorise humour as a practice of rupture and resistance against prevailing power structures, institutions, systems of oppression and violence, the purpose of this article is to reveal how humour can sustain prevailing and oppressive power structures and their institutions and be a part of the practice of their violence. Undertaking a gender analysis of the obituaries of British military personnel killed in the recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq I argue that humour is a gender practice significant to the production of military violence.

There were 456 British military fatalities in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2015 and 179 British military fatalities in Iraq between 2003 and 2009. The Ministry of Defence (MOD)

website lists each of these and most names are accompanied by a full official public obituary (MOD, n.d). Official military obituaries are significant for understanding military institutions and military power. They are outward-facing statements that collectively build a picture of how the military institution views itself. The terms on which obituaries celebrate individual deceased soldiers can tell us much about the terms of the institutions gendered configurations and violences. Military obituaries have the potential to be exceptionally revealing about martial projects of gender and violence because of the political potency of soldiers killed in war (inter alia Mosse, 1993; Zehfuss, 2009; Purnell, 2018; Jenkings et al 2012; Millar, 2017). The death of men in war is often understood as the ultimate heroic masculine sacrifice, such that in death soldiers become exemplary of their institution, nation, and manliness. Such deaths are comprehended as being 'combat', an idealised and imagined category and concept of violence (Millar and Tidy, 2017; Mosse 1990; Tidy 2016; Caddick et al 2020).

Given that the military is a gender defining institution in which normative ideals of masculinity are (re)produced (Hutchings 2008, 402; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 832; Hale 2012, 700) we might not be surprised to observe that in the MOD's obituaries the deceased tend to be remembered and celebrated as ideal men, whether this is expressed in explicit terms or through the emphasis on "values, capacities, and practices that are identified as exemplary for men" (Hutchings 2008, 402) such as physical prowess and fitness and notions of heroism. What seems more surprising in an obituary is the prominence of humour[1]. Surveying the more than 450 obituaries is difficult to find one that does not remark upon and commend the sharp wit and strong banter of a deceased soldier. Contributions from the comrades of the deceased share funny stories or dry observations. Often, the part that the dead soldier played in the cohesion of the unit and the smooth conduct of their mission through their morale-boosting banter is recalled. Throughout the obituaries humour, often in

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[1]This likely wouldn't be as surprising to anyone who has been a part of or immersed in the British military.

the particular form of 'banter', is a uniting characterisation of soldierliness and manliness (or, in the case of women, an honorary version of it, with women soldiers admired and accepted for their ability to share a joke with the 'lads'). Whilst the obituaries celebrate a fairly wide range of "values, capacities and practices" (Hutchings 2008, 402) as exemplifying soldierliness and manliness, the single uniting theme, which cuts across branch, rank, and cap badge, is the particular sense of humour characterised by 'banter', as illustrated in the following extracts:

> One of the reasons that he was able to fit seamlessly into the Company was his keen sense of humour; he excelled at the banter which only soldiers seem to understand. He was always quick to offer advice and the benefit of his experience to anyone, rank was no barrier….. [nickname] always brought a smile to your face with his wit and cutting sarcasm (Obituary of a Lance Corporal from 3 Royal Welsh).

> I first got to know Sapper [nickname and name] from his banter in the troop and later for his passion for Armoured Engineering. He was renowned for his one liners followed by his trademark laugh. He was typically involved in troop banter, and always raised spirits wherever he was. We remember him getting a lot of stick for his volleyball skills or lack thereof! (Obituary of a Sapper from 32 Engineer Regiment).

> She was a very strong character and a great northern lass who could put up with a Royal Engineers Search Team humour and banter… Though our time knowing each other in Afghanistan was short, I will never forget her professionalism, motivated attitude and our mutual love of banter… She had a strong personality and really liked to have a laugh and enjoy a joke with the 'lads' (Obituary of a Captain from 321 Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) Squadron, Royal Logistics Corps).

