

SWEDISH OFFICERS – HIGHER RANK, LESS UNIT COHESION

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Abstract. The military is considered one of the most cohesive organisations in our society because of its cohesion, organisational identification, and commitment to the group. Furthermore, a military organisation is characterised by a strong set of norms and behaviours. Militaries are often part of a large, longstanding organisation that is rather isolated, hierarchical and highly regulated. The aim of this interview study was to explore the descriptions of unit cohesion among experienced Swedish officers. Results show that the way that unit cohesion changes during a military career can be understood from the following four overriding categories: *entering the military*, *downsizing*, *family*, and *the changing character of work*. In the first category, unit cohesion and the experience of joining a military unit at a young age are explored. The following three categories focus on officers' reflections on how unit cohesion and the sense of community has altered during their careers. Future research should address the topic of downsizing in relation to unit cohesion. Furthermore, qualitative research should explore the altering stages of unit cohesion during officers' military career paths. The changing character of work is also a topic for further study as values in society are shifting and the characteristics of work are subject to an ongoing progress. In general, it seems like the things that initially made individuals apply to the Swedish Armed Forces (SAF) and begin employment will start to fade away when one rises higher in the hierarchical system.

Keywords: Cohesion, military, officer, Sweden, interview study

1. Introduction

The military is often regarded as one of the most cohesive organisations in our society because of its cohesion, organisational identification, and commitment to the group². Furthermore, a military organisation is characterised by a

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² **Perez, A. L. U.; Strizhko, T. V.** 2018. Minority representation, tokenism, and well-being in army units. – *Military Psychology*, Vol. 30, No. 5, pp. 449–463.

strong set of norms and behaviours^{3,4}. Entrance into the military often coincides with early adulthood when most people start to become more independent and mature⁵. These circumstances set the armed forces apart from many other organisations as individuals are expected to take responsibility, become independent, and develop the ability to work in a group⁶. Furthermore, as Siebold describes it, militaries are often part of a large, longstanding organisation that is rather isolated, hierarchical and highly regulated⁷. There is great potential in effective teamwork and there is a huge body of literature on this topic. However, others state that many organisations fail to use that to its full potential⁸. Unit cohesion is a concept that has been effectively applied in the military context^{9,10,11,12} and there is considerable evidence of positive outcomes for high unit cohesion.

2. Unit cohesion

Our study applies the concept of unit cohesion as referred to by Ahronson and Cameron who describe unit cohesion as the power of ties between

³ **Elder, G. H. Jr.; Gimbel, C.; Ivie, R.** 1991. Turning points in life: The case of military service and war. – *Military Psychology*, Vol. 3, No. 4, pp. 215–231.

⁴ **Österberg, J.; Nilsson, J.** 2019. A Diary-based Case Study in the Development of Unit Cohesion during Basic Training in the Swedish Air Force. – *Res Militaris*, Vol. 9, No. 2, pp. 1–16.

⁵ **Lönnqvist, J. E.; Mäkinen, S.; Paunonen, S. V.; Henriksson, M.; Verkasalo, M.** 2008. Psychosocial functioning in young men predicts their personality stability over 15 years. – *Journal of Research in Personality*, Vol. 42, No. 3, pp. 599–621.

⁶ **Swedish Armed Forces** 2006. *Pedagogiska grunder*. Stockholm: Swedish Armed Forces.

⁷ **Siebold, G. L.** 2006. Military group cohesion. – *Military performance. Military life: The psychology of serving in peace and combat*. Britt, T. W.; Castro, C. A.; Adler, A. B. (eds.). Westport, CT: Praeger Security International. [Siebold 2006]

⁸ **Van Der Vegt, G. S.; Bunderson, J. S.** 2005. Learning and performance in multidisciplinary teams: The importance of collective team identification. – *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 48, No. 3, pp. 532–547.

⁹ **Siebold, G. L.** 2007. The essence of military group cohesion. – *Armed Forces & Society*, Vol. 33, No. 2, pp. 286–295. [Siebold 2007]

¹⁰ **Siebold, G. L.** 2011. Key questions and challenges to the standard model of military group cohesion. – *Armed Forces & Society*, Vol. 37, No. 3, pp. 448–468. [Siebold 2011]

¹¹ **Williams, J.; Brown, J.; Bray, R.; Anderson Goodell, E. M.; Rae Olmsted, K.; Adler, A. B.** 2016. Unit cohesion, resilience, and mental health of soldiers in basic combat training. – *Military Psychology*, Vol. 28, No. 4, pp. 1–10. [Williams et al. 2016].

