Infrapolitics and role abeyance: How Irish military officers experience university

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Abstract
Starting in 1969, the Irish Defence Forces began to send its officers to attend civilian university in University College Galway as part of their professional formation, through the University Service Administrative Complement (USAC) scheme. Using a conceptual framework that combines role theory with James C. Scott’s concept of ‘infrapolitics’, this paper interrogates how or whether full time, commissioned officers negotiate role tensions while attending civilian higher education as part of their professional military formation. Role theory would suggest that those who are expected to maintain two roles simultaneously, i.e. as student and military officer, would be expected to experience ‘role strain’. This paper illustrates instead that student officers deploy a variety of infrapolitical tactics and strategies, thus creating an alternative route to negotiating role tensions and anxiety.

Keywords
Socialisation, infrapolitics, role theory, military education, higher education

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This paper comes out of a study of the socialisation of Irish military officers and examines how full time, commissioned officers manage their identities while attending civilian higher education as part of their professional military formation. In Ireland, the training and professional formation of Permanent Defence Forces (PDF) officers takes place primarily in a highly structured and hierarchical environment, namely the Cadet School in the Curragh, Co. Kildare. Following their training and commissioning, officers are posted to their units and begin their professional military careers, in Ireland or abroad. Since 1969, however, the Irish Defence Forces has sent army officers to attend civilian university in University College Galway, through the University Service Administrative Complement (USAC) scheme. This experience, whereby commissioned officers attend a civilian university to gain an undergraduate degree at the beginning of their career, is unique to the Irish military.

The question for this paper is 'how do officers reconcile the competing demands of being a full-time student in civilian higher education with the requirements of their military role?' While there are strict expectations attending the military role in the form of the institutional requirements of military discipline, this paper found that from the 1990s onwards, officers attending university started to resist these. A general approach to putting the military role 'into abeyance' is considered through the discussion of wearing the military uniform on campus, living in military accommodation, and officers disclosing their military identity to their civilian peers.

Role theory, the conceptual literature with which this paper starts its analysis, would suggest that those who are expected to maintain two roles simultaneously, i.e. as university student and military officer, would be expected to experience 'role strain' or 'role conflict', with competing demands leading to an inability to adequately perform the requirements of either or both roles. In contrast to expectations from this literature, however, interviewees did not experience enduring estrangement from the military role during or following civilian higher education. By analysing these officers’ experiences through James C. Scott’s concept of ‘infra-politics’, as well as other insights from Goffman and Hochschild, this paper shows how officers attending university create an alternative to ‘role conflict’ in negotiating their role tensions and anxiety.

This has policy implications for the Irish Defence Forces, and is also significant theoretically given that while functionalist role theory was a useful framework in the past, it has appeared to fall out of favour in recent years. This paper illustrates a fruitful way whereby role theory can be combined with another theoretical perspective, leading to fresh insights which also overcome the limitations of purely structural-functionalist analysis. It also confirms theoretical claims made about the changing place of ‘role’ in sociological research over recent decades.

**Conceptual approaches to roles**

The theatrical metaphor of social life has a long history, with the *theatrum mundi* long antedating Shakespeare’s ‘all the world’s a stage’ (Curtius, 1990: 142). It has
entered the conceptual canon, along with the corresponding view of the individual playing a ‘role’, which is ‘generally defined as behavior appropriate for some situations but not for others’ (Sennett, 1992: 28–44). Randall Collins notes George Herbert Mead’s work as the origin of different sociological approaches to role, with one stream becoming the symbolic interactionist analysis, as found in Goffman’s social-life-as-theatre approach (1990), and another more functionalist stream becoming role theory. This latter attempted to develop a ‘determinative set of explanatory laws’, and it cut its scope to ‘the fairly narrow question of how the self is embedded in social roles’ (Collins, 1994: 262, 266). Hans Joas echoes this genealogy, identifying in functionalist approaches to role (as in Talcott Parsons) an ‘integrative function for the social system’, with an emphasis on stability and coherence; the contrasting symbolic interactionist approaches such as Goffman’s emphasised the opposite through concepts like ‘role distance’ (1993: 219, 222). Turner also offers a symbolic interactionist instance of role, whereby the positive integration of role and person for functionalist is regarded instead as a ‘failure of role compartmentalisation’ (1978: 1).

Contemporary social theory often emphasises change and fragmentation, however, rather than the apparent stasis of identity that role theory would appear to suggest. For instance, Bonner summarises Margaret Archer’s work on the decreasing relevance of habitus in empirical research to say that she effectively argues that ‘stable positions’ speak more to society up to the end of the twentieth century than to society in the last twenty-five years or so, the concept of role has significant currency in sociological discourse, as can be seen from the vast majority of introductory textbooks. (Archer, 2010; Bonner, 2016: 204)

Bonner implies that the declining relevance of the concept of ‘role’ in sociological theory in recent years maps on to a waning of habitus. Here, the question arises of how role theory is still an appropriate conceptual stance to adopt.

In response, a third perspective on role is possible, namely Hans Joas’s stance that integrates philosophical pragmatism with socialisation research.

In the 1980s the debates on role theory were on the wane. […] Generally speaking, one can claim that the decrease of interest in role theory was not due to falsifications of its assumptions but, to the contrary, because these assumptions have increasingly become a matter of course in the body of sociological knowledge. (Joas, 1993: 225)

This third, pragmatic position suggests that role theory ‘should be regarded as a metatheoretical scheme for the conceptual structuring of an area of study within the social sciences […] its job is to provide a conceptual framework for the formulation of fields of empirical research’ (Joas, 1993). This paper accepts Joas’s view that role as a useful way of structuring empirical research, neither privileging integration nor deviance, but also referring to and building on some of the critiques made of various approaches. Adopting Joas’s pragmatist stance allows for
accepting a provisional stability of the military role as it is accepted by or agreed upon by officers. In this sense, military socialisation results in an officer role which is something of a throwback to the ‘stable positions’ in society in times gone past and on which role theory built its conceptual foundations, exemplified by rank titles and hierarchy, uniforms, military places, and so on. But role theory can also be useful in identifying cause for conflict or tension with respect to these officers’ roles, and it is so used here. Crucially, the pragmatist stance does not require acceptance of the functionalist view that integration or resolution of conflict necessarily follows. This is not a theoretical paper, and so there is no scope for a detailed consideration of the critiques role theory, but nevertheless considering some of the arguments against role theory is useful for illustrating how it can be fruitfully supplemented.

