CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

from *Challenging the (Moral) Order:*

Military Service Members as Public Witnesses to War

A Dissertation

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On an overcast Friday afternoon in March of 2008, in the suburbs of Washington, DC, Jon, a former Marine Corps gunner who had served in two combat deployments to Iraq, sat at a long table, alongside eight other military veterans who had served, at various times and in various locations, in Iraq. The row of veterans faced an audience of about four hundred people, including other veterans and their families, antiwar activists, and journalists.

Jon, who was the fifth member to speak to the audience about his experiences in Iraq, did not readily fit the image of a regimented, hardcore Marine [Figure 1.1]. At 22 years of age, he had a soft complexion and expressive eyes. With a shag haircut and scruffy beard, he wore a blue button-down shirt with a t-shirt underneath, as well as a bead necklace, earrings, and several woven bracelets. Partially concealed from the audience were assorted tattoos that covered his arms, including one with the Arabic translation of “fuck you” on his wrist. The one visible connection to the Marines was the row of seven medals, including a Purple Heart, which he wore on his chest.

As Jon began to speak, his voice was soft and slightly quivered. He briefly introduced himself and gave his military credentials as an automatic machine gunner in Kilo Company of the Third Battalion, Eighth Marine Regiment. He then referenced the well-known slogan, “once a Marine, always a Marine,” only to continue with, “there's also the term, eat the apple, F the Corps.” Ripping the medals from his chest, he tossed them to the floor in front of him, and, with a voice that trembled, declared, “I don't work for you no more.” The audience, in response, burst into cheers and gave a standing ovation that lasted for twenty seconds.

Jon would go on to speak for another 17 minutes, providing a candid account of unchecked aggression toward and disregard for the Iraqis that his unit encountered, as well as the admission that he was personally responsible for the unwarranted deaths of two Iraqi men. To help convey his experiences to the audience, Jon showed photographs of mutilated and bloody corpses. He brought digital video clips that showed the detonation of a five hundred pound missile and a sustained barrage of a mosque minaret by mortars and tank rounds – all while US troops could be heard cheering and joking in the background.

He explained to the audience that he was speaking for those who could no longer speak. He stressed that people needed to know about "the hate and destruction" caused by US service members. Only when people knew the reality of what has happened in Iraq, he insisted, would the violence end. With his eyes scanning the audience, he spoke his final words: "I am sorry for the things that I did, I am no longer the monster that I once was." The audience again stood to give him a sustained applause. Jon, however, did not appear to take any pleasure in the positive response. He kept his eyes down toward the floor with a pained expression on his face.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT

This dissertation focuses, in part, on the accounts given by Jon and his fellow panel members as part of a four-day event, entitled *Winter Soldier: Iraq and Afghanistan: Eyewitness Accounts of the Occupations* (WSIA). Organized by members of the nonprofit group, Iraq Veterans Against the War, the event featured the testimonies of fifty veterans of the Army, Marine Corps, and Navy, who spoke about the excessive violence and cruelty that

they participated in and witnessed during their time in the US military. The organizers framed systemic discrimination and abuse within the military as the cause of such violence and cruelty. As participants, the veterans were constituted as public witnesses to the atrocities, testifying not only to the physical and psychological harm done to the Iraqis, but also to themselves. In this way, the veterans were positioned as *victimized perpetrators*, an identity that conflicts with the more conventional characterization of military service members as *heroes*. The salience of the notions of victims and perpetrators for the veterans, on the other hand, can be understood within the broader context of the judicialization of international relations, in which state sovereignty and the conduct of war are constrained by the international laws that define war crimes and crimes against humanity (Hazan 2010). While the right of state sovereignty remains a legitimate justification for war, criminal arguments have gained increasing prominence, both in justifying the reason for war and in judging the actions of militaries within war.[1]

The presentation of testimony by veterans during the WSIA event has particular social significance for two reasons. First, the type of collective public criticism by lower-enlisted service members that occurred during WSIA is indicative of a shift in the forms of military dissent. That is to say, there is a long history of individual (and typically private) resistance and criticism of war and the military as an institution, which has led to the formal