¹² **Griffith, J.** 2007. Further considerations concerning the cohesion-performance relation in military settings. – *Armed Forces & Society*, Vol. 34, No. 1, pp. 138–147.

individuals that unite military personnel¹³. Unit cohesion has been studied from many different military perspectives. Grady et al. showed that the differences in perceived unit cohesion, trauma symptoms and anxiety symptoms were related to the individual attachment styles of US military veterans¹⁴. Furthermore, Kanesarajah et al. displayed how unit cohesion relates positively to psychological well-being¹⁵, and Griffith and Bryan indicated that a higher than average cohesion was associated with reduced suicidal thoughts among U.S. soldiers¹⁶. Maguen and Litz showed that unit cohesion relates positively to morale and mission success¹⁷. Oliver et al. illustrated how unit cohesion is associated with improved job satisfaction and high unit performance¹⁸. Williams et al. displayed the relation between unit cohesion and organisational outcomes such as individual and unit readiness¹⁹. Bierman and Keltly found that cohesion buffers the relationship between threat and emotional distress, but not nonlinearly, with buffering observed at moderate but not high levels of cohesion²⁰. According to Siebold, cohesion is not an object or item, and its level is not established by military observers; instead he suggests that cohesion in its peer, leader, organisational, and institutional dimensions is a social-relationship product caused by the interactions and experiences of group members in the context of their daily military activities²¹. Siebold makes a clear distinction between group cohesion and task cohesion, where group cohesion is found in group members' relationships and their stated

¹³ **Ahronson, A.; Cameron, J. E.** 2007. The nature and consequences of group cohesion in a military sample. – *Military Psychology*, Vol. 19, No. 1, pp. 9–25

¹⁴ **Grady, J.; Banford-Witting, A.; Kim, A.; Davis, S.** 2018. Differences in unit cohesion and combat-related mental health problems based on attachment styles in us military veterans. – *Contemporary Family Therapy: An International Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 3, pp. 249–258.

¹⁵ **Kanesarajah, J.; Waller, M.; Zheng, W. Y.; Dobson, A. J.** 2016. Unit cohesion, traumatic exposure and mental health of military personnel. – *Occupational Medicine*, Vol. 66, No. 4, pp. 308–315.

¹⁶ **Griffith, J.; Bryan, C. J.** 2015. Suicides in the U.S. military: Birth cohort vulnerability and the all-volunteer force. – *Armed Forces & Society*, Vol. 42, No. 3, pp. 1–18.

¹⁷ **Maguen, S.; Litz, B. T.** 2006. Predictors of morale in U.S. peacekeepers. – *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, Vol. 36, No. 4 pp. 820–836.

¹⁸ **Oliver, L. W.; Harman, J.; Hoover, E.; Hayes, S. M.; Pandhi, N. A.** 1999. A quantitative integration of the military cohesion literature. – *Military Psychology*, Vol. 11, No. 1, pp. 57–83. [Oliver et al. 1999]

¹⁹ **Williams et al.** 2016.

²⁰ **Bierman, A.; Keltly, R.** 2018. Subjective cohesion as stress buffer among civilians working with the military in iraq and afghanistan. – *Armed Forces & Society*, Vol. 44, No. 2, pp. 238–260.

²¹ **Siebold, G. L.** 1989. Longitudinal patterns in combat platoon cohesion. Paper presented at the Leadership Conference. Kansas City, MO: Center for Army Leadership.

capability for cooperative action in order to accomplish their mission²². In addition, individual knowledge, skills, and capability within a group have been shown to be predictors of group productivity.

Shils reported that the cohesive primary group “served two principle functions in combat motivation: it set and emphasised group standards of behaviour and it supported and sustained the individual in stresses he would otherwise not have been able to withstand.”²³ Furthermore, unit cohesion improves performance and efficiency in military operations, and comprises, for example, effective leadership and comradeship between group members as well as communication between members and leaders of military groups. Siebold concludes that cohesion is “easy to understand in the abstract but complex and difficult to grasp in concrete.”²⁴ However, in literature, cohesion has also been associated with negative outcomes; for example, Janis’ group-think²⁵ and Pawiński state that in authoritarian military institutions, unit cohesion can have unintended consequences, like a dehumanising effect on the out-groups²⁶.