The invocations of humour in the MOD obituaries indicate some form of a connection between humour, gender and the function, which necessarily encompasses the violence, of

military institutions. Exploring this connection is the purpose of this article. Tracing what humour achieves for military violence (both in its every day enactment and wider social legitimation) enables me to make the broader point that whilst scholars have been clear in revealing the subversive role of humour in relation to oppression, violence and dominant power relations (inter alia Weaver 2010; Sorensen 2016; Brassett 2016; Brassett and Sutton 2017; cf Brassett 2018), we should also pay attention to how it upholds, enables and underpins these things. In making this argument the article unfolds over two parts. Firstly I consider conceptualisations and prior understandings of humour, gender and violence. I outline the approach to gender and gendered power that underpins the ideas in the article and set out how humour can be understood to be an aspect of gender practice (something that has implications for the study of humour in global politics more broadly). I then describe and situate the feminist approach to gender and military violence. The second part explores, through the case of the MOD obituaries, two possible directions for exploring the interrelation of humour, gender and military violence. The first looks at the function of humour within the institution, asking *what might the obituaries tell us about the inside workings of the institution?* The second examines what the invocation of humour in the obituaries achieves in an outward-facing sense (the obituaries, after all, are crafted for public consumption). *What does humour achieve politically within public statements about soldiers, the military and war?*

As outlined above, the MOD obituaries are understood within this article as particularly significant texts of the military institution and these form the chief empirical basis for the analysis. However, the presence and import of humour in military life would likely come as little surprise to anyone who had been a part of a military institution or undertaken ethnographic work within one (Hockey 1986; Basham 2013: 107, 117-8) and other sources such as military memoirs, online forums for military personnel, and observations of everyday

military life (to name but a few) could also have fruitfully been examined. In this article my approach to understanding "military power, processes and institutions" follows Basham and Bulmer (2017, quoting Rech et al, 2015) as having "multiple forms 'as the outcome of social life and political contestation'" across a "range of scales from the embodied to the global".

For this article, all 456 obituaries were read for references to humour in its various forms. This included explicit references to the sense of humour of the deceased, but also allusions to specific forms such as banter, jokes, wit, and so on. Humour within the obituaries – such as jokes and funny stories about the person – were also considered and these examples were analysed for tropes and themes. How these (re)produced the logics, relations, structures and configurations of the gendered military institution and its violences could then be traced.

That I reproduce portions of the MOD obituaries here carries with it a range of ethical implications. There is a complex political ethics to the naming of the war dead both more generally and within academic writing. More broadly this also pertains to how violence is represented and reproduced through scholarship (for example Dauphinée 2007). In this instance I have omitted the names of the deceased, since the inclusion of the names themselves adds little to the analysis (the examples have been chosen to illustrate the broader set of texts) but could cause distress and suffering to their family members and friends. I have left in other contextual information such as the rank and cap badge of the soldier since this is of relevance to the analysis (as an indicator of social class for example). It should be acknowledged that removing names does reduce the transparency of the analysis (although readers can find all of the obituaries quoted as part of the broader set of texts on the MOD website – MOD.n.d). It also invites an additional set of ethical questions concerning who is and who is not protected when we make particular ethical judgments within research practice (something we might think of as the politics of the distribution of ethical care), full discussion of which are beyond the scope of this article.

Humour, Gender, Violence

My conceptualisation of gender for this analysis is grounded in Raewyn Connell's account of gender, power and institutions. Gender is the relational "way in which social practice is ordered" (Connell 2005 [1995], 71) with gender relations achieved in the interwoven dimensions of "[e]conomic processes, authority, violence, discourses and ideologies, sexuality and emotional connections" (Connell 2005, 7). The relationality of gender includes how the processes of gender practice we call 'masculinities' and 'femininities' are produced in interaction with each other and with race and class (Connell 2005 [1995], 75). "[W]hen we speak of masculinity and femininity we are naming configurations of gender practice", or rather, the *processes* whereby gender practices become configured. This emphasis on process is particularly useful because it allows us to understand gender not as a static structure but as a "project" (Connell 2005 [1995], 72). Masculinities and femininities, as they emerge over a person's lifetime, or in the practices and structures of an institution, can consequently be understood as ongoing "gender projects".

