The order of the day

Script error in military organisations and violence against civilians
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Abstract

In an attempt to understand the micro-dimensional mechanisms of how some individuals come to perpetrate violence against civilians during wartime, this thesis adopts a theory from organisational psychology. By looking at the military as a professional organisation, violence against civilians perpetrated by state armies during wartime is theorised to be the outcome of a process of script error wherein military scripts of non-combatant immunity fail. The theory is applied on the massacre in My Lai, during the Vietnam war. Findings showed that the mechanism of script error did not play out completely as theorised, however that military scripts did dictate behaviour and that a script error was present to some degree as civilians came to be targeted as if they were enemies. Some mechanisms used in previous research on violence against civilians were supported by this study and could also be integrated into the framework of organisational scripts, showing the explanatory value that organisational scripts have to further understand military violence. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of an important historical case, shows the value of introducing organisational psychology into studies of the military organisation and finally helps us further make sense of situations of violent transgression.

Keywords: organisational scripts, script error, military violence, violence against civilians, mass violence, atrocity, My Lai
1. Introduction

In many studies of armed actors, conflict and war, violence is explained in mechanic terms; it is a tool for the actor to use instrumentally to achieve certain goals. Violence against civilians during war is sometimes captured by this perspective; that civilians are targeted because of a strategic reason for doing so (Kalyvas 2006; Wood 2010; Wood, Kathman, and Gent 2012). Other times, violence against civilians is explained as the chaotic outcome of violent socialisation taken too far, often with reference to a habituation that is expected to occur once initial violence has been learned (Green 2018; Wolfendale 2007; Lang 2010). What these studies have in common is a view of violence as one uniform type of behaviour; they do not differentiate between violence against civilians and other types of violence, say military encounters, but instead take violence to be the same irrespective of target or context.

Using this uniform view on violence when looking at national armies, violence would then be a behaviour that is created by military socialisation and applied according to state goals. Violence is the professional product that armies produce and while this product is similar across time and space in some ways; for example, soldiers go through the same basic training, get deployed together, and work in units; military violence is multifaceted in more ways than much research assumes. Military violence is a behaviour learned in a controlled and strict manner, armies are professional organisations that produce violence for a goal and purpose. Primarily, violence is produced in order to create security for a nation-state, and the rightful target for violence is then potential threats to that security (Soeters 2018, 254ff). This is the type of violence that soldiers are taught during military training. This should be differentiated from other types of violence; mass atrocity and mass violence, as the unauthorised, extra-legal actions that they are, should not be seen as belonging to the same set of behaviour that ‘normal’ military violence does. The empirical world gives evidence to this fact; mass atrocity happens in a limited number of cases of war, while all armies go through a process of learning how to kill. Furthermore, people experience violence differently. They suffer more from unauthorised violence directed at innocent groups than they do from authorised violence directed at enemies (Purcell et al. 2018). Learning to use violence does not mean learning to use all types of violence; the military produces violence in a nuanced, specific and guided manner; with both promotion and restraint in accordance to the laws of war and the military profession. Soldiers should not have learned how to target civilians, yet civilian casualties happen, sometimes at extreme levels. This is a puzzle that remains to be adequately understood.
Violence needs to be studied at all levels, and a micro-dimensional study on the situations that produce those types of violence that should not occur will help us understand the mechanisms of promotion and restraint. This is not only relevant in those cases where civilian groups are targeted during war. National armies around the world are and have been involved in a number of atrocious actions; most genocides that have occurred have been on the order of governments and executed by the state army. In order to make sense of the micro dynamics that lead to excessive violence, the army needs to be studied as an organisation that is supposed to only know a certain type of violence; it needs to be understood as a professional group of people that in some cases behave in unsanctioned and unsocialised ways; outside their normal codes of conduct. This is essential if we are to understand how violence can be limited.

This motivates asking the question: how do individuals come to perpetrate violence against civilians during wartime?

In order to explore this question, this study takes on an individual, micro-dimensional approach and adopts a theory from organisational psychology, using the mechanism of script error to understand what situations that might lead to mass violence. The theory is developed with a method of process tracing applied to the historical case of My Lai. The primary data comes from interrogations of those involved in the event, taken from The Peers Inquiry, a large military investigation that was conducted after My Lai. Findings showed that due to inadequate training, individuals lacked sufficient scripts of non-combatant immunity. Instead their strongest scripts were in relation to obedience to authority, which was developed both during training and after deployment. Furthermore, scripts relating to the nature of the conflict, essentially the difficulties in separating combatants and non-combatants, produced a situation of the enemy script being applied to the civilian population of My Lai. While this process did not fully play out as theorised, a script error was present to a certain degree and the application of organisational scripts to the case helped to further shed light on a puzzling empirical outcome and on the theoretical understanding of mass violence.