There seems to be something of a dearth of qualitative research on this topic, not least from a European perspective. Furthermore, many studies focus on cohesion from a combat or group performance perspective. Therefore, the aim of this study is to explore the descriptions of unit cohesion among experienced Swedish officers.

2.1. The Swedish military context

The professional officer system in Sweden has gone through a number of changes over the last three decades²⁷. The officer system has gone from a

²² Siebold 2006.

²³ Shils, E. 1950. Primary Groups in the American Army. – Merton, R. K.; Lazarsfeld, P. F. (eds.). *Studies in the Scope and Method of the American Soldier: Continuities in Social Research*. Glencoe: Free Press, pp. 19–39.

²⁴ Siebold 2007.

²⁵ Janis, I. L. 1972. *Victims of groupthink: A psychological study of foreign-policy decisions and fiascos*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

²⁶ Pawiński, M. 2018. Unintended consequences of military cohesion. – *International Peace-keeping*, Vol. 25, No. 2, pp. 293–313. [Pawiński 2018]

²⁷ Österberg, J.; Oskarsson, E.; Nilsson, J. 2021. Perceptions of Officer Training Among Newly Employed Officers and Specialist Officers in the Swedish Armed Forces – A Qualitative Study. – *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies*, Vol. 4(1), pp. 50–61. <http://doi.org/10.31374/sjms.63>. [Österberg, Oskarsson, Nilsson 2021]

three-category system with officers, senior NCOs and junior NCOs, to a system with regimental officers, company officers and platoon officers, to—in 1983—a one-tier system without NCOs and back to a reformed three-category system with officers, specialist officers and junior NCOs. In 2008, officer education was transferred from the Swedish Armed Forces (SAF) to the Swedish Defence University (SEDU) at the same time as the Officer Programme (OP) became a three-year university program, leading to a bachelor level degree in war science. The training of professional specialist officers (senior NCOs) as well as junior NCOs remains within the SAF and takes place at service and specialist branch schools. NCO training within the SAF is non-academic. Sweden has not only changed the professional officer training system in the last 30 years, conscription was also discontinued in 2010 and the SAF switched to an all-voluntary force. This experiment was judged unsuccessful by the government in 2017 and conscription (now gender neutral) was re-introduced as a recruitment principle alongside the all-voluntary force.²⁸ Weber and Österberg describe how the basics of the conscript system in Sweden changed from 2002–2010 due to downsizing and societal shifts in values among youth. Results showed that the most important values and attitudes towards conscription could be divided into three subcategories: individual development, group cohesion and competence.²⁹ In line with this, Mir et al. assume that the dominant paradigm of the employee-organisation relationship has begun to shift from a psychological contract to a model of economic exchange³⁰ where the individual self becomes responsible for his/her own career^{31, 32}. Therefore, if the SAF would like conscripts to stay within the organisation, these issues are important to address.

²⁸ Österberg, J.; Rydstedt, L. 2018. Job satisfaction among Swedish soldiers – Applying the job characteristics model to newly recruited military personnel. – *Military Psychology*, Vol. 30, No.4, pp. 302–310.

²⁹ Weber, M.; Österberg, J. 2015. A principal component analysis of Swedish conscripts' values and attitudes towards their military education. – *Res Militaris*, Vol. 5, No. 2. [Weber, Österberg 2015].

³⁰ Mir, A.; Mir, R.; Mosca, J. B. 2002. The new age employee: An exploration of changing employee-organizational relations. – *Public Personnel Management*, Vol. 31, No. 2, pp. 187–200. [Mir et al. 2002]

³¹ McDougall, M.; Vaughan, E. 1996. Changing expectations of career development: Implications for organizations and for social marketing. – *The Journal of Management Development*, Vol. 15, No. 9, 36–47.

³² McCarthy, J. F.; Hall, D. T. 2000. Organizational crisis and change: The new career contract at work. – Burke, R. J.; Cooper, C. L. (eds.). *The organization in crisis: Downsizing, restructuring, and privatization*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Given the above-mentioned changes within the military organisation as well as in society, it is important to investigate how the concept of unit cohesion changes over a military career.