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[1] Thus, for example, the Bush Administration put forward two arguments to justify the invasion of Iraq. On the one hand, the potential for the Iraqi government to maintain and use "weapons of mass destruction" was positioned as a threat to the security of the United States and its allies. On the other hand, they argued that Saddam Hussein was an illegitimate leader of Iraq because he was allegedly guilty of crimes against humanity.

recognition of the conscientious objector;[2] however, acts of collective and public criticism by military service members is a recent phenomenon, first achieving form in the United States during the Vietnam War. Second, the structure and frame of WSIA corresponds with a practice that emerged alongside the judicialization of international relations and has come to gain considerable international authority, which I refer to as *public atrocity witnessing*. The social significance of the practice is also connected to recognition that public testimony or confession can serve as a potent means of personal and social transformation, as seen in the practices of recovery stories during AA meetings and therapeutic sessions for incarcerated individuals (Denzin 1993; Haney 2010).

Conventionally, public atrocity witnessing is intended as a public forum for the victims of violence and abuse that had been sanctioned by a discriminatory system or institution to recount their personal experiences, such as with the testimonies of Holocaust survivors or the public hearings on human rights abuses during the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Not only are those who carried out the violence and abuse – typically members of a military or police force –excluded from presenting testimony, they are labeled as perpetrators, which criminalizes their behavior by recasting the previously sanctioned system that they served as unjust and discriminatory. Given the frame of victim and perpetrator that is provided by public atrocity witnessing, the use of the practice by US military veterans and the subsequent positioning of the testifiers as *victimized perpetrators* are remarkable. Indeed, in the case of WSIA, this positioning has been controversial, as there

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[2] There have, of course, been collective acts of revolt, such as mutinies; however, these actions are typically aimed at the leadership of a particular individual and not the issue of war or the military as an institution.

were promilitary activists who condemned the testifiers as traitors, antiwar activists who questioned the legitimacy of the veterans' status as victims, and testifiers, themselves, who exhibited discomfort with the characterizations of both victim and perpetrator.

LOCATING THE MORAL SITUATION

This dissertation intends to illuminate the social significance of the testimonies presented at WSIA, both in relation to public understandings of the military and war and the broader place of witnessing as a social phenomenon. However, within this frame, I have a more particular interest in how the WSIA event (and public atrocity witnessing more generally) might be characterized as having *moral* significance. This significance has been attributed to the testimonies, which are said to "reveal how the Iraq occupation is…morally wrong" (*IVAW Winter Soldier Description*). In testifying to atrocity, the veterans served as the type of witness that has been described as "a morally justified individual who speaks out against unjust power" (Peters 714). At the same time, advocates of public atrocity witnessing understand that a key aspect of the practice is the opportunity for the other participants to witness the witness. In this way, situations like WSIA offer the opportunity for *moral interactions*, where the audience "partakes of the struggle of the victim with the memories and residues of his or her traumatic past" (Felman and Laub 58). Through the action of witnessing the witness, the audience comes to have a shared experience with the testifier that can serve as the basis for a common moral interpretation of injustice.

To act as a witness is, in essence, to be a spectator. To an ordinary observer, the witness is passive – a nonactor. Nevertheless, there is a form of communication that occurs,

whereby the witness internalizes the scene. According to the advocates of public atrocity witnessing, the witness to the witness does more than just observe; he or she acts through the actions of the testifier. Thus, when I say that the practice of public atrocity witnessing can be defined as a space for moral interactions, these interactions do not take the form of conventional interactions that have been the object of study in social interactionism and conversation analysis (i.e. the observable and verbal exchange of utterance and response). To the contrary, the structure of public atrocity witnessing, by necessity, is highly asymmetrical and performative. In order to facilitate the acts of testifying and witnessing, asymmetric relations place the testifiers on a privileged platform from which to speak and position the other participants as a deferential audience. In order to ensure the constitution of these relations, many of the circumstances of the event are preplanned and structured. Events of public atrocity witnessing are designed to address a specific social issue (e.g. discrimination) by selecting individuals who testify to that issue. While the testifiers speak to their personal experiences, they do so as part of a collective. The testifiers come to the event prepared to recount specific memories. While interactions, in general, have a degree of performativity, the coordination and preparation that preceded WSIA gave the situation a considerable amount of structured performance. The organizers asserted that such control was necessary in order to provide a space for the veterans to speak about private and sensitive issues in a public forum. However, the performativity is also indicative of ritualism within the practice of public atrocity witnessing, which can help to identify how moral meanings are constituted through an event like WSIA.