One criticism of role theory is that it ‘loses the dynamic side of the individual’ and provides ‘only a partial theory of the self’ (Collins, 1994: 266). Other more detailed critiques expand on this, while also pointing to other significant issues with role theory (Jackson, 1998a: 53, 1998b; Lynch, 2007). Jackson’s overviews of role theory’s limitations sets out many points, of which two specifically are of relevance, namely that it fails to account for human agency, and that it has a segmented and static view of human activity and ‘resistive efforts’. As such, a valid role theoretical analysis needs some way to account for agency specifically in terms of resistance, how individuals can effect change in their role set, as well as the static view of social phenomena. Role theory on its own cannot integrate creative responses to role strain, nor wider social changes. Incidentally, the symbolic-interactionist approach to role is of no help here either, as Sennet makes similar critical observations of Goffman’s work, suggesting his interest in a ‘static, historyless society of scenes’ means he has ‘no ear for, indeed no interest in, the forces of disorder, disruption, and change which might intervene in these arrangements’ (1992: 36).

The concept of ‘infrapolitics’, can supplement these limitations, however. Michel De Certeau writes that ‘there is no truth except in whispers and among peasants’ (1984: 16), and this could serve as an evocation of the work of political anthropologist James C. Scott. Scott’s fundamental insight is that though society is made up of relations of domination – power exercised by the few over many – there is always resistance to these attempts at control. The implication of Scott’s vision is that the ‘subordinate groups’ he studies practice what he calls infrapolitics, ‘a politics that “dare not speak its name,” a diagonal politics, a careful and evasive politics that avoid[s] dangerous risks’ (Scott, 2012: 113). It is a subaltern politics (Marche, 2012), or even micro-politics. While Scott’s work originally considered such power relations in an agrarian setting in South East Asia, he subsequently expanded this analysis to modern and urban settings. Other scholars have built on this framework to apply infrapolitics to topics as diverse as the gendered aspects of the Italian entertainment industry (Martinez Tagliavia, 2018), a study of an Aboriginal-owned heritage tourism company (Darby, 2008), the working conditions of casino cocktail waitresses in the U.S. (De Volo, 2003), the place of humour
and jokes as infrapolitics in Nigeria (Obadare, 2009), scatological tropes on China’s internet (Yang et al., 2015), urban gardening as a form of resistance (Baudry, 2012), protest tactics in contemporary Russia (Fröhlich and Jacobsson, 2019).

In a situation where there is power being exercised over and above a given group, here we find what Scott terms ‘the official transcript’, the voice of authority, of institutions, of hierarchy. There is, however, a subterranean counter-current, ‘the hidden transcript’ (Scott, 1985: 286). A methodological implication of this is in Scott’s observations on the nature of the ‘voice under domination’, and the ways that the subordinated group can find ways to insert their voice into the official transcript, through ‘undeclared ideological guerrilla war’ of ‘rumor, gossip, disguises, linguistic tricks, metaphors, euphemisms, folktales, ritual gestures, anonymity’ (Scott, 1990: 136–137). For our purposes, the primary observation he makes is the use of myriad resources to remain anonymous in exercising this infrapolitics of resistance:

The logic of disguise followed by infrapolitics extends to its organization as well as to its substance. Again, the form of organization is as much a product of political necessity as of political choice. Because open political activity is all but precluded, resistance is confined to the informal networks of kin, neighbors, friends, and community rather than formal organisation. [...] The informal assemblages of market, neighbors, family, and community thus provide both a structure and a cover for resistance. Since resistance is conducted in small groups [...] it is well adapted to thwart surveillance. There are no leaders to round up, no membership lists to investigate, no manifestos to denounce, no public activities to draw attention. (1990: 200)

Role theory provides us with a way of understanding the different elements in officers’ identities; infrapolitics suggests the tactics at these officers’ disposal in negotiating role tensions, but there is still space to consider why such a negotiation takes place. While not a central element of the following analysis, Hochschild (1979) developed the concept of emotional labour to describe jobs where those performing roles must manage their own emotions so as to elicit desired outcomes in those they are interacting with. More generally than the specific instance of emotional labour is ‘emotion work’, or what is now more widely referred to as ‘emotion management’ (Lively and Weed, 2014). In this management of emotions, of the affective self, has overlaps with role theory, Goffman, and Scott become apparent. The ‘thin crust of display’ in a performed role (Hochschild, 1983: 21) and the possibility of an ‘estrangement between self and feeling and between self and display’ (p. 131) has parallels with the strain between person and role. A review paper on emotion management notes that it is what individuals engage with ‘in order to comply with emotion norms, that is, emotions they should feel or express in specific situations’. In a situation where some role tension is perceived, infrapolitics might explain a given individual does, but emotion management may give some insight into why they do it.
Outline of a role theoretical analysis

Role theory seeks to formalize the analysis of how an individual interacts with society through a specific expression of their person. A role is an element within the individual’s set of identities specifically in terms of the acquisition of ‘structural status roles’, like occupational, family, and recreational roles that are attached to position, office, or status in particular organizational settings’ (Turner, 1990: 87–88). Implied here is a distinction between the person and their roles, or a specific role. Role theory can thereby consider the individual or person as ‘all the roles in an individual’s repertoire’ (Turner, 1978: 2), understood as a role set (Merton, 1957: 110).

The existence of multiple roles for the individual or role set leads to the possibility of tension between discrete roles and their expectations, and consequently, the question of which role in the role set has priority over others. Callero (1985) terms this ‘role-identity salience’, the idea that some roles are more important to a person (‘identity’) than others. So, an occupational role, such as an individual’s officer role, might be more important to them as a person than their family roles as a sister or a daughter. An individual’s role tensions are understood in terms of ‘role strain’, whereby an individual faces ‘a wide, distracting, and sometimes conflicting array of role obligations. If he [sic] conforms fully or adequately in one direction, fulfilment will be difficult in another’ (Goode, 1960: 485). This has also been called ‘role overload’ (Biddle, 1979: 7) and ‘role ambiguity’ (Rizzo et al., 1970), which captures aspects of the difficulties that exist in dealing with such competing demands in the role set, and testifies to the centrality of this situation within role theory.

‘Role conflict’ is the situation when an individual has two (or more) roles that do not align in terms of the expectations for the two social positions, in this paper that of the ‘officer’ and that of the ‘student’ (Biddle, 1979: 197). Different approaches to ‘role conflict’ have been developed in order to conceptualise this strain (e.g. Getzels and Guba, 1954; Gullahorn and Gullahorn, 1963; Ivey and Robin, 1966; van de Vliert, 1981; see also Biddle, 1979: 195–201 for an overview of these and others). Of these, the Gullahorns’ approach to defining role conflict is emblematic of functional role theory’s limitations in this regard. They see role conflict as where (i) a decision is required of an individual whose professional role is such that they must decide; (ii) between two or more alternatives, each of which will fulfil legitimate expectations of others in terms of their role; and (iii) no available decision open to that individual will satisfy all these expectations in conflict. One military example are NCOs in the military as ‘men in the middle’ who ‘may anticipate recurrent conflicts among legitimate expectations’ (pp.39–40), namely between enlisted and commissioned personnel.