3. Method

3.1. Participants and procedure

For this research, 41 qualitative, in-depth interviews were conducted at five military units with officers with a minimum of 15 years of service aged between 36 and 63, and the interviews, semi-structured in nature, lasted between 50 and 125 minutes. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed verbatim. All interviews were conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines provided by the Swedish Research Council³³. Thematic analysis (TA) was used to analyse qualitative data. This represents a flexible method for identifying themes, e.g. patterns in empirical materials that, depending on the overall aim of the study, are either essential or interesting³⁴. This analytical framework can be used across a broad range of epistemologies and research questions³⁵. We chose an inductive approach to code our data, however focusing on exploring aspects of value in the data regarding cohesion, such as group activities, comradeship, and collaboration in the workplace. In examining the data, open coding was used where the codes were developed and adjusted during the coding processes.³⁶ In this process the data was structured into four categories: *entering the military*, *downsizing*, *family*, and *the changing character of work*.

All respondents had completed their officer education before 2008, in accordance with the old officer training system.

³³ Swedish Research Council 2017. God forskningssed. Stockholm: Swedish Research Council.

³⁴ Braun, V.; Clarke, V. 2006. Using thematic analysis in psychology. – *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 77–101. [Braun, Clarke 2006]

³⁵ Nowell, L. S.; Norris, J. M.; White, D. E.; Moules, N. J. 2017. Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. – *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, Vol. 16, No. 1, pp. 1–13.

³⁶ Braun, Clarke 2006.

4. Results

In the first category, *entering the military*, unit cohesion and the experience of joining military units at a young age are explored. The following three themes discern the officers' reflections on how unit cohesion and the sense of community had altered during their career in terms of *downsizing*, *family*, and *the changing character of work*.

4.1. Entering the military

According to officers' reflections, entering the military involves several thought processes and emotions. Most regard the entry as a challenging but necessary trial in which they progressively found their roles in the organisation. With many years of work-life experience, some of the interviewees reflected upon the months spent in basic military training as the first step towards a military identity. This was reflected in one of the informants' descriptions:

It is a matter of learning to know yourself, but also learning how to work in a group. You also need to learn how to take orders. But above all, you have to learn that not everything is going to come easy, or for free. Sometimes, you have to make an effort to achieve something.

All the participants ascribed significance to the comradery embedded within military units, especially the notion of performing and solving tasks together in groups which characterises the early stages of military training. The common elements of military activities were of great importance for many when taking the next step towards employment:

When all is said and done, everything is about the people around you, the opportunity to be continuously engaged with others. That appealed to me back then ... even as a young man. Training, sleeping in the barracks and solving tasks together brings us closer.

The informants' emphasis on group activities is not surprising as the expectations of being part of a community have been identified as one of the initial motivators for wanting to serve in the SAF³⁷. However, in the case of our

³⁷ Österberg, J.; Nilsson, J.; Hellum, N. 2020. The motivation to serve in the military among Swedish and Norwegian soldiers, a comparative study. – Journal of Defence Resources Management, Vol. 11, No. 1, pp. 30–42.

interviewees talking about the early stages of their military careers, it reflects more of a regional, even local, idiosyncrasy. Although some of the participants conducted military service at a remote location, a considerable number did their military service close to home. Some interviewees performed their military training together with schoolmates or team members from the local football or ice hockey teams, which lessened some of the tension of stepping into the military, and the establishment of unit cohesion was regarded as something natural. Similarities between the group-related aspects of sports and the underlying communal characteristics of the military were emphasised during the interviews. Here, one of the interviewees reinforced the image of the beginning phases of a military career as a collective process. This is manifested in the working tasks of training soldiers, in the middle of their learning process:

First and foremost, the military's main objective is to train soldiers. There are, of course, different positions, but that constitutes the core of the job, at least in the beginning of your military career. Before, but also during, my military career I have been into sports, and I like the environment where you solve tasks together, similar to the ways you do when you are into sports.

Reflecting upon the SAF's overarching values, one of the interviewees highlights coaching newcomers as one of the core values of the officer profession, but also as a source of meaning in work:

Coaching the young ones is one of the core values of the profession... if you have to pick three to four things, helping others is definitely up there! To coach the younger ones towards their vision, their big goals, their intermediate goals, and seeing when you can tick off their achievements. That is why you are here.... and, in many ways, the high point of our profession.

