

# AMBIGUITY TOLERANCE AND THE CONCEPT OF „INNERE FÜHRUNG“

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## 1. Introduction

Some time ago, a serviceman told me a story from his tour in Afghanistan: He was manning the vehicle's machine gun, and keeping an eye on things behind him. The patrol had to slow down because they were passing a village. Suddenly a little boy ran up to the vehicle, holding something round and grey and raised his hand. The soldier's comrades were yelling: "Open fire! What are you waiting for?" The soldier did not shoot. Later, the soldier realized that the little Afghan boy only wanted to offer him an orange – it was gray from the dust which is everywhere. Later on, the serviceman at the machine gun could not explain why he did not shoot. He said that it was possible that he suddenly started thinking of his own two little daughters back home.

In the situation described here, the soldier made the correct decision. We do not know how a German serviceman would have reacted to such an intense situation. Would his comrades have even had to have shouted 'Shoot'? Perhaps, the soldier at the machine gun would have opened fire before the others would even have seen the boy.

This example illustrates that in war, soldiers must be able to evaluate dangers correctly and react accordingly. They know that their decisions can affect their own lives as well as the lives of their fellow soldiers. They can even affect the overall success of a mission.

It is a very important responsibility that the German Armed Forces (*Bundeswehr*) have assigned to its mostly young men and women in uniform. To act appropriately, they must identify with their military mission on all levels. It is imperative that they learn complicated details about tribal structures, power politics, and relationship networks (Chiari 2009; Seiffert *et al.* 2012).

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<sup>1</sup> The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author only and do not necessarily reflect those of the Federal Department of Defense.

And within these networks of antagonisms, the soldiers must act – or even kill other people, if necessary.

The crux of my thesis is that, to act appropriately, they need – so I would argue – to develop ambiguity tolerance. Ambiguity tolerance is not a classical expression from military literature or out of the German Field Manual 10/1 “*Innere Führung*”<sup>2</sup> (German Department of Defense 2008), but a psychological term which has been in use since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This term is experiencing a certain boom not only in psychology, but also in economics in conjunction with leadership dilemmas. Therefore, I would like to explain first how the concept of ambiguity tolerance emerged and what it means. Secondly, I will present the evidence which indicates that ambiguity tolerance of servicemen and women should be enhanced by the military. Thirdly, I will analyze the relationship between the concepts of *Innere Führung* and ambiguity tolerance. Finally, recommendations will be developed for the education and training of soldiers.

## 2. Ambiguity Tolerance – What is it?

At the end of the 1940s, Theodor W. Adorno and some of his colleagues studied the authoritarian character in the U.S. with the aim of finding out if authoritarian individuals show peculiar personality patterns (Adorno *et al.* 1950). The hypothesis they posited was that the anti-democratic human is not a particular German phenomenon that was indoctrinated by Nazi propaganda, but rather can be found the world over.

Else Frenkel-Brunswik, a psychologist and psychoanalyst, participated in these studies. She discovered that some of the test persons thought only in simple, black-and-white terms and were not able to recognize the coexistence of positive and negative features within the same object. From these observations, Frenkel-Brunswik developed the psychological concept of ambiguity tolerance in 1949. She defined it as the capability of an individual to realize ambiguities and contradictions, and also name them. She also found that personalities who were intolerant of ambiguities could not stand contradictions. They constructed a dualistic structure of reality in order to draw clear-cut black-and-white distinctions. Therefore, people who are ambiguity intolerant dramatize and illustrate their experiences in a quite simple fashion. They perceive contradictions as threatening. Ambiguity intolerant people feel psychologically and physically uncomfortable with those contradictions. For

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<sup>2</sup> “*Innere Führung*” is officially translated as „Leadership Development and Civic Education”.

this reason, their minds are closed to ambiguous aspects of reality, they reject new ventures aggressively, and they seek to oversimplify complex, insoluble situations (Frenkel-Brunswik 1950).

On the other hand, people with high ambiguity tolerance are able to adapt to new, unstructured situations which are hard to control. They allow discrepancies from their expectations, are not averse to surprises and reactions by others and do not judge them to be a threat. Instead, they accept those uncertainties as challenges. Ambiguity tolerant people cannot solve contradictions better than others – if that were the case, ambiguity tolerance would not be needed. But individuals with the ability to understand complex realities and the ambiguity of their feelings are better able to keep control in emotional and cognitively demanding situations. Therefore, they are more capable of acting than others.