In terms of how role conflicts are to be resolved, Gullahorn and Gullahorn propose that a role conflict can be resolved by either: making a decision about which role to prioritise, delaying the decision, or rejecting the responsibility for a decision. A situation not meeting these narrow conditions are labelled a
‘pseudo-role conflict’ (p. 43), whereby an individual is not actually required to make a decision, one or both of the demands made are ‘illegitimate’ (although this is not properly defined), and a creative solution is possible. The use of ‘pseudo’ here is a product of how narrowly ‘role conflict’ is defined, however, and underplays how such a conflict might be experienced. That is, it privileges structure above the agency of the individual in a given situation. Nevertheless, the concept of the role is a useful ‘as a vehicle for discussing the socialization and adjustment of the individual’ and is used accordingly here (Biddle, 1979: 7). Biddle, in a later article on developments in role theory, notes other related terms which have emerged since earlier versions of role conflict:

- **role ambiguity** (a condition in which expectations are incomplete or insufficient to guide behavior),
- **role malintegration** (when roles do not fit well together),
- **role discontinuity** (when the person must perform a sequence of malintegrated roles), and
- **role overload** (when the person is faced with too many expectations). (Biddle, 1986: 83)

These are, however, an expansion of the typology of role strains, rather than making a significant development in terms of analysing the responses to role strain, nor the implications of those responses.

**Playing the military role**

The training of Irish military officers follows a model common to essentially all modern states. To become an officer of the Irish Army, Navy or Air Corps, qualified candidates apply to the annual open competition for entry to the cadets. In the Cadet School at the Irish Defence Forces Training Centre in the Curragh, Co. Kildare, all cadets undertake military training to bring these future officers up to the standard of an infantry platoon commander.

In this proto-typical ‘total institution’ (Goffman, 1961: 5), army officers are trained and inducted into their military role over 15 months. Entry to the Defence Forces available both for those who are school leavers and those possessing a university degree, but for the former attendance at university is compulsory. So once officers have received their commission as officers in the Irish Defence Forces, they spend time in their military units, and after this they apply attend university. Officers who were school leavers apply to study a subject of their choice at civilian university, usually in University College Galway. It is more usual for those undergoing military training to receive a military degree as part of their training, prior to commissioning, and only later in their careers to attend a civilian university, e.g. postgraduate level qualifications (as is also the case in Ireland, with the MA in Leadership Management and Defence Studies which is the Command and Staff qualification necessary for progression from mid to senior rank). In this, the Irish Defence Forces are unique internationally in sending their commissioned officers to civilian university for undergraduate education.
The choice of conceptual framework is as important in this context as any other, but given that the specific nature of military training and socialisation is to develop the civilian into the role of the military officer, a theory that allows for treating this role as relatively firmly agreed upon is useful. Becoming an officer is a form of secondary socialisation where the individual is socialised to the role of the military officer (and even more specifically to that of Army, Navy or Air Corps officer – or more precisely again, as cavalry, artillery, deck officers or pilot etc.). Role theory is useful to understand the experience of PDF officers attending higher education, as it considers how one significant element of their role set can be expressed or experienced in different settings (see the outline of this approach summarised in Biddle, 1979; Biddle and Thomas, 1966). It has been used previously to research military contexts (Bidwell, 1961; Gambardella, 2008; Stanford, 1968), and provides a framework to understand the initial process by which the professional roles of Defence Forces officers are formed and how this is experienced – and perhaps challenged – in other settings.

Understanding this ‘integrative’ function of military socialisation is necessary, but it is also important to understand any instances of resistance to such. Here infrapolitics is especially relevant, because overt political organisation in the form of union strikes is not available to military officers in the Irish Defence Forces (though there are non-union ‘representative organisations’). The military is a prime candidate for the exercise of infrapolitics, also by virtue of the rank structure and hierarchy, which means that there is scope for power to be exercised by those lower in rank against those further up the hierarchy. In this sense, the exercise of infrapolitics also has a political aspect, but remains generally in the realm of small-p politics, and even micropolitics. Similar observations have been made previously of militaries, however, through the concept of a ‘negotiated order’ (Bury, 2017; Hockey, 1986; Strauss, 1978). What Scott allows us to see, however, is that even those within the structure of ‘domination’ in his words still have agency, and if they disagree with how this power over them is wielded, they will seek ways to evade this. Role tension or conflict or ambiguity alone does not allow for this as it takes conflict as structural, rather than accounting for the ways in which the individual inhabitant of a role asserts their agency actively, as a subject rather than simply ‘subject to’ authority. As such Scott’s infrapolitics introduces active agency in a context of power differentials, making for a more creative inhabitant of a role, who exercises creative responses to the construction of their identity in given situations.

**Researching in the military context**

This paper came out of an exploratory case study of the socialisation of military officers within the Irish Permanent Defence Forces since the 1960s. Through a combination of archival documentary research and a literature review, a schedule for semi-structured interviews was developed. It was important to secure representation across branch, employment status, higher education and USAC experience,
rank, and gender. The sample for the interviews consisted of 46 interviews with serving and retired officers of the Permanent Defence Forces, with 19 retired and 27 serving officers. Branch representation was: 5 Air Corps, 35 Army, and 6 Navy. Ranks went from cadet to general-rank or equivalent, and included two female officers, one retired and one serving, which is representative of the current percentage of females in the PDF, 6.3% across all ranks. In terms of higher education, seven participants were commissioned prior to USAC, with the remaining 39 commissioned post-USAC. Twenty-two had participated in the USAC scheme, with 24 not having done so. Only three of the entire sample, however, had no higher education experience whatsoever; all others either were currently studying, had studied in USAC, or attended university later during their career or post-retirement.

Two approaches were necessary for securing access to interviewees. Two gatekeepers were able to put me in contact with retired PDF personnel, while for approaching serving officers, an awareness of specific characteristics of the Defence Forces as an organisation was necessary. My approach reflected the fact that ‘in an institution based on rigid hierarchical principles, authorisation from a higher echelon was nothing less than a pre-requisite to my activity of conducting interviews’ (Castro, 2017: 88). So I went through official channels, approaching the Chief of Staff (CoS) via letter, taking on board Goldstein’s (2002: 671) observations that for securing access drawing on my institution’s legitimacy; Castro (2017: 91) makes a similar observation with respect to researching the military in Brazil. The Chief of Staff was amenable to my undertaking this research, and all requests were facilitated through other personnel.