From the interviewees' perspective, the socialisation of newcomers, viewed from an organisational perspective, is a process of great significance. In this institutionalising phase, military values, but also the more specific values of the SAF, are embedded within newcomers who, in turn, submit to the values and, over time when they become acquainted with their military identity, make these values their own (see Berger and Luckmann)³⁸. Overcoming the obstacles interrelated with military service and accomplishing tasks together

³⁸ **Berger, P. L.; Luckmann, T.** 1967. The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge. New York: Anchor Books.

with colleagues was reflected as essential for the informants' decision to continue towards officer training. One of the interviewees describes how his group decided to continue in the armed forces:

From my year, we were a large group that chose to continue at the regiment, ten people if I'm not mistaken. We were a team already back then. I liked it a lot. The town is well-known for the military, it felt good to continue here.

In carrying out officer training with colleagues from basic military training, the development of unit cohesion evolved, which increased their commitment to their military units. Unit cohesion during basic military training can be divided into three subcategories:

Table 1. Unit cohesion before, during and after basic military training

Before	During	After
Knowing their military colleagues from before, i.e. from school, sports or other social activities made it easier to work together in groups, but also removed tensions related to entering the military.	As an outcome of group and task-related activities during military service, unit cohesion emerges among individuals. In the continuing phase, the newcomers are socialised into the organisation, developing fundamental skills in groups.	Being surrounded by others, overcoming the obstacles associated with military service and solving tasks together were reflected as necessary for the informants' decision to continue in the SAF. For some, unit cohesion became stronger during officer training.

4.2. Downsizing

As the majority of the interviewees were somewhere between 50 to 63 years old, they underwent their military service either in the late 1970s or somewhere during the 1980s. In their narratives, their personnel situation at the military unit was to a great extent stable, equipment was sufficient, and there were great opportunities to practice and develop their occupational roles. These descriptions preceded the extensive dismantling of the labour force, which came to characterise the Armed Forces for most of the 1990s and 2000s. All interviewees reflected upon the extensive downsizing phase which greatly affected unit cohesion:

Not only did they close many regiments, but they also significantly reduced the numbers of conscripts. At the unit where I used to work at the end of the 1990s, in the last couple of years they shrank the organisation from initially being a whole battalion—roughly a thousand youngsters walking around the barracks—to a small company to be trained to educate. Not only did a lot of people disappear—either they quit or were moved to other units—but the number of recruits was also drastically reduced.

A parallel can be drawn with the previous category which underlines how working and accomplishing tasks together greatly constitutes the core of the military, and how coaching individuals was reflected as one of the perks of the occupation. Such elements were significantly affected by the reduction of the staff in the organisation. As more and more employees left the organisation for various reasons, this affected the sense of community. Looking back at the most extensive periods of organisational downsizing, some of the interviewees viewed themselves as “the lucky ones”, reflecting how they neither had to change workplace nor were considered redundant, as indicated in the following informant’s portrayal:

Back then, I had many colleagues that I went to school together with, and they came from those units. As it turned out, I was the lucky one! I am the one who was not unwanted, but my friends from other regiments had to leave their units. It was a sad period... Many have disappeared along the way.

Nowadays, the organisation finds itself in a different situation, as the SAF is in the middle of an extensive phase of organisational growth which is reflected in high workload. As a result, the support and coaching of new individuals—of great importance when building unit cohesion—is described as a neglected facet. Simultaneously, as the organisation slowly grows in numbers, interviewees experience not only external but also internal pressure from the SAF to meet their challenges, deliver results and ‘rise to the occasion’, which one of the interviewees considers to be impossible:

We need to grow; everyone knows this! It is tough just getting everything in order. And as you look back... at how the SAF, during the 1990s, used to support civilian society – none of it is left today! Nowadays, everyone expects the SAF and police squads to solve every societal problem. Once, we were supposed to be used in war. But all the equipment, personnel... were disposed of.

In sum, the years of downsizing that characterised the organisation for an extended period, have affected unit cohesion in several ways and this citation reflects the fact that many regiments, flotillas and units have been disbanded

throughout the years of downsizing, meaning that a lot of people have left the organisation and many others have moved from their “original” units to new ones.