Psychologists differentiate between five dimensions of ambiguity tolerance: (1) the image of the parents, (2) the handling of social conflicts, (3) role stereotypes, (4) new experiences, new contexts and foreign cultures, and (5) unresolved problems, ambivalent information and opposing expectations.

Ambiguity tolerance may be trained. One can learn to understand ambiguities, and how not to avoid them. They can be seized as an opportunity to progress individually. If soldiers are disposed towards a high degree of ambiguity tolerance, they might be able to act even if the situation is very chaotic. Soldiers need to enhance this ability to remain open to new experiences, even if these experiences may be terrifying and make them feel fundamentally insecure.

Ambiguity intolerance may lead to confusion and grave problems, in particular when encountering foreign cultures, e.g. military operations overseas. There, servicemen and women must often deal with complex, contradictory, uncertain, and unstructured situations. And although soldiers are often interested in foreign cultures, those cultures often remain strange.

It is therefore necessary to train ambiguity tolerance. A soldier's ability to analyze his own perceptions and experiences in the face of extraordinary, conflicting challenges of the chosen profession should also be strengthened. This enables soldiers to perceive the existence of a double standard in conflicts, to be aware of stereotypes regarding the social roles, and to accept new experiences and unresolved problems as organizational tasks. Servicemen and women must recognize, name, and intellectually wrestle with contradictions in order to remain capable of acting and reacting appropriately while on duty.

One may argue that German soldiers seem to be disposed towards a high degree of ambiguity tolerance because they fulfil their duties abroad although

they know the dangers. Additionally, they feel demoralized by discussions about their inadequate equipment and lack of social recognition at home. It appears, however, that most of them have fulfilled their difficult duties quite well due to the fact that there have been no military scandals abroad. But this is not ambiguity tolerance in a proper sense. Most of the time, discussions of warfare, soldiers killed in action, and social recognition do not revolve around complex contradictions, but around explicit clarifications. Therefore, I would like to also name some indicators which necessitate the promotion of ambiguity tolerance within the German Armed Forces.

### **3. Indicators that Illustrate the Necessity to Promote Ambiguity Tolerance Within the Bundeswehr**

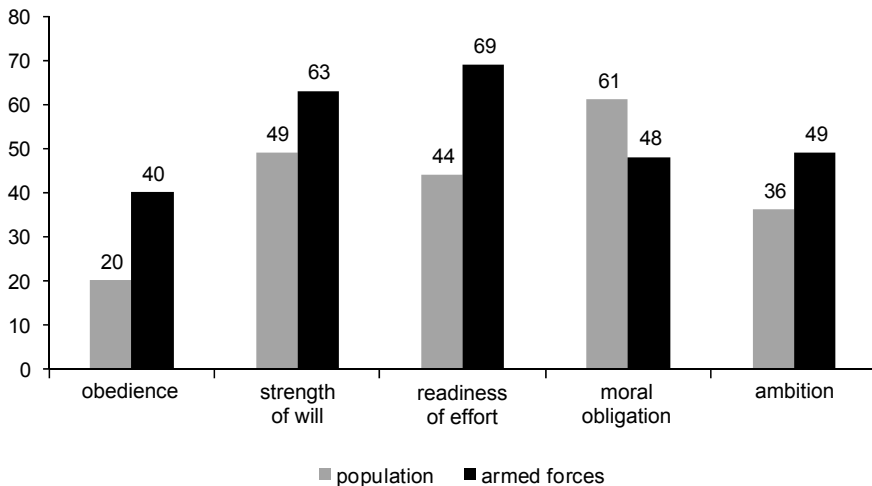
Soldiers are recognized by the uniforms. Uniformity is at the heart of a military organization. Orders, common rituals, a special military language, and – last, but not least – uniforms result in externally undifferentiated individuals. These also promote the development of an analogous mindset of servicemen and women. The strength of a military organization lies in its fulfilment of tasks by virtue of mental homogeneity – at the same time, this is also its weakness. An obligation to uniformity enforces not only the external homogeneity of soldiers, but too often also an internal homogeneity. Such internal uniformity could be prevented by ambiguity tolerance. The *Bundeswehr* Institute of Social Sciences (SOWI) has collected data which provide empirical evidence on this. They show that servicemen and women are more fixated on authority and feel pressured towards conformity than those who have been educated in ambiguity tolerance.