In examining how WSIA has moral significance, my primary concern with the testimony of Jon and the other veterans is not how they understand themselves as moral individuals or define morally laden notions like hero, enemy, victim and perpetrator. My interest lies in the meanings of their actions (e.g. Jon casting off his medals and offering an apology), as well as the actions (and inactions) of the other participants (e.g. the applause given to Jon for casting off his medals, the silence that was maintained during the testimony), within the particular circumstances of WSIA, and how these actions could be interpreted as moral within the situation. Of course, these actions and inactions that occur during Jon's testimony did not occur in isolation, such that the meanings constituted through the act of testimony should be understood in the broader context of the event, including the frame presented by the organizers, the spatial and temporal relations constituted during the event, and the other testimonies presented. This analysis of the collective testimonies and the circumstances of the event is intended to show how it was possible that the testimonies of the veterans demonstrated the immorality of the US military actions in Iraq (*IVAW Winter Soldier Description*).

One of the central challenges of this project, and the sociological study of morality more broadly, lies in the ultimately valuative character of morality. That is to say, morality is a construct for providing order and meaning to experience, and as such, is essentially an interpretative act. At the same time that morality is a nonmaterial thing, it is not purely an abstract construct: it is fundamentally tied to our experience of the world and moral meanings are manifest through our interactions with others. In social interaction, actors may attempt to achieve agreement on the appropriate interpretation of experience or impose a particular

interpretation on an experience. In this way, shared practices and normative forms of behavior can serve to reinforce a particular moral meaning. Nevertheless, those moral meanings, as the actors understand them, are tied to particular situations. That is to say, we "know" morality through the particularity of our experiences. Thus, my intention with this dissertation is to explore the situated and active constitution of moral meanings.

Approaching the study of morality through a situationalist perspective (Goffman 1974; Collins 2008) provides space for the contradiction, ambiguity, and partiality in moral meanings, which are more difficult to accommodate when defining morality through abstracted norms and values. When I initially envisioned this research project, I had taken the latter approach, attempting to identify the role of "citizen soldier," a label that a number of the veterans have adopted, as the problematic union of two "moral systems" – that of the soldier and that of the citizen. However, as I began to conduct my research, I found that such a categorization necessarily led to the distortion of the complexity inherent to the veterans' moral understanding. As a result, I have turned to the pragmatic theory of the creativity of action (Joas 1996) and developed a new empirical approach to explore what it means to study morality within a particular situation. While WSIA is a highly structured event, and therefore is distinct from what we might consider to be everyday interactions, its structured and performative characteristics also allow for a rich case study in the ways in which actors attempt to impose moral meaning within situations. In this way, I am able to examine how it is that circumstances and actions within WSIA ordered the participants' experiences in order to promote a particular moral interpretation of the world. In doing so, my project is

ultimately concerned with understanding *how moral meanings can be derived through the asymmetrical, performative interactions that occurred during the event of WSIA*.

Therefore, in addition to an interest in how US military service members engage in public criticisms of the military and war today through the practice of public atrocity witnessing, I use this dissertation as a means to develop and test a methodological approach designed to capture both the appearance of stable structures and practices and the dynamic constitution of moral meaning within specific situations. Such an approach, as I have developed it, requires a detailed study at multiple levels of analysis. Because the study requires attention to the situatedness of meaning, I have focused on a specific event – the national WSIA gathering. In addition, as I construct my approach to the situatedness of moral meanings, which are contingent, particular, and partial, in contrast to the abstract and post hoc moral explanations that are acquired through interviews, I compare the moral meanings constituted during WSIA with the moral meanings that emerged during interviews that I conducted with a subset of the WSIA testifiers. This comparison helps to highlight how the particularity of circumstances can affect moral meanings.