Therefore, we can understand gender as a relational process of power that produces a particular gender order (in broad brushstroke terms the gender order we currently have is an arrangement of "the subordination of women and dominance of men" – Connell 2005 [1995], 74). This gender order is the outcome of interaction between multiple gender projects, encompassing raced and classed masculinities and femininities. One way to think about the processes that underpin the broader gender order is through the notion of the gender regime, understood as "the patterning of gender relations" in a particular institution, "especially the continuing pattern, which provides the structural context of particular relationships and individual practices" (Connell 2005, 6). What is the place of humour in all of this? The answer is that humour is gendered; it is one of the ways in which gender relations are 'achieved'. Humour is a part of gender projects.

Perhaps it might be tempting to think of humour as a universal: as an affective, emotional commonality that unites rather than enacts division. But humour, both in its doing and in its characterisation, functions within a range of projects of differentiation. This is key to understanding how humour can function to uphold prevailing and oppressive power structures and be a part of the practice of their violence. Perhaps an obvious example that falls within the ambit of IR's traditionally state-oriented concerns might be the way in which differentiating national stereotypes about humour (or lack of it) inform and animate geopolitical imaginaries of state character (the dour Germans, the British with their satire and eye for the absurd, the Americans who don't get irony). The common characterisation of Angela Merkel as variously embodying or confounding the 'dour German' expectation whilst engaged in international negotiations and state visits, making her and her humour proxies for the 'feeling' and therefore foreign policy direction of the German state, is an example of how this sort of thing can play out (for example in Marlowe 2017; Stone 2017). Similarly, humour can be a practice of gender differentiation. An interdisciplinary literature on, broadly, 'humour and gender' has explored the function of humour within the gender practice of masculinity and femininity from a range of angles and I draw on that literature here (inter alia Mackie 1990; Plester 2015; Johnston, Mumby and Westwood 2013; Abedinifard 2016; Schurr 2008; Kehily and Nayak 1997). Marlene Mackie (1990, 12), for example, observes that "humour, a pervasive aspect of popular culture, …plays a significant role in the accomplishment of gender". Directly developing Connell's conceptualisation of gender hierarchy, Mostafa Abedinifard (2016, 241) suggests that a particular form of humour, ridicule, works to police the gender order. Mary Jane Kehily and Anoop Nayak (1997, 70) explore how "humour is a technique for the enactment of masculine [and heterosexual] identities"

Being active in humour - being funny, cracking jokes, engaging in banter - all are primarily seen as a manly thing to do. It is a man's place to be witty, erudite, funny. It is a woman's place to laugh appreciatively, to be the passive receiver of the brilliance of male wit (and so many other things besides). Accompanying this is the enduring notion that women are '*just not funny*'. In the most straightforward example, women comedians struggle to achieve the popularity of their male counterparts and have historically had to do so within particular terms deemed less threatening to the gender order (Mackie 1990, 20). Moreover, to be a (publically) (Mackie 1990, 17) funny woman, and to engage in particular forms of humour such as banter (which I will turn to next), is still seen as un-feminine, transgressive; it is a threatening incursion into the male domain and expansion out of the polite domicile of femininity. In this way funny women can be a threat to the wider gender order. Humour evidently can be, in this regard and much more widely, subversive (Mackie 1990, 13).

What of banter, that particular form of humour that crops up again and again in the MOD obituaries? Banter is a form of humour that seems to play a particular role in contemporary western masculinity. Banter is characterised by boundary testing and teasing, sexual bravado, and in-jokes being shared, typically, within groups of men. It is experienced as a form of male bonding, a verbal horseplay that tests and rehearses belonging to and positioning within (or, indeed, exclusion from) masculinity and groups of men (Kehily and Nayak 1997). Women are often on the receiving end of that which is coded and defended as banter (Trump's defensive invocation of "locker room banter" is hard not to recall here - see Fahrenthold, 2016). Women of course do banter too, including in ways that can function as a signal that they 'fit in with the lads' and a particular space otherwise coded as masculine (Mackie 1990, 18). Banter is an example of the type of humour that produces and strengthens the boundaries between the group and those outside of it (Mackie 1990, 17-18).