In terms of my own positionality, it is worth addressing my own connection to the Defence Forces, as my family has a connection here, and I myself had been in the Army Reserves. As such I was ‘studying the familiar’ (Berger, 2015: 223). Caddick (2018) in exploring the question of reflexivity suggests that military researchers ‘implicitly or explicitly locate themselves and their work somewhere on a continuum of support-for/opposition-to the military’, which he terms the cheerleader, the critic, and the diplomat. These effectively are the wholly positive (or uncritical) cheerleader, the wholly negative critic, and the mediating or pragmatic diplomat between these two extremes. Familiarity bred neither unquestioning approval as in the form of the ‘cheerleader’, nor did it inspire the opposite; notably, the same can be said of interviewees too. In some cases when they were aware of my background, I was positioned as something approaching an ‘insider’, with the attendant advantages this brought (Berger, 2015: 223–224); otherwise, I was generally perceived, to my mind, more or less neutrally, and occasionally referred to as a ‘civvy’, but one with an awareness of their world. All the serving personnel I interviewed knew I was there with the full knowledge of the military hierarchy, but crucially this did not prevent them from being forthright in their opinions, and critiquing or criticising the Defence Forces as an organisation.
The military role in civilian university

The first expectation was that interviewees discussing being military officers in a civilian higher education setting would describe role strain between their military role and their role as university students. There would be competing demands made of officers attending university: they would have to do well in their academic studies, interact with other (civilian) students, and also be subject to military discipline. As a structural corollary of the role set, this would lead to role overload or strain. The initial interviews immediately confirmed that this was the case, and that student officers experienced role overload while at university.

The second expectation was that, following on from this situation of role strain resulting from different environments and competing expectations, that role conflict would result. This was found with an interviewee from the early years of USAC who described student protests taking place during the 1970s. Student cadets were in a difficult position, as one interviewee suggested military students were part of ‘the establishment’ in the wider political context of Ireland in the early 1970s:

Long hair, Vietnam War, protests were a big, big part of student life at the time. Also symbols of authority were targeted, that was the culture of the time and there we were with our short hair and our uniforms. We fitted that bill. Although we never had any great problems.

However, when student protests arose, they ‘had to be careful on this one’:

We didn’t overtly support them or in any way support them. We’d never join a protest or anything else like that. I think what we used to do is we used to go to college with our uniform, and if there was a student strike, not attending lectures - well there were lectures we didn’t attend anyway for any number of reasons! So we’d go to the coffee shop. You know that sort of thing or go to the canteen, in our uniform. We were absent from the lecture rather than protesting. Subtle point but that’s the way it was dealt with.

By going for a coffee when other, civilian students were involved in protests, officers could use the ambiguity of a situation to their advantage. Rather than play the fully military role, or demonstrating an outright rejection of the political stance that the student movement would suggest was held by the majority of their peers, they took themselves ‘off the stage’. They did not involve themselves in the performance of protest, maintaining their military role-identity salience, but also some kind of academic role-identity salience. They struck a role bargain with the wider civilian world.

This was not the whole story, however, and it became clear that a tension existed for those officers attending university, between military discipline on the one hand, and the lived experience of being a student in university over a period of
months and years. As such, a role bargain like the above could work in certain situations, but it was an ad hoc reaction to an event, rather than an ongoing strategy or response. This was contrary to the literature on role conflict as a response to a specific event of incommensurate role demands. In response, interviewees described an alternative posture of ongoing infrapolitical behaviour with respect to their situation. While the literature would dismiss these as examples of ‘pseudo role conflicts’ (Gullahorn and Gullahorn, 1963: 43), this does not bring us any closer to understanding this situation in a role theoretical framework, and so an alternative concept is necessary.

Role abeyance is the concept that will be used to explain how interviewees described in effect putting their military role ‘on hold’ for the duration of their studies. Abeyance is a legal term, which suggests a contract not in effect, but which will be reactivated given certain circumstances. The parallels with the careers and roles of military officers will be presented in the following discussion. Role abeyance testifies to an overall strategy by military officers, which is clearly exemplified in three infrapolitical tactics: not wearing the military uniform on campus, not living in military accommodation or ‘living out’, and non-disclosure of military role in the higher education setting. The first question of the uniform will be dealt with at some length, followed by a briefer overview of ‘living out’ and non-disclosure of military role.

‘We’re still supposed to wear it’: Uniform experiences

Military uniform is a central element of military identity and the performance of the military role; the uniform and haircut are primary elements of role assumption upon entering any military organisation. Wearing of the uniform is a requirement of military discipline, and this applies also to those officers attending university – officers are obliged to be in uniform when attending lectures and tutorials, with exceptions only granted for those attending laboratory classes or conducting fieldwork. Some had positive feelings about this, exemplifying positive role-identity salience and the benefit of being part of the group: ‘I’d have felt strange going in in civilians. Because everyone would say “where is your uniform?”’ Another explained this in terms of duty and an implicit contract in representing the Defence Forces:

> You know, I felt it was kind of my duty to wear the uniform and to let people see that you know, ‘we’re here’ […] it’s part of the deal, that you’re visibly a Defence Forces officer. You’re not just taking the benefits of this program quietly.

Indeed, it was this sense of rules and the literal obligation to wear the uniform that is the most common context in which the wearing of uniform in the USAC scheme was discussed. This led many interviewees from earlier decades describing how army officers in their green uniforms were a ‘known entity’ on campus from the earliest years of USAC in the 1970s.
A change became apparent with mention of a more active approach by military authorities to maintaining military discipline in later years of the USAC scheme. This response to officers not wearing the uniform and organisational anxieties was described by one interviewee who attended university in Galway in the 1990s: ‘something the authorities in USAC used to struggle with as well periodically there would be reminders and letters and complaints [from military authorities] and so on of student officers not wearing the uniforms’.

Interviewees’ responses (see Table 1 below) showed ambivalence towards military discipline and obligations, further exemplifying a changing emphasis within officers’ role set, and a further degree of role strain setting in. When asked about wearing the uniform, while a large number said they did wear it (N = 10), a significant minority (N = 7) openly admitted not wearing the uniform. This did not include those who had permission not to wear the uniform, nor did it include those who did not explicitly state that they did not wear it. The difference by decade of commissioning is striking. One interviewee commissioned in the 1990s was definitive:

No. People will tell you. Nobody did. Nobody goes. You might go the first day or the odd day here or there. [...] And to be honest anybody who tells you they wore the uniform to college is just blatantly lying to you. They are.

Reasons included not being able to mix with civilian peers due to the requirements of military discipline: ‘it’s a hindrance, you know. If you’re finished college you can’t go for a pint on the way home in uniform’. Another pointed to developments in mobile phone technology and social media (though this would only be of relevance since the mid-2000s and the advent of such websites or apps). This was couched in terms of preserving the reputation of the Defence Forces:

like maybe back in the day, or back in the ‘70s or ‘80s, you know that was practical like y’know, going out to college in uniform and whatever like. But today, with phone social media, the whole lot like, we all sit together at lunch. Like if there’s a group of uniforms sitting at a table like, you know, it’s going to draw attention. There’s going to be Snapchats and Instagrams taken of it… which is just, just not good news for anybody like. So I think it’s impractical, but like we’re still supposed to wear it.