4.3. Family

After completing officer training, most of the officers worked for a couple of years and at some point became platoon leaders, later continuing in the internal hierarchy. However, examining the officers’ career paths, their feelings about the diminished importance of unit cohesion shows a distinctive pattern. As they grew older, a majority of the interviewees reflected that their partners and family came to be prioritised more highly than their work in the SAF. One of the interviewees described how he, with experience, became more at ease with navigating the many challenges of being an officer and manager, and gradually experienced less stress about the job. Along the way, he realised that there were more things to life than a career in the Armed Forces:

In the beginning, it was all about playing around in the forest and working closely with the soldiers. As you grow older and, perhaps, become lazy, or maybe convenient is the word I’m looking for... You get more comfortable with age! Your interests and priorities change. It is different when you are still nineteen or twenty, but when you turn thirty, pretty much everything changes around you in life.

In his reflections, he regards this as a transition from “being a young adult into becoming a real adult,” a changeover that he viewed as something natural. However, the analysis included other interviewees who experienced difficulties balancing work and private life. One informant described that when he met his future wife, he had made it clear to her that she had to accept that he was also ‘married to work.’ This illustrates that the trade-off between family and work in the Armed Forces, at least for the interviewed officers, does not follow a clear pattern.

The previous category established how organisational downsizing came to affect unit cohesion, and how reflections on downsizing are embedded in some of the officers’ thoughts on family life. Many of the officers’ colleagues decided to leave the SAF when their regiment was closed as they had already settled down and were unable to move. This presents itself as something of a challenge for the organisation, shown in the following description:

For most people, it is hard to come from a place of 300 kilometres away and suddenly build a family with children, without any contacts other than your colleagues at the unit. You have no babysitter and no support unless you have family nearby.

It should be stated that the officers in this study do not in any way consider the choice of building a family a reason for quitting the SAF. One of the interviewees said that, as his children grow older, he could consider going abroad for another international mission as he undoubtedly missed the strong cohesion associated with going abroad on joint assignments. On the other hand, he was relatively convinced that his future career opportunities in the SAF were limited as he had no intentions of moving his family to another city:

No. I have done that analysis myself, and this city is the base for me. If I pursued a career, I would have to move, and I do not see myself or my family moving to Stockholm, which I would be forced to do, one way or another... Of course, I've discussed the topic at home, but still, I am having difficulties seeing my children growing up in Stockholm.

His description outlines how he, together with his family, has already settled down. As a consequence of his regiment's geographical setting, he is not interested in pursuing a career at the Headquarters in Stockholm. However, some of the officers in this study have taken that path, which brings us to the next category.

4.4. Changing character of work

When reflecting on the early stages of their careers, almost all activities were executed together with others in groups. However, as the interviewees described their current work situation within the organisation, very few of the working tasks were characterised by any sense of unity. They described how they collaborated with others in the form of weekly meetings and double-checking information with colleagues. Still, much of the work seems in many ways to be office work carried out independently. One of the interviewees, working as a chief of staff, described his work in the following way:

As the chief of staff, you are the administrative support to the head of the battalion. He sketches the direction and what we want to do, and my function is to lead the staff and see to it that we carry out the tasks in the way he describes. I am also on the Board for the battalion together with the company leaders. There, I present a strategy for the job, what we should prioritise, and how we

want things to be in the workplace – the values, the work, from big to small issues. We must follow government policies to make sure we follow all procedures. As the chief of staff I am responsible for interconnecting all the supporting functions.

At higher managerial levels in the organisation there are many areas for collaboration; according to the informant, however, such meetings are preceded by hours of planning which the individuals mainly do themselves. Concerning unit cohesion, some interviewees described how they are still engaged in the development of military recruits, but many of them stopped doing this some years ago. Although they collaborate with others in different ways, everyday work does not seem to be characterised by the same sense of unit cohesion as was experienced in the beginning phases of their careers. As they work longer in the organisation, many people seem to be getting farther from the training that was conducted during military service.

Another aspect that was identified is how many of the interviewees have spent a lot of time away from their units and families. For some, their career paths have entailed a variety of job descriptions and various functions in different regiments in Sweden. One of the interviewees has worked almost his entire career in one unit. However, for shorter periods, he has been stationed at various organisational units, and has also worked in other countries:

This has always been my home. However, I am one of those who have had to travel during my career. I have been in different schools in different locations in Sweden; I have even worked with officer training. For three and a half years I was abroad teaching at a college. I have also worked at the Headquarters and returned to the regiment last year. It goes without saying but there has also been an international mission. There have also been some international courses. I would say that I am relatively well-travelled, both inside and outside the country.