The first section will outline existing research and show how previous findings does not fully capture the puzzle at hand. Secondly, the theory of script error will be presented, followed by a section on the research design which describes the method of process tracing. After that, the empirical data will be presented and analysed. A concluding discussion of the findings and their relation to the theorised process will follow, within which the theory will be somewhat revised. Lastly, a section on avenues for future research will be provided.
2. Research overview

This section will outline existing knowledge on the perpetration of violence against civilians. While not all studies mentioned below explain military violence in particular, but instead look at more general violence performed by for instance rebel groups or non-militaries, they are still relevant to discuss. Since they concern violence against civilians, they provide necessary knowledge to understand the subject, and since the fields are overlapping to a large degree, these studies need to be included in the discussion. After explaining military professionalism in relation to the laws of war, macro level explanations will be discussed, followed by meso and context specific findings. Existing individual level explanations will be outlined, and the gap identified in the previous research will be further specified.

This thesis will build on the Janowitzian notion of the professional soldier and define the military as a professional organisation that has been given by the state within which it operates the legitimacy to use violence as a means to increase protection and security for that state. It is often, apart from the police force, the only organisation within a state that has a monopoly of violence (Caforio and Hong 2018, 18ff, 41). Militaries also have a monopoly of violence internationally, and each national army internationally operates under the laws of war which specify how, when and towards whom violence can be used (Rukavishnikov and Pugh 2018, 125; Bell 2016; Boli and Thomas 1999). The bulk of international human law, including the section on the laws of war, can be found in the Geneva Conventions which specify that “parties to a conflict must at all times distinguish between the civilian population and combatants in order to spare civilian population and property” (ICRC 2010). As a professional organisation, state militaries have strong incentives to adhere to these laws, given that the international costs for nonadherence can be high for the individual state. This is the premise for much research; that the larger army organisation have strong incentives to limit violence against civilians as this is against the laws of war (Kümmel 2018, 480). This assumption will be made in this thesis as well, and the professional military will be theorised as an organisation that is to perform acts of authorised violence and that these are guided by international human law. Violence against civilians is thus something that should not happen if militaries were to act as they should, and that is what needs to be further explained.

Parts of the previous literature on violence against civilians has focused on the macro level, systemic factors linking general actor behaviour to civilian victimisation. Violence against civilians has been shown to be the most common during armed conflict, perpetrated by one of the armed groups involved (Eck and Hultman 2007). It has been evidenced to be related
to relative strength of the armed actor (Wood 2010), resource extraction (Wood, Kathman, and Gent 2012) and territorial control (Kalyvas 2006). Largely adopting rational choice theory, many of these studies show that violence against civilians can be the outcome of a cost-benefit analysis wherein civilian targeting becomes a relatively cheap way to wage war (Eck and Hultman 2007; Kalyvas 2006; Wood, Kathman, and Gent 2012; Wood 2010).

Through cross-national studies, these authors help us understand general trends that affect civilian victimisation and the systemic factors that make actors target civilians, yet they largely leave out the actual perpetration of violence; the on the ground, face-to-face killing that some individual has to perform. Civilian targeting is in macro studies seen as an instrument that actors use in certain circumstances; it is made equal with other types of violence and is described as an extension of other armed activities (ibid). Essentially it is assumed that armed actors are unitary and will without hesitation act out whatever type of violence that has the most strategic benefits, and that there is no difference in cost between different types of violence for the individual perpetrator.

Several studies have however shown that violence differs, and that there are different costs for the individual perpetrator depending on both the circumstances and the target of violence (Kooistra and Mahoney 2016, 779). American war veterans have for instance been shown to suffer more perpetrator induced PTSD from the perpetration of violence against civilians as compared to violence against combatants, and generally a very clear moral distinction was made by the veterans between the two types of violence (Purcell et al. 2018, 669).

There are other explanations of violence against civilians that attempt to breach the macro and meso level, showing how systemic level factors can affect group behaviour. These are mostly studies that centre around the context specific factors producing high levels of violence against civilians (Straus 2012). Counterinsurgency warfare have for instance historically produced relatively high levels of civilian casualties, as the close ties that insurgents often have with civilians makes distinguishing between combatants and non-combatants difficult (Crawford 2007, 194; Kahl 2007, 16f; Valentino 2004, 200ff). While these studies better explain how groups stop viewing the civilian population as non-combatants and in that way are able to target them as if they were enemies, there are still many cases of mass violence wherein the civilian population have been clearly unarmed, making the reference to indistinguishability an unsatisfactory explanation.