By focusing on one WSIA event and a series of interviews with a subset of testifiers, I recognize that there are limits to generalizing the findings. The project is not intended to explain why military veterans do or do not engage in this type of public criticism or to present a definitive account of morality. Instead, my aim is to explore how we might engage in an empirical study of the constitution of moral meanings within specific situations. With this type of close reading, it is possible to reveal the richness and complexity of moral meanings that arise within WSIA and the interviews, as well as the dependence of those

meanings on the situational context. Furthermore, I demonstrate how moral meanings within WSIA and the interviews are often partial, ambiguous, and, at times, contradictory, but that these limitations do not necessarily weaken the significance of the moral meanings within a situation.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

I begin, in Chapter Two, with an explanation of the theoretical and methodological basis for the project. I situate my approach, which I characterize as pragmatic and situational, in the broader historical context of sociological theories of morality. My intention is not to set my project in opposition to other, more conventional approaches to morality, which I loosely categorize into *normativist* and *constructivist*, but to develop a theoretical and methodological approach that reformulates them within the context of a theory of the creativity of action. While the project is designed to identify the moral meanings that emerge within WSIA and the interviews, I also establish a definition for terms such as morality, moral meaning, and valuation in order to make clear the assumptions that underlie my own interpretation of WSIA and the interviews. Morality, in this context, is understood as a means of giving order and meaning to experience, which is constituted within and through our experiences of the world and others. The chapter also details the data and methods used in the study. I relied primarily on ethnographic methods, including participant observation and semi-structured interviews, to collect my data. I conclude with an explanation of how I used a multilevel analysis of WSIA and the interviews in order to illuminate how various actors employed frames and structures to impose particular moral meanings, and, through the

detailed analysis of transcripts, how contingent meanings were constituted through linguistic and nonlinguistic expressions.

With Chapter Three, I take a macro-level perspective in order to situate the occurrence of WSIA within a cultural, legal, military, political, and historical context. There are a number of factors that play into the appearance of military veterans as public atrocity witnesses, and this chapter lays out the central causes. In addition to the judicialization of international relations, we find a broader popularization of public testimony as a means for individuals to liberate themselves from a traumatic past and for others to recognize and understand that experience. The ability for veterans, who had voluntarily enlisted in the military, to act as witnesses to atrocities committed by that same military is dependent upon a perspective that gives validity to the hermeneutics of suspicion and authenticity, which holds that individuals have a self distinct from their social roles, which can liberate itself from manipulative and exploitative social institutions through self-realization. In addition, the legitimation of post-traumatic stress disorder as an institutionally recognized illness allows for the notion that service members may suffer as much as civilians from the experience of combat and that actions that might conventionally be understood as bad behavior result from illness and not personal depravity. I position these cultural phenomena in relation to military and political developments, including transformations in the structure and function of the US military and the judicialization of international relations that occurred following World War II. Finally, I look at how the cultural, legal, military and political contexts come together in the emergence of a practice of public atrocity witnessing, which has been characterized among practitioners and advocates as a means for "constructing a shared moral memory for

mankind" (Margalit 80). The chapter concludes with an overview of the history of dissent among US military service members and the adaptation of the practice of public atrocity witnessing that began during the Vietnam War and is the basis for the events that constitute WSIA.

The Chapters Four through Six, I present the findings from a multi-level analysis of the organizers' actions, the veterans' testimonies, and the responses of the other participants that occurred during the national event of WSIA. Each chapter takes a different perspective on the event, moving from a meta-level analysis of the way in which the organizers and others attempt to impose frameworks for interpreting the testimonies presented by the veterans in Chapter Four, to a meso-level analysis of the ways in which the constitution of meaning was shaped by the spatial and temporal relations among the participants and within the content of the testimonies in Chapter Five, and finally to a micro-level analysis of the participants' expressions during WSIA in Chapter Six.