In terms of how not wearing the uniform was achieved, two participants discussed their experiences of leaving their military accommodation: ‘if needs be we walked out in uniform, changed in college, but we didn’t even tend to do that that much’. More elaborate arts of resistance (Scott, 1990) or strategies for avoiding detection were also mentioned:

So if you left before the [military] staff got in you could leave in civilians. What a lot of guys would do is to have a gym bag, and they’d leave in their uniform and change
in the car, or you know, that kind of thing. So there’s a lot of that going on. Or climbing out windows. Mad stuff. But that’s just, it’s just the way it is.

Staff here refers to military personnel with the responsibility for military discipline and general oversight of the USAC building and the military students resident there. Three interviewees referred to the fact that military authorities were in fact aware, at least on some level, of their resistance to this particular aspect of military discipline. Another interview acknowledged ‘we were supposed to. We claimed to, and it’s believed... But I think, I don’t think anyone actually, genuinely believes I wore the uniform into college. That’s my boss [commanding officer] included. But out of sight, out of mind’. Some other interviewees laughed or rolled their eyes as I asked the question, while one smiled and asked ‘this is confidential?’ As such, the number who explicitly admitted not wearing the uniform most likely underestimates the total of my sample who did not wear the uniform, and the number who experienced role strain or conflict.

Why interviewees did not wear the uniform was approached in a number of ways, in terms of role and role-identity salience. For some it was regarded personally as ‘nuisance’ or a ‘hindrance’, or it was depersonalised by saying ‘nobody found [it] particularly comfortable’. The inability to blend in ‘more as a civilian’ was mentioned, but a specific kind of discomfort and role strain with the military role was also apparent, and in stronger terms: ‘it was occasionally embarrassing. [...] You just got a lot of stares and you’d feel silly and self-conscious you know?’;

I would much have preferred to have been just anonymous you know, so this is the thing because you wear a uniform the whole time you are a ‘somebody’ [...] So you don’t have the same identity, individual identity as other students in the sense that other students don’t have this - I use the term baggage - but the other students don’t have that.

‘Baggage’ and ‘embarrassment’ are arresting terms to use to refer to the military role and its accoutrements as impediments, but it is worth noting that these negative feelings or attitudes did not extend beyond specific discussions of uniform in a civilian setting. No interviewee expressed negative views of the Defence Forces. Interviewees expressed embarrassment in a restricted, contextual sense, in relation to interactions with the academic or civilian world; it was a specific kind of role strain relating to being public figure in a uniform, a ‘somebody’.

|         | 1970s | 1980s | 1990s | 2000s+ |
|---------|-------|-------|-------|--------|
| Not wearing uniform | 0     | 0     | 2     | 5      |
| Wearing uniform    | 6     | 2     | 2     | 0      |

Table 1. Interviewees wearing uniform by decade (explicit statements).
Other personal reasons were also offered, stated in terms of an individual desire to integrate themselves with the university experience.

Now they wanted you to wear the formal uniform which makes absolutely no sense. If they requested you wear the camouflage stuff, people might. But in general people wanted to kind of... didn’t want to stand out. They wanted to enjoy the university experience.

There may be a contradiction here between the willingness to still be identifiably military in a camouflage uniform, but also wanting to ‘not stand out’, and it may be a way to rationalise not wearing uniform because it is more formal (and wouldn’t generally be worn in barracks). It does show that there isn’t necessarily opposition to being identifiably military, however. It is at the least an expression of ambivalence, rather than viewing the wearing of uniform as simply an obligation or an impediment. A female officer made an observation that differed, relating to the previous discussion of the desire for anonymity:

I think it’s more negative being a woman in uniform. [...] You see it even when you know you’re putting on, when you go out in your civilian attire, and people kind of almost have a double take like, you know, because it’s a certain perception or look that you have when you are in your uniform. More often than not certainly all the women, we used to always try and go in civvy attire.

Not wearing the uniform was also, counterintuitively, an expression of pride. Indeed, exasperation with civilian ignorance of the Defence Forces was more common, as one naval officer described:

the uniform that we wore to college looked very similar to campus security. So you got a lot of, ‘oh are you campus security’ and then you’re trying to explain what’s going on, and you’re like ‘No’. And you’d irate people that had just got their bike stolen, and you’re trying to say ‘I’m not campus security. Leave me alone’. So it was just, bar the uncomfortable thing, there was also that element of you looked a bit like campus security and people just... Kind of got confused.

This interviewee’s experience shows that by the post-2000 period, USAC students were perhaps no longer a ‘known entity’ as they once were in that university. Here, this officer was identifiably ‘other’ in some way, but was mistakenly identified with the administrative machinery of the university, rather than having his own military distinctness acknowledged. This was another kind of role strain, as it was an affront to naval officers’ role-identity salience. It was better to be viewed as a civilian than to experience the indignity inflicted on their role by not being immediately identifiable as a certain type of Defence Forces officer. He continued that he and a Naval Service colleague wore their uniform the first day, but ‘we never wore it again’.
'I just want to meet normal people': Living out and non-disclosure of the military role

Another central requirement of the university experience for officers studying in Galway is residing in the USAC building where officers are subject to military discipline: ‘you were living within the confines of the military environment anyway, so you’re in an accommodation block just outside the barracks which was run by military personnel, there was a commanding officer up there like every other unit’. As with the discussion of uniform, there were a variety of strategies to minimise the effects or reach of military discipline, those ‘living in’ as it is described, set out various ways in which this was achieved: ‘you were gone out the door as early as you could. And you spent as little time as you could in the USAC building’.

Ambivalence towards military discipline is also apparent here. Starting from the mid-1980s, some interviewees’ comments showed that there appeared to be changing attitudes to ‘living in’ versus ‘living out’ by student officers, highlighted by official concerns expressed by military authorities about ‘living out’:

At that time they were quite concerned about us, people living out and they didn’t... it wasn’t encouraged. I mean you could, but I mean, we’re all... we got along with it you know. I spent most of my time living in... But you know, there were times [laughter] when I didn’t. But no, we were mostly, the vast majority of people... There was a few people in very established relationships, you know, they were living out, you know. I suppose I was like that for a while myself, but...No, it was just part of the overall system I suppose.

The language here is opaque, and hedged all around by qualifications and vagueness. This affects a deflation of the actions of not living in the military building by saying ‘there were times’, in itself an expression of and response to role strain. Indeed, this is followed up by claiming to have, counter to what was just revealed, followed the rules: ‘the only challenge, you know, there’s no, there’s no challenges, with, we just accepted it. Ireland was very different place [then]’. This linguistic strategy is understandable in the context of minimising actions that would be viewed as problematic (at best) in the light of the obligations of military discipline.