Another set of explanations also falls under the context-sensitive category, yet use a more situationist understanding of violence as primarily a product of group thinking and group
behaviour. In this, the context, or situations, are provided socially by the group which affects individual choice. Waller (2007, 102ff) refers to binding factors of the group in explaining participation in mass atrocity, wherein the individual is submerged into a group, making violence possible. One of these binding factors is a diffusion of responsibility, mostly working through obedience to authority. While analysing testimonies from people participating in atrocity, many studies find that obedience to authority is a commonly cited reason for engaging in civilian targeting despite it being against the laws of war (Waller 2007, 102ff; Green 2018; Kooistra and Mahoney 2016, 767; Kelman and Hamilton 1989). Wolfendale writes that violence is made possible through the undermining of one’s own moral agency and that soldiers are instilled with a “disposition associated with crimes of obedience” (Wolfendale 2007, 3f).

Since Milgram’s experiment, in which he showed that individuals with no previous history of violence were able to give lethal shocks to a subject simply because they were ordered to do so, so called crimes of obedience have been a recurring theme within the field of mass violence (Russell and Gregory 2005, 77; Milgram 2017). The military emphasis on obedience to orders is said to produce individuals who abandon their own moral reasoning and are able to perform any acts they are ordered to. Cases of mass violence such as the Holocaust, Rwanda and Srebrenica have then been argued to have occurred because of this destructive obedience produced by the military organisation (Russel and Gregory 2005, 77, Kelman and Hamilton 1989). Much of the evidence that violence against civilians is the product of crimes of obedience comes from post-violence testimonies, and obedience is often cited as an important aspect of why violence was committed (Nuciari 2018, 38). This was for instance the case in the Nuremberg trials after the holocaust and in the criminal investigation of those involved in the Abu Ghraib scandal (Post and Panis 2005, 34).

A problem with this line of reasoning is the fact that in a post-violence setting, the argument of superior orders can simply be an excuse and a way to shift responsibility away from oneself. It can also be questioned as to what extent this actually works on site; Grossman notes that the human inhibition to kill is so high that even after going through military training soldiers find it extremely difficult to use lethal violence (Grossman 2009). Being ordered to do something might help ease one’s conscience afterwards, yet it is difficult knowing how this works during the actual killing as the individual still has to personally perform the violence. Another problem with this reasoning is that the mechanism of obedience to authority does not explain how civilians come to be seen as a justified target in the first place, as the authority itself should be aware of the illegality of the orders they are giving and should according to the professional standards of the organisation not regard civilians as a viable target.
Furthermore, since it is seldom specified who the authority in question is and what their motivation to the use of violence was, it simply transfers the reasoning behind the violence from the foot soldier to an abstract order without actually providing any further understanding of why violence was committed. While there is indeed a hierarchy within the military, each individual should have a somewhat similar idea of the conflict and the goal, and whatever motivation causing the commander to order violence against civilian is, this should be in some sense present among the rest of the unit as well.

Other binding factors of the group relate to group conformity and mechanisms that make the individual prone to abandon his or her own moral compass in favour of that of the group (Waller 2007, 203). Browning showed that German soldiers during world war two executed civilians primarily because of in-group pressure, and a feeling of not wanting to abandon one’s co-soldiers (Browning 2001). Group-conformity has been shown to reduce level of individual responsibility, and increased feelings of conformity correlate with violence. Groups that look alike, through uniforms and similar haircuts for instance, behave more violently because of increased experienced in-groupness and due to a feeling of anonymity (Waller 2007, 212). Theories of group conformity can however also be criticised for the same reason as obedience to authority; for not presenting a causal story. Agency is placed outside of the individual and the motivation for why the group decides to act the way it does is still missing.