In drawing attention to these aspects of humour I am content with being, somewhat ironically, the feminist killjoy on the topic of humour (Ahmed 2010, 581), (aren't feminists often admonished for being humour*less*?)[2] but maybe I'm being too hasty in eliding the fact that humour in all its guises is surely *fun*? Perhaps these accounts strip out the affective, pleasurable heart, the vibrant human social experience of humour? Here, I think, we need to be attentive to the *distribution* of that affective experience, that fun – something I develop on in the next part of this article. This is key to some of the ways in which humour works politically, including as a gendered and gendering process. Who experiences a moment of 'humour' as fun, as pleasurable, and who doesn't is an organising, configuring practice of inclusion and exclusion. In order to experience banter as fun one has to be seen to be doing it right; one has to fit (as a man, as the right sort of man or an honorary one). One has to be able to reciprocate, to 'give as good as you get' and that in itself is only possible within particular configurations of power. The experience of the social pleasure of humour, or not, is a part of and configured through power.

So far I have outlined the relationship between humour and gender, but what of that between gender and military violence/war? In this article I work with the idea that gender achieves and is achieved in military power and war; war and gender are co-constitutive (Duncanson 2017, 51; Prugl and Ticker 2018, 78; Sharoni and Welland 2016, 4; Millar and Tidy 2017). Gender, and gendered power, doesn't so much cause war or generate military power in the straightforward sense (Duncanson 2017, 51) as inhabit it (Prugl and Ticker 2018, 78). Feminist work on gender and war has produced an extensive theorisation of the manner in which "gender is central to the understanding of war and its effects" (Sharoni and Welland 2016, 2). This has included an account of militaries as, in Connell's conceptual language, a key part of the gender order, providing "a crucial arena for the construction of masculinity in

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[2] And feminists are often attacked through mocking humour (see Mackie 1990, 14)

the larger society" (Hale 2012, 700; Connell 2005 [1995]). The military as an institution, reproduces a "(variable) set of values, capacities, and practices that are identified as exemplary for men" (Hutchings 2008, 402; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 832) through particular normative ideal(s) of martial violence, (Millar and Tidy 2017). Most recently feminists theorising gender, military power and war have – often drawing on Connell's account of gender – turned particular attention to unpacking war and military institutions as complex fields of masculinities (Chisholm and Tidy, 2017) rather than as a more monolithic bastion of patriarchy.

Gender and violence in the MOD's obituaries

The three examples in the opening part of this article are illustrative of the many allusions to humour, and specifically banter, across the MOD obituaries. Some obituaries mention a soldier's sense of humour in passing, often amongst a list of other favourable soldierly attributes, whilst others emphasise it as something that was particularly key to the role they played within the institution. Soldiers are regularly described in obituaries as typical or ideal soldiers and/or men. A Sapper from 28 Engineer Regiment is described as "the epitome of a true Sapper [Royal Engineer], one who would roll up his sleeves and get on with the task in hand no matter what, but importantly he would do it with great humour". A Corporal from 2nd Battalion, the Royal Regiment of Scotland is described as "the perfect man". The Commanding Officer of the Battalion described him as "a classic example of a Scottish infantryman: robust, committed and blessed with a fine line in banter". A sense of humour, and particularly that described as 'banter' therefore becomes bound up in the definitional practices of the military institution (what it is to be a soldier and comprise the institution) and its gender normative structure (that is, it's statement of what it is and should be to be a man). In the case of the obituary of the Captain from 321 Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) Squadron, Royal Logistics Corps quoted at the beginnning of this article - one of the

relatively few women British military fatalities - her ability to "put up with" and reciprocate in banter was remarked upon as a marker of her 'fit' within the institution as one of the 'lads' (both men and women); it was one of the things that made her what Anthony King has conceptualised as an "honorary man" within the institution (King 2016).

My contention throughout this article is that gendered humour undertakes important work for military power and for military violence. What might the the obituaries tell us about the relationship between humour, gender and violence within the workings of the military institution and the practice of its violence, and what might the invocation of humour within the obituaries do in an outward facing sense to simultaneously reproduce the military as a gender normative institution and cultivate an acceptance of military violence? To answer these questions I next explore – through the case of the MOD's Afghanistan and Iraq obituaries – what form this 'work' might take both within the institution, and, since the obituaries are public statements about soldiers and war, in wider public discourse. This is significant because of the gender-normative position of the military and because of the interconnected way in which war and military power is presented for public consumption and reproduced through it.