More specifically, in Chapter Four, I examine the discursive frames the participants employed in order to organize their experiences and influence how others interpreted the situation. Since WSIA was a highly structured and asymmetrical event, the organizers had a good deal of control over such framing of the situation. Thus, the chapter gives considerable attention to the mechanisms the organizers employed, including the use of semantic macrostructures (such as event titles and themes), moderators' panel summaries, and screening instruments (such as a testifier questionnaire). These semantic macrostructures framed the veterans as eyewitnesses who provided factual and reliable accounts that would show the US military produced systemic discrimination and dehumanization of Iraqis and

Afghans that led to acts of brutality and unwarranted violence by US military service members. In this way, the organizers' discursive frame positioned the testimonies as moral examples of the human capacity for violence under conditions that have been promoted within the US military. In addition the veterans were established as moral authorities who could speak to this process. While the organizers were able to limit to a considerable degree the types of discursive frames allowed within WSIA, there were alternative frames put forward for interpreting the testimonies. I consider two of the primary sources for alternative frames: "pro-war" groups and the news media. The frame of the pro-war groups, which was largely manifest through internet communications, positioned the testimonies as subjective stories that created a highly biased portrayal of the military and thereby unfairly slandered the honorable work of service members. The frames presented by the news media, by contrast, opted to interpret the veterans' testimonies either as part of a partisan antiwar movement or examples of the private (and apolitical) efforts of veterans to cope with the anguish of war.

In assuming a "meso-level" perspective in Chapter Five, I explore how moral meanings are constituted through the manifestation of spatial and temporal relations during WSIA. Attention to the ways in which physical relations contribute to the structure and framing of situations allows us to move beyond a discursive analysis to examine how actors might *experience* morality, which I define through its function of giving order and meaning to experience. As with the discursive frame, the organizers of WSIA had a great deal of control over the spatial and temporal relations of WSIA. As a result, the physical structure of the situation supported the positioning of the veterans as witnesses who ought to be given

deference by the other participants. Thus, the veterans were isolated from the other participants and given a privileged position to speak, while the other participants were situated as members of an anonymous, (largely) voiceless audience. At the same time, a tension was produced between the situation's simultaneous constitution as a "sacred space" for veterans to come to terms with their personal past and as a "public space" that was meant to foster open deliberation. Indeed, the tension between public and private is an essential part of public atrocity witnessing, particularly as it results from the public presentation of personal trauma, and the discomfort that many of the veterans experienced in exposing personal anguish allowed for the audience to *experience* the veterans' trauma and thereby serve as witnesses to the witness. Temporal relations were also significant in establishing order and meaning, particularly since WSIA was an "memory" event, where veterans spoke about their past experiences. The veterans sought to make the past "real" for the participants in the present, and one effective means for achieving that realism was through the use of photographs and videos, which have the effect of producing the "illogical conjunction between the *here-now* and the *there-then*" (Barthes 1977: 44 emphasis in original). However, the veterans' past association with the military, which was identified as the institution that caused the atrocities in Iraq, also meant that they needed to distance themselves from that association in order to speak as atrocity witnesses. The spatial and temporal relations of WSIA were was crucial to the establishment of group boundaries in moral identities, such as victims, perpetrators, and victimized perpetrators.

Chapter Six examines the collectivity of linguistic and nonlinguistic expressions that occurred during WSIA to identify the articulation of moral meanings. Through this

examination, I show how there was an absence of explicit articulations of rules or principles. Instead, meaning was conveyed through implication, and was often partial, ambiguous, and (at times) contradictory. The testifiers presented rules and principles as generally inadequate as a means for guiding action or explaining the experience of war. By contrast, we find that the testifiers sought to explain their experiences by identifying a common humanity – that is to say, to posit that their experiences and their reactions to war were a natural result of the human response to manipulation by a discriminatory system that forced them to dominate another population. One means of expressing this shared humanity was through the use of the *doubly deictic* second person pronoun, whereby the veterans' personal experience was generalized to an ambiguous *you* that blurred the separation between the world of the veterans' past and the world of the testimonial present. By constituting moral meanings within the rich and dynamic context of past experiences, the veterans asserted an authority through their position as *authentic witnesses* to war, while also transforming their past reality into *your* (i.e. the listener's) reality. Another means for communicating a common humanity was through the presentation of physical, emotional and psychological pain as an example of the experiential truth of human suffering. The idea of presenting testimony of past atrocity in order for the witness to share their suffering with others is a basic premise behind the practice of public atrocity witnessing. In order to interpret pain as suffering, one must understand the cause of the pain as fundamentally unjust. In examining the role of emotion and pain in the veterans' testimonies, I show how they situate the source of that pain within a discriminatory and unjust system. I then consider how the asymmetry of participants' relations and the