In a later period, however, changes in attitudes became clearer and less ambivalent, as implied in the comment from one officer commissioned in the 1990s who raised this point in a general way while sarcastically discussing whether others in later periods wore uniform on campus: ‘Oh, yeah, they go in uniform all the time. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. [Opens eyes widely] We won’t ask how many are actually “living in” as well’. So it was clear that some officers were not living in the building, and two interviewees from a later period were considerably more forthright in discussing their own decisions to live out. The initial reasons they offered were to do with fitting in with the full university experience. One had been to university for a period prior to joining the army:
In a sense, I probably tried to separate myself from the Defence Forces, and this might sound mad, but I was in it for the broadest possible experience […] I had a sense of what college was about and that sense of the broad education that college can bring. After first year in USAC I actually pretty much moved out.

This was not officially approved of by military authorities but may have been tolerated by some in the hierarchy at least, which in itself evinces some role ambiguity (Schwab and Iwanicki, 1982: 61–62) on the part of military authorities, and a lack of clarity related to role requirements. The other interviewee discussed a prolonged period of illness in the first year of college where he was in hospital and missed lectures: ‘when I came out of hospital then I realized that if I was to stay physically in the building, I was going to find it more difficult to kind of assimilate into normality at the time’. For both, the USAC building and experience was regarded as an impediment, an ‘abnormal’ setting which contrasted with the normality of the university experience.

Both echoed the previous discussion of not wearing uniform, couching their decision in terms that showed they viewed their own personal reasons for not living in the USAC building as being compatible with military discipline.

So I moved into just a normal house like a normal student, and tried to live the normal student life, but still fulfil the obligations the military set out, which were, you know, signing in, making sure you’re present, turning up at the briefings, turning up to different meetings that were required.

The other interviewee discussed ‘living in’ as an impediment in terms of academic achievement and fulfilling the requirements of the scheme:

I didn’t move out for social reasons. I moved out for… When you’re living in USAC, you’re going to a room, you’re studying in a room. You don’t have the same contact, you know. You’ve people coming and going, it’s disturbance. Whereas if you’re living in a house with four other people who are studying the same course as you, you’re working together, you’re discussing the course, you’re, you know, you’re living the course far more than you would have in USAC. I found USAC was an impediment to me. The building, well, it wasn’t the best circumstances [in which] to be achieving.

This is a clear instance of deemphasising an element of the military role in order to maintain role-identity salience. The decision to ‘live out’ had negative implications: ‘I kind of, you know, I kind of lost some friendships because of that. Some people didn’t understand my rationale, and I was just saying, I just want to meet normal people’.

There can be differences across the Defence Forces in terms of individual officers’ role sets and how they have defined their own role-identity salience, with individuals aware that others respond differently to role strains and tensions. What had been accepted as normal military discipline in the past, however, was viewed
by some officers as abnormal and perceived as a role strain or conflict, and some took the significant measure of deciding to live out as the strategy to maintain some role-identity salience. The fact that mentions of living out appear among interviewees commissioned at the same time as those discussing not wearing the uniform is suggestive of changing attitudes to military identity in a civilian setting. A further instance of this comes in the unusual behaviour by interviewees who chose to conceal that they were military officers from their civilian classmates.

Concealing the military role is different from the previous two examples, however, as telling people you are in the Defence Forces is not a ‘requirement’ of military discipline. Indeed, the notion of telling other people only arises in the absence of identifying characteristics, such as wearing the uniform, or living in the USAC building. The question of not disclosing the military role emerged in discussions with seven interviewees, with a similar pattern to the one observed for those not wearing the uniform (see Table 2), as in the early years no interviewees mentioned not disclosing that they were in the Defence Forces, in large part no doubt because they would have been wearing military dress.

One officer noted that non-disclosure was a wider approach by USAC students:

the whole lot of us made a conscious decision to just try and blend in as much as possible, not say anything. And once we got friendly with people they realized or figured out that we were in the army.

Others also mentioned civilian students ‘figuring it out’:

I’d say their awareness is much as I’ve told them, you know, I haven’t... it wouldn’t be the first thing I lead with. I definitely didn’t intend on telling anyone. Not that I wanted to keep it a secret, but it just kind of, I just kept it sort of off the table, and people kind of just found out as they found out.

Another interviewee described a more active approach to concealment:

before I came to college I changed my thing on Facebook, took down the fact I was in the army, I hid all photographs of me in uniform, changed my profile picture. So, it’s just me in civvies. Whenever anyone asked me at the start like, ‘oh how come you’re older than the rest of us?’ I just went, ‘aw you know, I left college, got a job for a few years and now I’ve come back’ – which was technically true, I just didn’t say what job I was doing.

This same interviewee also referred, however, to other students figuring it out. Other interviewees expressed misgivings about how they believed the Irish Defence Forces were perceived: ‘people like to think we do nothing. And that doesn’t bother us either. It’s like, we know what we’re doing. We know what our job is. We’re proud that’s our job, let’s say’. Here the reason for
de-emphasising the military role within the role set as a response to role strain is clear.

This also led to more spectacular forms of non-disclosure. One interviewee got to the third year of his degree without anyone knowing he was an army officer, and the decision to disclose his role was taken out of his hands by another officer in his course who was worried about a presentation he had to give, and so was going to wear his uniform the following day. This implied that this interviewee was going to have to wear his uniform, and he spoke of how this came as a surprise to his classmates.

I’d be in their houses, they’d be at my house at the time. They hadn’t a clue. They knew, like, I’d friends and they knew my friends were in the army, but they never, never fully kind of put it together that I was actually there as well. Now the fact I did grow a beard as well probably threw them off the scent quite a lot.

The fact that this classmate did still take the time to call the interviewee is also testament to military solidarity even if some are living out and is an instance of what Goffman termed ‘dramaturgical loyalty’ (1990: 207). Non-disclosure here was a more active undertaking, and various strategies (not wearing the uniform, not living in, not telling people, not socialising with other officers, growing a beard) served to ‘put others off the scent’. Disclosure then takes the form of a ‘coming out’, indeed, another officer described arriving at a student ball in full dress uniform, and this being the first time many learned that he was a Defence Forces officer.

These behaviours raised by interviewees of not wearing uniform, not living in military accommodation and not disclosing their military occupation are distinctly different. Tables 1 and 2 serve as indicators of a distance between role and self or identity for those interviewees describing such behaviours and strategies of coping with role strain. One or a combination of these tactics can be deployed by an individual officer as a way of managing the role strain. So, for some officers role abeyance might imply not wearing the uniform. For others it may take the form of not wearing the uniform but letting others know they are in the Defence Forces; for others still living out, not wearing the uniform, and not telling fellow students about their military role. Role conflict is based around events and discrete decisions, and so is structural. It is effectively atemporal (beyond the implied ‘before’ and ‘after’ of making the decision).