Humour and Violence within the Institutional Gender Regime

That humour is important to the operation and function of the military institution has regularly been remarked upon (inter alia Godfrey 2016; Nilsson 2018; Brown and Penttinen 2013; Davies 2001; Madigan 2013, Basham 2013) including by those (whether military commanders or theorists) who wish to improve the operation and function of military institutions. The function of humour within the military organisation has been variously characterised as a disciplinary technology (Godfrey 2014), as a form of human experience through which to forge forms of everyday resilience and resistance (Brown and Penttinen

2013) and explicitly as 'unit cohesion' (Nilsson 2017) – the bonding of soldiers in a manner that sustains the accomplishment of the mission. How humour serves the gendered and raced configurations of power within military institutions has also been noted. Victoria Basham has observed how humour operates within the British military to uphold raced arrangements of power with banter or "joking" in the predominantly white institution taking "particularly racial forms" (Basham 2013, 118).

The contribution of dead soldiers is often framed within the terms of unit cohesion within the MOD obituaries. A Craftsman from the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers is described, for example, as "'The REME Soldier' personified" and "a morale asset for the Squadron". Contributors to his obituary noted that "the example he set, together with his wit, kept his fellow soldiers going under very difficult and demanding conditions". They observed that "regardless of what was going on around him, [his] sense of humour always seemed to shine through"; "He had a great sense of humour and knew how to use it well". The soldier, who is seen (as is often the case in these obituaries) as epitomising his corps, is seen as an "asset" not just by virtue of his skills as a Recovery Mechanic but due to his wit and sense of humour which enabled him, and crucially his fellow soldiers, to undertake their mission. Furthermore, the more precise form of this Craftsman's "asset" was banter with its boundary testing and one-upmanship (in his case in relation to Officers) and in-jokes that bound him with the other men of his rank. His Sergeant Major described how during Squadron parades he "often stood bolt upright, with the sun in his eyes and with a cheeky grin, deliberately avoiding my stare". Elsewhere in the obituary it is recorded that he

> …took particular pride in recovering the then Officer Commanding who rolled his vehicle in treacherous weather conditions. [Name] seized the opportunity to get one-up on his 'boss', with his tales of the affair and witty quips earning him great kudos with the other blokes. He was one of the few who could get away with it.

At the start of this article I outlined Connell's approach to understanding gender as achieved in interaction with race and class (Connell 2005 [1995], 75) and through the interwoven dimensions of "[e]conomic processes, authority, violence, discourses and ideologies, sexuality and emotional connections" (Connell 2005, 7). This soldier's obituary draws attention to his successful fit within the masculine gender-normative institution; he "personified" the REME soldier. Key to this was his banter, which – testing the boundaries between officers and men and 'getting away with it' – was not just part of a gender project but a specifically a classed gender project.[3] Humour here is a means to test authority (and gain it in the form of "kudos" from his fellow men – "the other blokes") producing a working class soldierly masculinity. Simultaneously, gendered humour is the material for emotional connections between men - a sense of institutional fit, common purpose and unity with fellow soldiers of the same class – that generate something useful to the violent imperatives of the military. This, as I described above, is a function of humour within the military that the institution is comfortable acknowledging and, indeed, celebrating.

Less comfortable for the institution include the relationships between banter, practices referred to as hazing and – ultimately – forms of prisoner abuse and torture. Paul Higate (2012) has explored what hazing scandals can tell us about the creation of "intra-masculine bonds" within fratriarchies ("formations …shaped by patriarchal values embedded in systems of individual autonomy, interpersonal power and struggle" and typically "found in those contexts characterized by close relations between men" – 450, 453). Whilst his study explores hazing within a different militarized setting – Private Militarized Security Companies – Higate usefully draws attention to the way in which hazing can be practiced through "humour and irony" and feature "laughter and general hilarity" in which there is

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[3] Exploring the particularly raced and classed function of humour within the military would be a fertile area of future research. It might, for example, interrogate the ways in which raced and classed 'fit' within particular parts of the institution are marked by specific practices of humour.