Based on the interviews, it appears that the career paths and the consequent working tasks do not enjoy the same level of unit cohesion that characterised the beginning of their careers. Not everyone, but many of the interviewees experience that today with their in-depth specialist areas or responsibilities as managers. They get less insight into the soldiers' education, which many consider to be the core of the officer profession. That being said, more or less all of the interviewees still feel great loyalty and commitment to the organisation. Still, it seems as if the significance of unit cohesion has altered along the way for a number of different reasons. Viewing the data in its totality, the character of unit cohesion has altered during the officers' careers in the SAF.

5. Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore the opinions about unit cohesion of experienced Swedish officers. Results show that the way that unit cohesion changes during a military career could be understood from the following four overriding categories: *entering the military*, *downsizing*, *family*, and *the changing character of work*.

5.1. Entering the military

In the result section, unit cohesion is divided into 1) before, 2) during, and 3) after military training. However, the first subcategory is a reflection of previous recruitment and selection strategies applied from the 1970s to the early 1990s, which was based on local and regional recruitment. It is thus unlikely that such a form of cohesion characteristic of ‘before military training’ might be particularly relevant for today’s conscripts regarding the afore-mentioned shift in society. The second subcategory represents the development of unit cohesion during military training, which we identify as the subcategory with the most relevance for today’s armed forces. Group- and task-related activities, contrasted against the continued phase of institutionalisation, present an opportunity for future research in which unit cohesion can be empirically investigated in a contemporary context. When it comes to the third subcategory, we would again like to highlight that the officers’ experiences reflect a different education system, organised differently. Recently, a study focusing on experiences of officer training shows that the process of military institutionalisation does not appear to be reinforced during officer education, but is more noticeably linked to military training.³⁹ Against this background, we argue that the results presented in the first theme—reflecting unit cohesion in terms of before, during, and after military training—are not appropriate when transferred to military training in current educational systems. Instead, it is more meaningful to explore other areas in the officers’ reflections on entering the military. As the organisation continues its extensive phase of force restructuring, more attention needs to be directed towards the military organisations’ socialisation of newcomers, which the officers reflect upon as one of the pillars of the profession.

³⁹ Österberg, Oskarsson, Nilsson 2021.

5.2. Downsizing

The extensive downsizing of the SAF has had major consequences on the organisation. Besides a reduction of personnel and materiel, there are consequences on a group and individual level. As there are huge vacancies at officer levels and many regiments have been shut down, many officers had to move to other geographic locations and to new units. This could mean that the strong bond and unit cohesion those officers once had now needed to be processed once again with new colleagues. This is in line with Salo and Siebold showing that the best predictors of peer cohesion were personal sociability, primary group relationships, and secondary group experiences⁴⁰. Changes in cohesion were associated with changes in company climate, expected group performance, hazing, leadership, social adjustment, and training motivation.

The strained situation of vacancies at higher officer levels could imply faster career advancement for those currently graduating from officer training. This could lead to a situation where officers spend less time at each officer level, meaning that the earlier stages in their career where unit cohesion manifests could be somewhat neglected. Furthermore, downsizing has led to the loss of competent military personnel and a loss of the experience of unit cohesion. Another negative consequence of downsizing could be that of cohesion that is too strong, where those still in the organisation in specific branches could develop an unhealthy cohesion resembling what Pawiński describes as an unhealthy perception of those belonging to other groups⁴¹. There are few openings in specialist positions, which could mean that there are groups that are very tightly knit regarding competence. They might have known each other for a long time, which could mean that there is the risk of groupthink and similar psychological phenomena. The high workload also indicates that the supervision and mentoring of newly graduated officers is neglected, which in turn can lead to a more difficult situation for new employees, hindering them from focusing on important matters from a group development perspective.

⁴⁰ Salo, M.; Siebold, G. L. 2008. Variables impacting peer group cohesion in the Finnish conscript. – *Journal of Political & Military Sociology*, Vol. 36, No. 1, pp. 1–18.

⁴¹ Pawiński 2018.