#### **3.1. The Soldier's Fixation on Authorities**

Order and obedience are the foundation of every military organization. In regards to obedience, there is a huge difference between the 'citizen in uniform' and the civil population in Germany:

If you ask "How important for you personally are the following characteristics?", soldiers name obedience as "very important" twice as often as civilians. Data on this item was last collected six years ago. But there are no indicators suggesting that these attitudes have changed since. When the perception of obedience between young soldiers and young civilians up to

**Figure 1.** Question: “How important for you personally are the following characteristics?” (in percentages).



Source: *Bevölkerungs- und Streitkräfteumfrage 2004.*

the age of 25 are compared, the same tendency is evident. One could argue that military socialization is the basis for these answers. But obedience can also reduce ambiguity, that is as long as obedience is not dictated by one’s conscience, as suggested by Field Manual 10/1 “*Innere Führung*”. (Dörfler-Dierken 2005: 120–130) Obedience towards the authority of military regulations is illustrated by the story of Private First Class (PFC) Schneider which is often used in group discussions of servicemen and women.

“PFC Schneider is mounting guard at a depot of the *Bundeswehr* where arms are stored. He is carrying a loaded gun as required. At night he observes a person leaving the depot towards its fence with some objects under his arm. Schneider calls three times ‘Stop. Stand still.’ The unknown person begins to climb over the fence. Schneider fires a warning shot in the air. As the other still does not react, Schneider targets the legs and opens fire. The person falls down, shot in his hip and lies on the ground. It turned out that the unknown person was PFC Conrad who wanted to steal objects from the depot.” (Hegner et al. 1983: 77)

In 1983, this story was used for the first time in an inquiry for a SOWI survey. The ability to form an independent ethical judgement is measured by the degree of consent with the reasons which justified PFC Schneider discharging his firearm.

**Figure 2.** Question: “41. In your mind which of the following arguments best justifies the condemnation of the behavior of Schneider?”

		<i>This argument justifies the condemnation of the behavior of Schneider</i>				
	You can argue that ...	<i>a lot</i>	<i>quite well</i>	<i>good</i>	<i>less well</i>	<i>not at all</i>
1	... he should not have fired because now he has to anticipate that he will be beaten by his comrades.	0	0	1	4	24
2	... he would had fewer problems if he would not have shot.	2	2	2	1	22
3	... it would have been more comradely not to shoot.	0	0	1	8	20
4	... in any case, he acted against the unwritten law not to shoot a comrade.	0	1	0	5	23
5	... his targeted shot corresponded to the rules of engagement while on guard but he nevertheless should have asked himself if the shooting would be justified in this particular case.	5	1	7	10	6
6	... in any case it would be wrong to endanger the life of a human even if this means an important order of the German army would have been disregarded.	1	1	2	11	14

I have led a discussion about PFC Schneider’s dilemma with my students at the Armed Forces University in Hamburg. All young officers but one justified the reaction of the PRC on guard although everybody already knew the end of the story – that the soldier shot a comrade.

**Figure 3.** Question: “42. Please tell us what you think about the situation?”

	<i>more right</i>	<i>more wrong</i>
In your mind: Was the behavior of Schneider more right or more wrong? Please try to decide on one option!	28	1

Obviously, the military students justified Schneider because he had acted according to his orders. The result of the discussion seems to indicate that in general, servicemen and women are inclined towards solving unclear situations by supposedly acting decisively and in conformity with orders. In reality, those situations are quite rare. Often, a ‘framing’ is necessary to

determine how to bring regulations and contradicting ‘real’ experiences into harmony (Neitzel/Welzer 2011: 16–82).