"willing and active participation" by all of those involved in ways that affirm the group's closeness (Higate 2012, 457; Basham 2013, 107-8). Both group banter and hazing share a common logic and structure of ritualised abuse, humiliation, group boundary-making and closeness. Being 'able to take' (and indeed willing to take and participate in) initiation hazing is what binds a person (typically a man) into a group. Being 'able to take' banter rehearses that same arrangement in a more quotidian and less embodied manner. The obituary of a Lance Corporal in the Adjutant General's Corps notes approvingly that "If it was his turn to receive the banter - he took it with his customary smile, all in good nature".

If the "willing and active participation" (Higate 2012, 457) in banter and hazing binds the group together, we can also posit the inverse. The obituary of a Private from the Rifles drew attention to the fact that he was regularly on the receiving end of banter due to his "personal admin" (care for and organisation of the body and uniform, such as meeting standards for dress on the parade ground) which "left something to be desired" and put him at "the centre of some laughs and jokes amongst the lads". The MOD obituary does not record that the Private took his own life whilst deployed to Iraq leaving a note listing grievances against a number of people, including his Platoon Sergeant. At his inquest questions were raised about whether he "had been bullied", but this was denied by witnesses (BBC 2011). We can conclude that 'banter' and 'hazing' are fundamentally linked processes, complex fields of gendered power relations, compliance, complicity, fitting and unfitting, even whilst they are coded quite differently in normative terms. Banter is commonly seen as benign and indeed functionally useful male bonding whereas hazing is characterised as a violent excess that is scandalous for, and seen to be damaging to, the military institution. Hazing is unsettling. It is unsettling in part because it has the potential to make visible the violent gendered relations that also run through banter. Humour therefore facilitates the operation of the violent

imperatives of the military institution but it also can also structure that violence.

An example of this is prisoner abuse and torture. The complex (dis)connections between hazing and the racialised, gendered and sexualised torture of prisoners by American military personnel at Abu Ghraib have been explored by other writers (inter alia Mirzoeff 2006, 35; Zurbriggen 2008, 307-8). It is difficult to ignore in the infamous photographs that emanated from Abu Ghraib the smiling and jokey countenance of the torturers as they posed with the dead and debased; an iteration of humour was at work somewhere in this violent milieu. It was definitely invoked in defence of the torturers, with Rush Limbaugh infamously arguing that they were just "people having a good time", "sort of like hazing, a fraternity prank. Sort of like that kind of fun." (quoted in Zurbriggen 2008, 309). Limbaugh was not wrong that Abu Ghraib was "people having a good time" but of course this was a "good time" for *particular* people through the suffering of others (others that through Limbaugh's formulation are rendered invisible or perhaps not fully 'people'). That the violence and suffering of war can be undertaken as and experienced as something we might summarise as 'fun' by certain people, the distribution of that violence-as-fun, is a function of gendered and racialised power (Tidy 2019). Here the lack of compliance and the one-sidedness of the pleasure underscored the prisoners' otherness; we might posit that it would have bound the group of torturers together and simultaneously exposed their victims to violence and death.

Abu Ghraib is a very high profile example, but one from a different military institutional setting to that on which this article focuses. We can however see similar practices of humour structuring prisoner abuse, torture and killing undertaken by the British military. The 2011 killing of an Afghan 'insurgent' by the British soldier who became known as Marine A was accompanied by a verbal quip that paraphrased Hamlet – "shuffle off this mortal coil you cunt" (see Partis-Jennings 2019 for a full discussion). In the video of the beating of Iraqi boys

by British soldiers in Al Amara, Iraq in 2004 the soldier filming the abuse can be heard laughing whilst saying "Oh, yes. Oh, yes. You're going to get it. Yes. Naughty little boys". The video itself was "reportedly shown for entertainment at a British military base in Europe" before being leaked to a British newspaper by a whistle blower (Lyall 2006). We can see humour, manifesting as reports of soldiers laughing whilst engaging in violence, throughout accounts of abuse by British soldiers (see case summaries in Public Interest Lawyers 2009). In one example at Camp Breadbasket in Basra, Iraq, a prisoner described witnessing how another prisoner was "tied to the forks of a forklift truck where he was taken up and down. The two soldiers in the watchtower found this to be very funny and were laughing very loudly" (Public Interest Lawyers 2009, 13). Sentencing one of the soldiers at a resulting military tribunal the judge noted that he had "used the prisoner to amuse himself" (BBC 2005).