Table 2. Non-disclosure of military role by decade.

| Decade | 1970s | 1980s | 1990s | 2000s+ |
|--------|-------|-------|-------|--------|
| 0      | 0     | 1     | 6     |        |

Gibson
Role abeyance

The role theoretical framework allows for an understanding of the situation of officers attending university, and many of the issues discussed to this point were connected with the tensions inherent in performing the role of an officer, while also being a student at university outside the military environment. Given the contact between two ‘symbolic universes’ (Berger and Luckmann, 1991), some friction is to be expected. From the analysis above, it is clear that interviewees did perceive themselves as experiencing role strain as a 'wide, distracting, and sometimes conflicting array of role obligations' (Goode, 1960: 485). They needed to meet the demands of their academic education, social interaction with their civilian peers, and also fulfil the obligations of the military role. This can be seen in how individuals would strike ‘role bargains’ (Goode, 1960: 483) in response to specific events. The example from the 1970s clarifies the distinction, in the decision to not participate in a student protest. This is an event that requires a one-off decision, a clear-cut experience of ‘role conflict’ leading to a role bargain. In terms of how those officers resolved such a role conflict, the chosen solution appears consistent with Gullahorn and Gullahorn’s proposed solution in the case of one-off situations of deciding between the competing claims of military and non-military worlds. It does not, however, apply to the situation of role strain extending over years, when there are ongoing patterns of behaviour such as not wearing a uniform, not living in military accommodation, and not telling civilians you’re in the military.

Role abeyance testifies to an overall strategy by officers, a set of practices under which various arts of resistance are gathered. Role abeyance, in the case of non-disclosure, is not one decision, but a whole series of decisions, and not made at once, but on an ongoing basis. For some officers, role abeyance might imply not wearing the uniform. For others, it may take the form of not wearing the uniform but letting others know they are in the Defence Forces; for others still living out, not wearing the uniform and not telling fellow students about their military role. These different approaches mean different interviewees put their military role into abeyance in whatever way they were most comfortable with, whereby ‘each participant is allowed to establish the tentative official rule regarding matters which are vital to him but not immediately important to others’ (Goffman, 1990: 21).

Thus, in contrast to role conflict, role abeyance is a temporal concept for a series of decisions and nexus of behaviours. So an individual officer not disclosing their military role decides to not wear the uniform (daily) decides not to introduce themselves as military at the start of their college time or in any other subsequent social interactions, decides to change their social media profiles and decides to offer vague responses to questions about their background. Non-disclosure can thus be characterised as a posture, and involves a nexus of decisions and non-decisions. Abeyance also allows for the fact that in many cases a conflict (whether structural or psychological in Gullahorn and Gullahorn’s words) is not apparent; it may be incipient, but role abeyance prevents such a potential conflict.
Thus, individual officers might be aware of the potential for feeling role strain (i.e. by wearing the uniform) and so they elect not to wear it, thus effectively forestalling role strain. Also, by not telling other civilians about their military role, is this a role conflict (pseudo or otherwise), or is this taking steps to prevent such a role conflict? Finally, role abeyance also notes that while officers in university resist the military authorities’ definition of their role in various way by putting it into abeyance, but they do not reject the military role.

Accepting the concept of role abeyance allows for an understanding of why individuals might make this decision to put their military role into abeyance. One initial reason, taking interviewees at their word, would be to protect their role as military officers. By putting their military role into abeyance, counterintuitively, they also protect the Defence Forces’ reputation, as was discussed by those interviewees who brought up social media as part of their reason for not wearing the uniform. In distancing themselves from the military role, they protect the role to which they will return. Similarly, when another interviewee moved out from the USAC building, he explained his actions as allowing him to fulfil the requirement to do well in his studies. He thus avoided one element of military discipline in so as to be obedient to it in the larger sense, allowing for a ‘veneer of consensus’ (Goffman, 1990: 21) that this was being done so as to focus on the broader military or organisational priority of doing well in his studies.

Across the three instances discussed, there is a sense of wanting to blend in with the civilian population while in university but also a similar wariness involving waiting and deciding whether to trust civilian students with a piece of, it is implied, sensitive information. What appears to be the pattern for these interviewees is a kind of passive concealment, omitting to disclose. In university, social relationships are built organically, where the individual’s identity without the military aspect is normal. Analogy with an earlier period can be made, if we see the military officer in university as inhabiting a similar situation to the 18th century habitué of the coffeehouse, in an era in which [...] social rank was of paramount importance. In order to gain knowledge and information through talk, the men of the time therefore created what was for them a fiction, the fiction that social distinctions did not exist. (Sennett, 1992: 82–83)

The military universe is still in many ways equivalent to the starkly hierarchical world Sennett describes. As such, military officers in university are in a similar position, pretending that their own military rank does not exist, in order to experience the free social exchange that university is meant to foster. It’s not to suggest the absence of hierarchies in the academic world, as these have been outlined in detail by others (e.g. Bourdieu, 1988; Hagstrom, 1965). Rather it is by putting their military role into abeyance, that the military universe is bracketed, so that the academic universe can be accepted.
**Going backstage and emotion work**

Reference to protecting the military role is just one explanation, however, and can be understood as an indirect (and perhaps thus more acceptable for the individual) means of discussing the individual or self. Here role abeyance is how the individual manages role strain. Goffman described those performing a role as being ‘on stage’ in a ‘front region’ (1990: 114). Officers wearing a uniform are always on stage in this respect, are always visible, and their speech is part of an official transcript of the military. Goffman notes that a front region necessarily implies a back region, however, where what he calls ‘suppressed facts’ appear:

A back region or backstage may be defined as a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course. There are, of course, many characteristic functions of such places. [. . .] Here the performer can relax; he can drop his front, forgo speaking his lines, and step out of character. (Goffman, 1990: 114–115)

Officers in uniform, however, are not afforded such a backstage in the university academic setting, unlike other students or academics. They are always performing their role when they are in uniform, are always ‘on stage’. Goffman further notes that often the back region of a performance is where ‘a performer out in front can receive backstage assistance while the performance is in progress and can interrupt his performance momentarily for brief periods of relaxation’ (Goffman, 1990: 115). Attending university through USAC, these officers have no such scope for relaxation, however, especially given that in their place of residence in the USAC building, they are also being monitored and subject to military discipline, even if they are out of uniform.

Implicit here is that having a backstage is integral to ‘successfully’ performing a role, so what occurs when officers do not have this? In the interviews, a sense of tension was apparent in terms of wearing the uniform (and also thus non-disclosure, and in part ‘living out’). For some, the uniform was described in functional terms as a ‘hindrance’ and the fact that it created difficulties in the organisation of their day (such as going for a drink after college). Those from the 1990s onwards discussing issues with the uniform mentioned personal embarrassment in wearing the uniform, however, which reflects the wider changes in higher education where they would have been alone in wearing a uniform, and so not merely inconvenienced by it. This also relates to the wider societal ignorance of the Defence Forces which was brought up by participants.