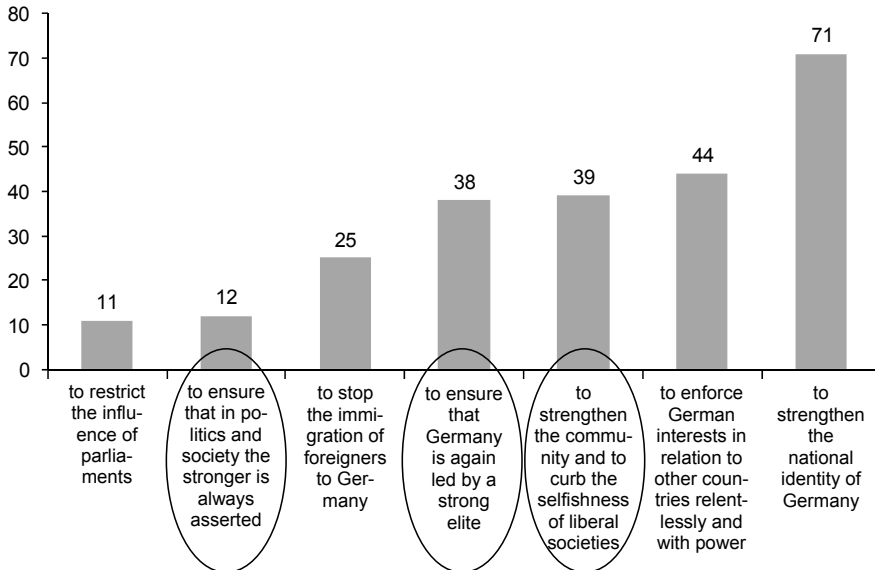
Soldiers are inclined to use forceful means to solve ambiguous, contradicting and unclear situations out of service as well, i.e. in other circumstances. What they have learned for their professional role will also be reflected in their private lives. Servicemen and women tend to solve conflicts by force in public as well as in private, vis-à-vis their comrades. Survey results for American and Canadian armed forces can be summarized as follows: “Violence in families of soldiers maybe supported by a culture of machismo, a hierarchical-authoritarian character of the military as an institution, by the principle of order and obedience, the training in the use of force, the social and geographical isolation because of frequent relocations and operations abroad which disturb the balance of a family system every time, and the potentially life-threatening job of the soldier, all these stresses may play a role in support of violence at home.” (Klein/Kümmel 2002; Näser-Lather 2011) Acts of violence seem to occur less frequently among German than American servicemen and women. But here, too, there is a danger of military methods being transferred to civil contexts when solving conflicts.

Among soldiers, there are more indicators of an inclination to reduce ambiguity by relying on authorities. See figure 4.

A high percentage of young German officers believes that in society “the stronger should always prevail”, that Germany should be “led by a strong elite”, that the migration of foreign nationals should be stopped, that community should take precedence over individuality, and that the power of parliaments should be restricted. I think that the emphasis on self-denial is also very important – besides the fixation on force, prevalence, and elite (see Bulmahn 2007: 117–132).

I interpret the concurrence with each of the following items as an example of intolerance of ambiguity: young officers are against pluralism, against the simultaneousness of brightness and darkness, against democracy, and instead, they strive for a clear-cut distinction between black and white, up and down, in and out. In the discussion of these figures, it should be emphasized that among student officers, concurrence with these items is lower than among youngsters and young German adults of the age between 15 and 32. If we compare young male high-school students with these officers, who at one time were also high-school students, the concurrence level of the latter is even lower. This is a real problem because all these officers should exercise the state monopoly of force on behalf of the government and parliament and therefore identify themselves in an important way with decision-making in a democracy which is – admittedly – polyphonic but capable of transforming conflicts.

**Figure 4.** Concurrence with political goals. Question: “In politics one can pursue very different goals.



Which of the following goals do you concur with, which do you reject? (in percentages)