5.3. Family

In examining the officer career paths and diminishing unit cohesion, family may reveal itself as a more self-assertive and natural influence on the more robust form of unit cohesion present in officers' earlier career stages. With age, many interviewees came to prioritise family. As they settled down, the required mobility for pursuing a career in the armed forces seemed an unattainable goal. One of the officers regarded this as a transition into becoming a 'real adult'. Here, the significance of unit cohesion—carried by values such as task orientation, group activities, community, and comradeship—diminishes as other facets of life assert themselves as more important or meaningful than pursuing a career in the Armed Forces.

On the other hand, the trade-off between work and family in the Armed Forces is interlinked with some other aspects. Firstly, the periods of downsizing and the dismantling of military units required them to relocate to another new workplace where some interviewees characterised themselves as 'survivors'. These officers continued at their 'home unit' while others, sometimes against their will, had no choice but to move to be able to provide for their families. Secondly, the officers reflected upon the balance between employment and family life, where the empirical material depicted several different considerations and attitudes. For some, being 'married to work' was considered natural. For others, the Armed Forces were felt to be a demanding employer requiring loyalty and perhaps some sacrifices along the way, thus potentially leading to strained relationships or a lack of opportunity to pursue them. As the balance between employment and personal life was identified as one of the main reasons for turnover in military organisations over half a century ago⁴², we argue that the challenges of combining work and family life are still an area in need of more empirical investigation. However, to clarify, none of the officers viewed combining work in the Armed Forces with having a family or a partner as impossible; on the other hand, they can all be considered 'survivors' of previous downsizing periods and redundancies. An alternative study focusing on those who decided to leave the organisation during the 1990s and 2000s may reveal more insight into the tensions of combining military employment and family life.

⁴² **Abrahamsson, B.** 1965. Anpassning och avgångsbenägenhet bland militärt befäl. Stockholm: Military Psychological Institute.

5.4. Changing character of work

Experienced officers think that they have become distanced from the core of the military profession. The circumstances that once made them enlist in the military at the beginning of their career are something they distance themselves from the longer they work in the SAF, as is the expected process. Consequently, what could be described as the core of the officer profession is something that respondents are increasingly distanced from. Still, our respondents have chosen to stay in the SAF, suggesting that their mindset perhaps shifted from group to individual working practices. This is as some respondents describe it an inevitable development in a military system. The officer career system in Sweden, and several other countries, is built on the fact that you rise in the ranks during your officer career. This means that if you are OF4 or above you will most certainly end up in a staff position for the remainder of your military career. The respondents state that the character of work has changed from working in a tight-knit platoon to working alone. The characteristics that first attracted the officers and made them embark upon a military career, in accordance with what Ahronson and Cameron state, seem to fade away while rising through the ranks. The structured forms of interaction that the officers reflect upon shows similarity with Siebold's description of Secondary Group Cohesion⁴³. As the platforms for organisational bonding take a more impersonal form and rely on formal relationships, the close relationship between peers (as reflected in the category *entering the military*) decreases and instead alters into a supportive climate, with the main focus on the tasks at hand. Furthermore, a military career demands geographic mobility, meaning that officers need to form new working groups on a regular basis, putting them back to square one when it comes to building unit cohesion. Working in the Headquarters normally means working there between 3–4 years in a certain position, then being relocated elsewhere.

Mir et al. have examined changing employee-organisation relations. According to them “the new age employees” have substantially different expectations from organisations stemming from their own articulateness about their career needs, as well as a mistrust of organisational loyalty in the aftermath of the recent waves of organisational downsizing.⁴⁴

Technological developments in the society in general also affect the armed forces. Artificial intelligence is becoming a reality, and this will inevitably

⁴³ Siebold 2007.

⁴⁴ Mir et al. 2002.

have a significant impact. As Hoffman suggests, the nature and character of war will change⁴⁵.

Future research should address the topic of downsizing in relation to unit cohesion. Furthermore, qualitative research should explore the altering stages of unit cohesion during an officer's military career path. The changing character of work is also a topic for further study as values in society are shifting and the characteristics of work are undergoing ongoing progress. All in all, it seems like the things that initially made individuals apply to the SAF and begin employment fade away the further one rises in the hierarchical system. However, this might also reflect the different needs and conditions among officers following their career.

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⁴⁵ **Hoffman, F.** 2017. Will war's nature change in the seventh military revolution? – *Parameters*, Vol. 47, No. 4, pp. 19–31.