audience's nonlinguistic actions and deferential "nonactions" supported the positioning of veterans' pain as examples of suffering.

In Chapter Seven, I turn to the interviews that I conducted with a group of the veterans who testified during WSIA in Chapter Seven. My aim in this chapter is to examine the extent to which situational context is important to the constitution of moral meanings, while also testing a basic premise of my theoretical and methodological framework for this project, which holds that conventional empirical sociological studies of morality that rely primarily on surveys and interviews produce the articulation of abstract norms and values and thereby tend to obscure the far more particular, contingent, and implicit character of moral meanings that is evident in situational analyses. In the chapter, I apply the same multilevel analysis that I used to examine WSIA in order to demonstrate how the interviews relied on many of the socio-structural factors as WSIA, yet led to the constitutions of distinct moral meanings. The content of the two situations was highly correlated since they both focused on the veterans' experiences with war and the military and took place relatively close in time. In addition, the practice both of the interview process of public atrocity witnessing give primacy to subjective experience and situate the individual as a moral authority; however, whereas the moral authority for one who testifies in public atrocity witnessing is located in their capacity to serve as a *witness*; it is located, for one who is interviewed, in their capacity to narrate a *self*. The frame that I provided through my introduction and interview questions asked for an account from the veterans that would demonstrate an authentic self that was defined through the accumulation of experiential knowledge. In establishing an internal self that was capable of moral valuation, the veterans' accounts were

notably dispassionate and abstract, particularly when compared to the highly particular and emotional testimonies during WSIA.

In the final chapter, Chapter Eight, I reflect on how my examination of the discursive frames, spatial and temporal relations, and linguistic and nonlinguistic expressions that were manifest during WSIA and the interviews provides for a sound account of the ways in which moral meanings are constituted through situations. In empirical research, the interview method is understood as a tool that can be used to measure a phenomenon in the social world that is external to the activity of the interview itself. Even as researchers recognize the ways in which the interviewer and environment can affect an interview, the responses are still typically treated as accurate representations of the interviewee's moral worldview. Through a situational analysis of the interviews that I conducted with the veterans reveals the way in which the interviewee is constituted as a self and the effect of these conditions on the constitution of moral meanings. The positioning of the veterans as *selves* during the interviews is contrasted with their constitution as *witnesses* during WSIA. In addition, the situational analyses of WSIA and the interviews illuminates three central aspects of the constitution of moral meanings, which I look at in turn. First, moral meanings are partial and implied, and the actors within the situation are more concerned with the relation of the moral meanings to the situation than the justification of the valuation. Second, when there is an articulation of abstracted norms and values, it occurs as a means of imposing a particular interpretation within a given situation, and therefore the full meaning of those abstracted norms and values is dependent on the context of that articulation. Third, even though moral meanings are dependent upon frames and practices that reference preestablished practices

and discourses, they are constituted through the active and situated enactment of those practices and discourses. It is in this way that we might say that we *experience* morality, even though it is not an object that we encounter but an interpretation of experience. We ultimately know morality through our situated experiences. As a result, any study of morality that does not take context into account will fail to capture the richness of morality in social life. From a consideration of how the findings inform my theoretical and methodological approach, I turn then to explore the broader social implications of WISA, including the importance of asymmetry and performativity for the constitution of moral meanings and the social significance of WSIA. I conclude with some thoughts on how comparative studies of various other situations might further enhance our understanding of the social significance of witnessing and deepen the theoretical and methodological approach to the empirical study of morality that has been presented here.

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