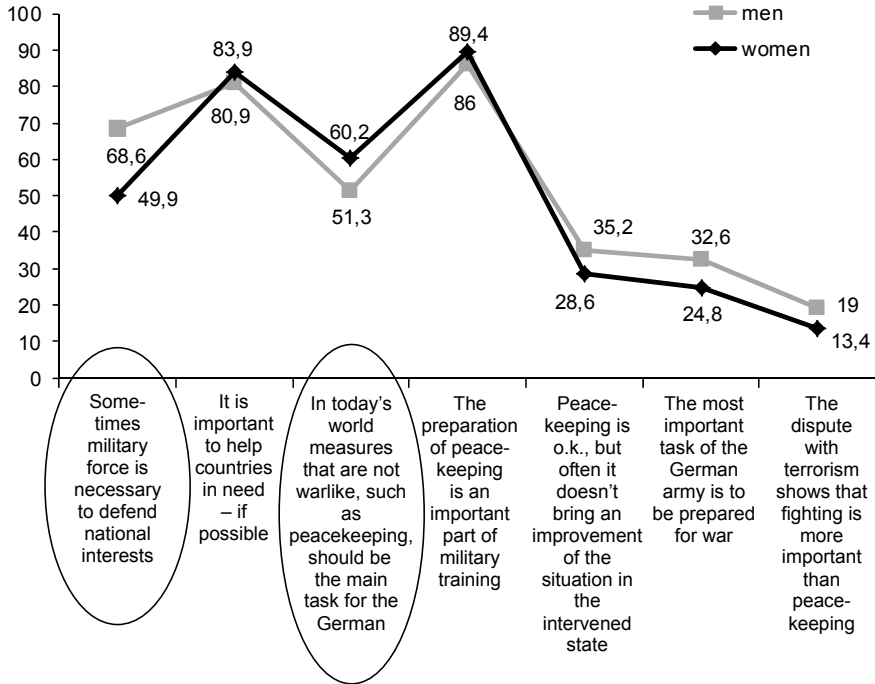
Source: Bulmahn: *Studentenbefragung 2010*.

### 3.2. Pressure to conform within the armed forces

A second indicator of the often quite low ambiguity tolerance of German servicemen and women that I have collected evidence for is connected to the pressure towards conformity. Military life is based on conformity. Everybody looks the same and does the same. So everybody is annoyed by somebody who looks differently and who thinks differently as compared to the soldiers as a whole. Most young people want to live in fellowship within the *Bundeswehr*. Therefore they are inclined to integrate themselves into the military group to the point of self-denial, and perhaps, tolerate even humiliating experiences. The largest dissenting group within the German armed forces are women who actually still comprise less than 10 percent of all service-personnel, and only 6.9 percent of all officers. There is a great deal of distrust towards women which can be observed among the male service-personnel. Obviously, women are a source of irritation for the *Bundeswehr* – not only because of their sex. Women also bring new ideas to the military organization: They agree less often to the item that “sometimes military force is necessary to protect national interests” than their male comrades, and they more often see “peacekeeping as a central task for the *Bundeswehr*”.



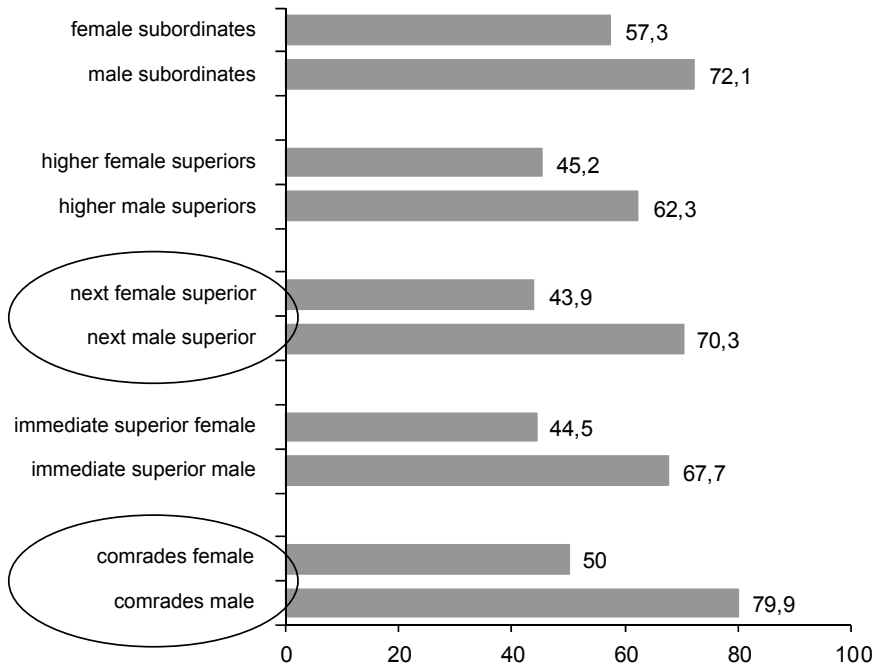
**Figure 5.** The military’s mission: whether to defend, help, rescue, keep peace, or engage in violence and fighting (in percentages)



Source: Kümmel: Truppenbild mit Dame 2008.