Humour and Violence in the Public Discourse of Soldiers

The MOD obituaries are statements about soldiers and the wars in which they died, and the military institution of which they were a part, that are crafted for public consumption. They are outward-facing statements about what it means to be a soldier, about the way the military institution sees itself and the war and occupation it is pursuing, and about how the institution in turn wants itself to be understood. Furthermore, the obituaries – as texts of the institution – (re)produce its patterning of gender relations; its 'gender regime' (Connell 2005, 6). What does the ubiquity of humour 'do' here, particularly to – simultaneously – reproduce the military as a gender normative institution and cultivate an acceptance of military violence? There is a useful cognate literature on the politics, including the gender politics, of dead soldiers more generally and British military obituaries more specifically, which reveals how obituaries (re)produce particular discourses about soldiers and war that serve to normalise and make military violence possible (inter alia Zehfuss, 2009; Danilova, 2015; King, 2010;

Millar, 2017; Purnell 2018) This work, however, has not considered the role of humour other than in a passing manner.

To a British audience the remarks about humour that are made in the obituaries are ultimately reassuring and comforting to read. There is a common narrative across the obituaries within which humour acts as a lynchpin, and through which the institution's violence is replaced by stories about exemplary but relatable men having a good time. The structure of the obituaries, and the focus on humour within them, tell readers that soldiers are normal (and norm*ative*) men. The war they are engaged in can then be legible as normal and normative too.

The first part of the obituary narrative is that the deceased was an excellent and exemplary soldier and good man, which tends to include having a sense of humour and being positive for morale through their banter. For example, the obituary of a Lance Corporal from the 1st Battalion The Royal Gloucestershire, Berkshire and Wiltshire Regiment records how "[comedic nickname] epitomized the Mortar Platoon" and was "so cheerful and cheeky he could be forgiven anything". A Lance Corporal from the Royal Marines is described as "a fine example of a Royal Marine" who was "popular and well respected by all in his Troop, largely because of his dry sense of humour and ability to see the lighter side of life. In his Troop he could be relied upon to lift morale regardless of the situation or mood". A Corporal is described as a "fun loving Jock who loved the military and was up for anything and everything" whilst another is described as "the model of a modern Formation Reconnaissance soldier". It is remarked that "[l]ife was fun with him around. He knew how to make the best of things and was ever ready with an amusing story or comment to keep his troop and squadron motivated"; he brought "a huge sense of fun…to the Regiment" which was "an inspiration to his crew and the squadron as a whole". These descriptions are, as discussed above, allusions to what the military understands as unit cohesion. (An additional reading is

that the 'bringing of fun' to war could be read as a facet of a military culture within which the practice of violence and humour become, as I have argued, closely entwined).

The obituaries tell readers about how the men and women successfully fitted within the gender-normative institution and how this was undertaken within familiar, benign and relatable terms. As described at the outset, the military is a source of normative models of manliness, socially understood as an institution made up of exemplary men (Hutchings 2008, 402). The obituaries tell the reader that to be an exemplary man within the military is not just about personifying those attributes that more typically spring to mind when one thinks of military models of masculinity – fitness, bravery, tenacity and so on – but also through the relatable performance of gender-normative humour.

The second part of the obituary narrative is thus that within the military institution the deceased soldier was well liked and supported within a tight knit group of friends with whom they shared a lot of fun. For example, we are told of a Royal Marine that he "loved to play the joker, which made him popular with all his colleagues. He was always quick to play a prank on others but always first to laugh at a joke at his own expense". A Corporal "was popular, easy going with lots of friends. He always had a smile on his face. He will be missed by all". The banter between the dead and their surviving comrades sometimes continues within the obituaries in the form of the retelling of humorous and embarrassing stories. It was remembered of a Private from First Battalion, The Staffordshire Regiment, that he "was always getting in trouble. I remember on a battlefield tour in Belgium where he managed to acquire some wine when we were not supposed to be drinking. Needless to say, he got caught; but took his punishment with a smile on his face". Another obituary, of a Corporal, noted his "notorious Ibiza clubbing outfits". This part of the obituary story compounds the account of institutional fit, but it also allows readers to be a part of that institutional fit themselves. Readers are let in on the joke about a soldier's notorious outfits, and can share in the willing

