Summary
PhD thesis Elin Gustavsen

This thesis investigates the lived experience of contemporary warfare. The main empirical data consists of 29 thematic interviews conducted with Norwegian veterans of the operation in Afghanistan and 8 narrative interviews with female spouses of veterans. The aim of the project has been to (1) better understand how veterans and spouses interpret their experiences with military deployments, and (2) to explore how the personal meaning assigned to armed service is shaped and channeled by the sociocultural context of Norwegian society. To investigate the sociocultural context in which the interviewees construct meaning from their experiences, the thesis has also made use of document analysis.

The analysis draws on theoretical perspectives from cultural sociology, lived experience and meaning-making as a cultural practice. The cultural theory of Ann Swidler’s has been utilized to probe into the connectivity between lived experience and available meaning-making resources. Her concepts of “settled” and “unsettled” contexts are used in particular to examine the accessibility of culturally established resources for how to interpret the experience of warfare. The overall argument developed through this research is that unsettled experiences - like the experience of war in the case of Norway - are not accompanied by established cultural scripts for how to interpret their particular meaning. The thesis discusses mechanisms that contributes to construct wartime service into an unsettled experience in Norway, most importantly how changing civil-military relations have reshaped the links between the armed forces and civilian society. The thesis consists of an introduction that sets the scene and elaborates on theoretical and methodological perspectives, followed by four articles that comprise the main body of the research.

Article I “The construction of meaning among Norwegian Afghanistan veterans” published in International Sociology (1/2016) presents an overview of the dominant forms of meaning-making identified among the interviewed veterans. Three interpretive frameworks are presented, conceptualized as a military, societal, and personal framework of meaning. The article draws explicitly on the work of Edna Lomsky-Feder on Israeli veterans to compare and highlight the findings. It further utilizes Swidler’s notion of “settled” and “unsettled” to
contextualize the interpretive strategies with regards to the lack of a shared war experience that characterizes Norwegian society.

Article II “The privatized meaning of wartime deployments: Examining the narratives of Norwegian military spouses” accepted for publication in Ethos (forthcoming) uses a narrative design to analyze eight interviews conducted with female spouses of Afghanistan veterans. The analysis presents two main strategies used by the women to make sense of deployments, conceptualized as “normalization” and “agency”. The article demonstrates how the spouses interpreted the deployment in a highly normalized fashion, while also being careful to state their ownership and equality in the situation. Continuing in the footsteps of article I, this second article elaborates on the argument made about contemporary warfare as an unsettled experience in Norwegian society.

Article III “Soldiers without a war. Official and private framings of Norway’s engagement in Afghanistan” under review (r&r) in Acta Sociologica situates the veterans’ personal meaning-making in relation to the official framing of the Afghanistan engagement in the Norwegian public sphere. The analysis focuses on how the veterans both framed the deployment in highly job-related terms - as conceptualized in article I as a military framework of interpretation - at the same time as there was widespread resentment among the veterans towards the rhetoric used by the political leadership, in particular their refusal to call the operation a “war”. To discuss the mismatch between the public and private framing, the article draws on the theoretical argument developed in articles I and II, arguing that the veterans' insistence on the importance of using the term “war” can be viewed as an attempt to restore a sense of connection between their personal effort and society at large.

Article IV “Civil-military entanglements in Norwegian society: From everyday life to ceremonies and entertainment” under revision to be included as a book chapter in Civil-military entanglements (ed. Birgitte R. Sørensen and Eyal Ben-Ari) provides a broader background for understanding the sociocultural context examined in this thesis. It describes how the relationship between the military institution and Norwegian society has evolved since the end of the Cold War until today, and how the new role of the military as an expeditionary force has given rise to new cultural practices, both implemented by formal authorities and emerging in the fields of cultural production. The article discusses how the armed forces have become more removed from most people’s regular lives, at the same time as the military institution itself has become more transparent and open.