As servicemen see professional soldiers to a large extent as being a typical male profession, women are not accepted as superiors or as comrades as much as might be desired.

One can suppose that a pre-modern gender orientation of soldiers becomes particularly developed when they are mentally preparing for war. Servicemen believe that servicewomen are only suited for deescalating operations. Men often act against the letter and spirit of the code of gender equivalence: Many female soldiers have stated that they have experienced sexism as members of the armed forces (Kümmel 2008: 76–83). This is of special significance because of the soldier’s basic obligation to be obedient. The change of the job profile by admitting women seems to touch a sensitive nerve, perhaps even the self-perception of being a man in general.

**Figure 6.** Confidence of male soldiers in female soldiers (in percentages)

Source: Kümmel: Truppenbild mit Dame 2008.

Now it should be asked whether the concept of *Innere Führung* which determines the self-image of the servicemen and women and the organizational culture of the military as a whole strengthens or weakens ambiguity tolerance.

#### 4. Does 'Innere Führung' Promote Ambiguity Tolerance?

This question must be answered by the two new Field Manuals "*Innere Führung: Self-Image and Leadership Culture of the Bundeswehr*" (FM 10/1), and "Living Responsibly – Assuming Responsibility for Others" (FM 10/4). Neither manual mentions 'ambiguity tolerance'. Nevertheless one can observe that both regulation manuals seem to promote this ability rather than dampen it. Looking through these manuals for authority fixation and conformity pressure, one finds that neither handbook promotes them but rather explicitly rejects these two characteristics. Thus FM 10/1 "*Innere Führung*" puts 'task' in front of 'order' (point 316) and also avoids listing 'order' as a keyword in the index (only 'authority to issue orders' is mentioned), but it names the keyword 'task' eleven times: "Point 612. Leadership must

permit room for action, participation, and for joint responsibility. Therefore, superiors must use the overriding principle of ‘leading by mission’. In doing so, they may have to accept solutions by somebody else if necessary. If possible, superiors shall share important decisions with the soldiers concerned. This enhances motivation and is therefore an important factor in professional satisfaction and for operational readiness.”

The keyword ‘obedience’ and ‘obligation to obedience’ respectively is only mentioned three times according to the index of this handbook. In each case, it concerns the limits of military authority. Thus, the professional image of the soldier that this manual promotes is to be rather critical of authorities.

A disposition towards authoritarian social or political orientations cannot be found in this manual either. What it emphasizes is the importance of democracy, discussion and even pluralism (point 301, 312f.). The reference to justice illustrates disapproval of the law of the jungle. The pluralism of Germany’s society is not only accepted as a reality of life, but is something that should be promoted in the *Bundeswehr* (point 314). Instead of showing an elite orientation, the manual praises participation and advice. The international integration of Germany rather than national identity is favored.

FM 10/4 is based on the same principles. It does not contain ‘order’ or ‘obedience’ in the index, but presupposes a soldier who possesses a fully developed power of moral judgement and who knows and follows the “moral foundations of a behaviour based on ethics” (German Department of Defense 2009). Such educated servicemen and women follow the values of the German Constitution and are “self-determined”. The FM 10/4 states very clearly: “Point 107. From the soldiers’ point of view, the *Lebenskundlicher Unterricht* (ethical education) contributes to the affirmation of common values within a liberal-democratic society in light of cultural and social diversity. Thereby soldiers are enabled to deal with the convictions, ideologies, and cultures – their own and those of others – through debate as well as open a dialogue and develop cultural awareness.”

These two manuals seek to encourage the willingness of servicemen and women to take responsibility for themselves and for other people, and to bind them to the value system of the German Constitution: The dignity of all men, liberty, peace, justice, equality, solidarity, and democracy.