What became apparent in terms of the discussion of embarrassment in wearing the uniform is the emotional cost of being ‘on stage’. Reasons for this embarrassment (or the need for emotion management) were not explicitly examined in the course of the interviews, but some interpretations suggest themselves. For one, even though these officers are on the whole two to three years older than their peers in university (having already completed their two years of officer training),
they are still in their early 20s, and so the effects of peer embarrassment might still be greater than for older individuals. Secondly, the emotional ‘cost’ might be less in societies where the military is better known, and/or respected, but in Ireland this is not so; this is a manifestation of Ireland’s unique society-military relations. Indeed, one might plausibly argue it would in fact be more unusual if these officers were to insist on maintaining their military identity in the civilian university setting today. As it is, they accept the norms of Irish society more widely, and seek ways to conform to these rather than accepting the military norms as in opposition.

It was apparent nevertheless through the language used by interviewees that performing the military role in the university setting does indeed involve emotion work. Embarrassment implies shame, and being on stage all the time in uniform is also a form of emotion work, being a representative of the Defence Forces at all times. Being on stage, and working to feel upbeat in the face of ignorance of or negative attitudes towards the military makes significant demands on the individual. The absence of a backstage added to this would make the demands even greater, as there is would be no space for ‘relaxation’ of the role performance. Accordingly, not wearing the uniform, not living in barracks, and not disclosing military identity are all ways in which military officers create a backstage for themselves, and lessen the amount of emotion management they need to undertake on a daily basis. There does not appear to be much literature on emotion management by military personnel in civilian settings, and so this in its own right is worthy of greater attention.

Conclusion

This discussion has a number of ramifications. Firstly, it is significant empirically as a means of understanding what happens when officers attend university, because they do indeed experience a form of role anxiety, but it does not lead them to a ‘role conflict’ in any previously understood sense of the word. The concept of ‘role abeyance’ allows for a more accurate interpretation than role conflict or pseudo-role conflict can and shows how officers exercise agency in a way that allows them to maintain a sense of role-identity salience, while engaging (more) fully with life at university alongside their civilian peers. This finding has potential policy implications for the Irish Defence Forces (as well as other militaries sending their personnel to higher education), in that it defuses long-standing Defence Forces fears that higher education is a place where the military officer will be ‘desocialised’ out of their military role.

This paper’s theoretical contribution is that it illustrates how the weaknesses of the functionalist role theory can be addressed when supplemented by more nuanced picture of social interaction found in Scott’s infrapolitics. Doing so accounts for the well-documented limitations in role theory by integrating power and agency. While role theory was a useful framework for much social scientific research in the past, it has fallen somewhat out of favour in recent years. As such, this paper suggests a fruitful way whereby role theory can be combined with
another theoretical perspective, leading to fresh insights. Role abeyance, indeed, as a concept coming from a combination of role theory with infrapolitics, illustrates how many of role theory’s limitations (e.g. Jackson, 1998a) can be accounted for. In terms of the wider literature, by supplementing role theory with Scott’s ideas, it also provides a coherent framework in which other work on militaries as dynamic social structures (e.g. Bury, 2017; Hockey, 1986) can be understood, and provides further evidence of a ‘negotiated order’ (Strauss, 1978) existing in the military context.

Combining these conclusions lead to a third point. When looking to the timeline of the phenomenon of the various instances of role abeyance as more prevalent from the 1990s onwards, this offers empirical support of theoretical observations, namely it confirms the timeline Bonner sees Archer setting out, with a change starting in the 1990s. By allowing for ‘role’ in my analysis, but in combination with Scott’s ideas of infrapolitics, it was possible to confirm Bonner and Archer’s theses through the identification of role abeyance emerging from the 1990s. This paper meets the expectation of role tension as role theory sets out, but goes beyond the limitations of that perspective through the application of infrapolitics, allowing for a theoretically sound understanding of the Irish military officer’s social position in relation to their experience of higher education.

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Notes
1. In due course Naval Service and Air Corps Officers also began to partake in this scheme in a more limited fashion.
2. Collins notes that, confusingly, that branch ‘also calls itself Symbolic Interactionism’ but that it ‘links up with the functionalist view of society, especially when it describes the roles as being made up out of institutionalised norms and values’ (1994: 265).
3. Here I do not approach a comprehensive review of the literature on role theory, but my reading shows a peak of work on role theory in the early to mid-1960s, dropping off significantly in following decades. This parallels Korom’s (2020) work on the changes in who is cited in sociology from the 1970s to the 2010s, with functionalist sociology in serious decline.
4. Goffman may appear an appropriate alternative through which to consider this setting, but it is important to note that in his discussion of total institutions (wherein the fourth grouping included military barracks and ships), military personnel were ‘cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life’ (Goffman, 1961: xiii, 5). This might have been the case for the barracks of the conscripted military of mid-20th century when Goffman wrote, but they do not reflect the all-volunteer military of even a few decades later (Moskos, 1977), nor especially not the experience of officers attending civilian university. In contrast, Scott’s infrapolitics is a theory that can account for unequal power relations while also attending to the freedom of actors to mix socially outside the barracks milieu.

5. Role theory initially relied on specific terminology to discuss how a person or individual (‘ego’) interacts with others (‘alter’) through their ‘role’. While this has some benefits, it’s sufficient to this paper’s purposes that individual, person, self, and identity are treated interchangeably to refer to this fullest set of roles.

6. There are parallels here with Berger and Luckmann noting difficulties across interactions between ‘symbolic universes’ (1991: 122–134). Turner’s (1978) approach to role sees the merger of role with the ‘person’ as a source of role conflict, but this only puts the question of what is in conflict at a remove, and ‘person’ in this situation functions much as a competing role might for the more functionalist role theorists.

7. A related military example is Burchard’s study of the role conflict experienced by military chaplains, where there are ‘two major institutions which define their social roles are in some respects mutually exclusive’ (1954: 528). The author suggests that ‘the role which provides for the individual his primary identification’ (p. 535) takes precedence over another role, and for those military chaplains the role of military officer does just that.

8. The length of military training varies across the three military branches, however, with 15 months the standard period for Army Cadets. Following their commissioning as officers, Naval Service and Air Corps officers return to their services to continue the training specific to their future command roles as, e.g. aviators, ship commanders, etc., with the attendant qualifications that these imply.

9. Officers may choose degree subjects in Arts/Humanities/Social Science, Commerce, Engineering, and Science. Professional degrees such as veterinary science, medicine, dentistry etc. are excluded. Officers already in possession of a degree are posted immediately to their military units and are commissioned with the higher rank of First Lieutenant, in contrast with their peers who attend university at the lower rank of Second Lieutenant.

10. Compiled from Dáil Debates, 18 April, 2019, Vol. 982, No. 3, Col. 18206.

11. It also refers to aristocratic titles that are unclaimed. I chose ‘abeyance’ rather than its synonym ‘suspension’ as the latter, to my ear, has the sense of inactivity which could be permanent. Abeyance, in contrast, more clearly implies a period which can and does come to an end.

12. Or arguably the second option, delaying a decision, by going for a coffee rather than joining a protest.

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