discomfort of another caught with his illicit bottle. In sharing the joke, readers can be bound within the gender regime. The stories about groups of men sharing friendship and fun also reassure that military life and war must be – even as they have resulted in the deaths of those same young men – benign, at least in psychological terms. The violence of war and occupation is obscured by stories about clubbing outfits, illicit drinking and good natured pranks. Whilst the above mentioned references to 'raising morale' might hint vaguely at 'gallows humour' (see Basham 2013: 118), when the obituaries refer to specific examples of morale raising they suggest that hardships are less a matter of trauma and violence and more one of physical discomfort. A colleague of a Corporal described how "when we were wet and miserable after yet another desert thunderstorm he suddenly stripped off and plunged into a vast muddy puddle, just to prove that being filthy was really no bother and to make us smile".

The final part of the narrative is that the deceased died doing what they loved, preserved as exemplary and popular soldiers who had fun doing their job. Variations of the phrase *he died doing the job he loved* crop up again and again across the obituaries. That of one Corporal says "we must comfort ourselves with the knowledge that he was happy and died living out his dreams and had an enormous amount of friends and people who loved him dearly". The obituary of a Marine records that "He was an excellent Marine who died doing the job he loved and will be missed by all his friends in 45 Commando...He died doing what he wanted to do and amongst his friends and Royal Marine colleagues". The final comment in the obituaries is typically left to the Defence Secretary who ties the death to wider military and political imperatives. For example, Defence Secretary Des Browne wrote of two soldiers who died in the same operation, that "These young men died serving our country and helping to bring peace to Iraq".

Not only, the reader learns, did the young men die for a good reason (the objectives of the state and the imperatives of the military institution) but they were having a good time; they

were living fulfilling lives as individual, exemplary men, having fun amongst a close group of fellow men, and "loving" their occupation. Regardless, then, of any ambiguous feelings a nation might have about the wars being waged in Iraq and Afghanistan they could be comforted by the knowledge that the dead (and those who survived them) were living their best lives as young men; lives seemingly defined less by danger and violence than by those universal manly imperatives of banter and through it brotherly fraternity.

The invocation of humour therefore does an important job to make the war dead, and the violence they were engaged in, palatable to the nation. The comforting story conveyed by the obituaries is of the nation's men being facilitated by the military institution to be the best men they can be through doing the job of soldiering and having a good time whilst doing it. Violence is very much in the background of the obituaries, behind the privations of, for example, getting muddy in a thunderstorm. Their death was for a purpose and they died doing what they loved. The invocation of humour works to reassure readers that being in the military – an occupation from which violence is mostly removed in the obituaries – is fun, and specifically men's fun. This is also a normalising narrative; the soldiers are narrated as just ordinary lads having a laugh. If the central, albeit obscured, work of the military in war is violence this violence can therefore be lads having a laugh (a logic that seems to take us back to Rush Limbaugh). If the common sense is that humour is a universal, invoking it makes soldiers relatable, normal, 'just like us' (or rather, a better iteration).

Conclusion

In this article I have explored how, whilst the idea of humour as a mode of rupture and resistance within politics is compelling, we should be attuned to the ways in which it can also be a part of the functioning and maintenance of prevailing systems of oppression and violence. Using the UK military institution as its example, the article has explored the

connections between humour, gender and military violence. I have argued that applying the observation that humour is a gender practice draws attention to the ways in which it functions to uphold prevailing systems of power. Turning to the example of an institution of gender-normative violence – the British military – reveals in a more fine-grained manner the ways in which humour upholds the function of the institution and also can structure its violence. Humour also works to sustain the broader social legitimacy of the institution and its violence. Understanding humour as a gendered practice has implications for the study of humour within international politics more widely. Spending more time tracing this gendered practice we might re-evaluate the tendency to view humour as subversive of and resistant to oppressive power. My aim here has been not to produce an argument that narrowly takes the role of humour within British military violence as its concern but rather to signal to some of the complex ways that humour functions in global relations of power.

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