A look at one of the last reports of the *Wehrbeauftragter* (Parliamentary Commissioner for the Armed Forces) shows, however, that problems with the implementation of these Field Manuals still remain, especially with those who are in authority and conformity-oriented community, i. e. the military leaders. They lack, – as quoted by the last Parliamentary Commissioner – “more and more a ‘moral coordinate system’”. “Many of them (superiors

on all levels) already lack respect for the rights and the personalities of their subordinates.” (Report for 2009, published 2010: 24)

## 5. Recommendations

In classes on the *Innere Führung*, problems should be perceived and explained possibly in a broad and multi-dimensional manner. The tendency to solve problems in an oversimplified way should be reduced. A broad spectrum of options becomes available through intense discussions and especially by watching one's dark side which ultimately enhances the certitude to act in an appropriate manner. This ensures that soldiers will not only be educated in pre-modern military traditions, but also in the values of democratic societies: individuality, personal responsibility, pluralism, and compromise.

In order to perceive the contradictions, ambivalences, and ambiguities of the external reality one must perceive the ‘different souls in one's chest’. The Hamburg psychologist Friedemann Schulz von Thun (2004) describes the sense of self-perception and self-explanation as a conversation between the ‘inner team’. He believes that in every human being there are different ‘spokesmen’ working for different interests, feelings, and thoughts. Schulz von Thun suggests imagining these ‘spokesmen’ as a team in which each ‘player’ has a voice of its own. Each player in this ‘inner team’ is allowed to voice his own views. In this way, subliminal conflicts surface which hamper the personality. Identifying spokesmen for different interests, hearing the single voices, and allowing a dialogue between those single voices and their reconciliation, is part of the development of the ‘inner team’. Thus a reflective person can develop his own integrated statements. (Schulz von Thun 2004: 155) A person can become the leader of his ‘inner team’ and be capable of acting authentically if he accepts and arranges his inner contradictions. Schulz von Thun states that in the case of professional role conflicts, especially when those roles are changing, it is important to obtain strength from the different and perhaps even contradicting perspectives. He believes that there are typical professional positions of the ‘inner team’ and that there are specific professional dilemmas. Of course, Schulz von Thun does not believe that these dilemmas will always be solved by the persons concerned. He claims instead that his method of developing such a personality will allow an individual to resolve reflectively specific professional dilemmas, and that it will enhance professionalism. For soldiers, the manuals mentioned above would be one of the inner voices which advise the observance of normative requirements.

An education which is problem-oriented and self-reflexive could help soldiers to realize the irreversibility of the use of force and to deal with the challenges emanating from the responsibility of killing people.<sup>3</sup>

Courses on the *Innere Führung* on the basis of FM 10/1 or FM 10/4 are primarily proactive. They should foster the formation of the soldiers' conscience because in a conflict situation everybody stands "in front of his conscience" (Baudissin 1959) – as the 'spiritual father' of the *Innere Führung*, Wolf Graf von Baudissin, put it in his unmatched expression – and nobody else, and no order can release him from his conscience. Only a person who has learned to recognize ambiguities and to endure them – and who has made a decision after measuring all the options and their consequences in the best possible way – can live with his conscience. Therefore, seminars on the *Innere Führung* should train a sensibility towards oneself, and the ability to recognize obstacles – with the goal of enhancing the ambiguity tolerance of soldiers in this way. Such courses can help one to cope with the ambiguity inherent in reality in which servicemen and women must act. Learning to accept ambiguities does not mean that doing nothing is best. Rather the recognition of the ambiguity of the soldier's profession is a realisation of what servicemen and women must do to themselves if they use force against somebody else.

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<sup>3</sup> With regard to policemen it has been well documented what effect the use of guns has on the shooter. Approximately 40 percent of them are able to digest the event with family and friends. Another 40 percent develop a post-shooting trauma, a special case of the post-traumatic stress disorder, which can be cured by professional help. The last 20 percent of the policemen who have made use of their gun and killed somebody develop a permanent post-shooting trauma. This can also be a so called the "Siegfried syndrome": they provoke further shootings to experience if they are really invulnerable. These 20 percent are the cause of real danger for themselves as well as for others.

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