Another group of studies, mostly from the psychological field of research, looks into so called ethical decision making. These are related to situationist and context-centred explanation as they argue that war and combat situations and the stress this means for the individual and the group, limits cognitive ability and therefor makes ethical decision making more difficult (Doris and Murphy 2007; Litz et al. 2009). Self-reports from soldiers involved in combat show the tendency for ambivalence of the correct way to act in stressful combat situations (Litz et al. 2009, 697f). Doris and Murphy showed how legal culpability is difficult to asses in cases of mass atrocity and war crimes, as being placed in the context of armed conflict severely limits the individual’s ability to make ethical assessments (Doris and Murphy 2007). While Clausewitz’ term ‘the fog of war’ historically has been used to explain the chaotic nature of warfare and the recurring information failure that might lead to wrongful conduct (Soeters 2018, 257; Clausewitz 1989, 23), these studies help us to understand the underlying psychological features of that process. These authors also situate the mechanism of ethical decision making in the military as an organisation, and in that way incorporate aspects of military professionality in the analysis (Doris and Murphy 2007; Litz et al. 2009). There is
however a need to further investigate more precisely during what circumstances processes of decision-making fail. Deployed soldiers are constantly exposed to situations of stress, and military training ought to prepare them for the majority of situations they might face. Yet, certain situations lead to a failure in ethical decision making, and the micro-dimensions of these particular situations need to be further specified in addition to how the individuals’ varying responses can be situated in the larger framework of military violence.

A general shortcoming in the studies of contextual mechanisms of mass violence is that these tend to use a meso perspective, making the study largely insensitive to individual differences within the perpetrator group. While obedience to authority may be a motivation for some, others might perform acts of violence out of stress or confusion, and in the process towards generalisable explanations, individual variation is often discarded in favour of more commonly mentioned mechanisms such as obedience to authority or fog of war.

Doris and Murphy note that outside of the research world, there is a tendency to ascribe atrocity and massacres to dispositional factors present among the perpetrators. To pathologise violence, especially unauthorised violence, and to blame it on a few bad apples is certainly a comforting explanation, especially for the military itself (Doris and Murphy 2007, 31). Within academics there is however little theoretical or empirical proof that this is the case (ibid). After the Holocaust, the mad Nazi theory was common, however there is an intuitive reluctance to accept an explanation of mass participation in violence with reference to insanity among a few individuals. Largely insensitive to the context, the dispositional approach fails to explain group-level violence and the change in behaviour among seemingly ‘normal’ people with no previous record of violent behaviour who suddenly turn to violence (Waller 2007, 155ff; Eisner 2009, 46; Doris and Murphy 2007, 31).

Some scholars build on the dispositional approach, arguing that the use of violence essentially changes the individual’s predisposition to violence, thus combining the context level mechanisms with those that apply to the individual. This line of reasoning uses a habituation or brutalisation approach to violence against civilians, claiming that it is an inevitable outcome of learning how to kill (Green 2018; Hoover Green 2016; Wolfendale 2007). Studies have shown that there are indeed aspects of killing becoming easier with practice. Conditioning and realistic training during military socialisation, for instance shooting at targets that look like humans, have been proven to increase the propensity to use ‘real’ violence (Hughbank and Grossman 2013, 15). Israeli snipers for instance testified that skill in shooting was closely connected to the emotional aspect of killing (Bar and Ben-Ari 2005, 147). Soldiers both expressed that initial negative feelings of shooting at human shaped targets were lessened the more they practised it,
and that eventually the killing of actual humans became a way to “actualise professional capabilities” (ibid 141).

While this primarily relates to combat violence against armed opponents, Hoover Green argues that through military socialisation, soldiers change their predisposition to violence and that this explains violence against civilians. In arguing that it is essentially a question of restraint, she views civilian targeting as an inevitable consequence of military training. However, in assuming that violence against civilians will happen unless the unit practices constraint, her empirical evidence mostly concerns mechanisms of restraint and does in that way not properly test if violence against civilians actually is an inevitable product of military socialisation (Hoover Green 2016). Wolfendale similarly makes a connection between the intensity of the military training and the propensity for soldiers to use torture as a means of war, claiming that the causes for events like Abu Ghraib lie in the military as an organisation (Wolfendale 2007, 166). Weierstall et al. talks about ‘appetite aggression’; “the type of human aggression normally restrained through civilian socialisation and learned morality” (Weierstall et al. 2013) and which can be brought forward by the socialisation into an armed group which ultimately removes the normal restraints. They tested this on soldiers in rebel groups in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, finding that there was indeed appetite aggression associated with atrocities, yet this mostly applied to soldiers who had been forcefully recruited as children (ibid 510), making the findings somewhat difficult to apply to state armies. Appetite aggression was then more of a consequence of never learning the ‘normal restraints’ rather than having them removed by military socialisation (ibid).

While many scholars are able to explain how military training before deployment desensitises soldiers to the use of violence, few manage to provide enough empirical evidence that this is actually the case on site. When assuming that the military produces generally violent individuals, all those cases where violence is not excessive nor directed at the civilian population, need to be accounted for. In a majority of cases, soldiers do generally follow the laws of war, which speaks against theories of habituation or desensitisation being the mechanism of violence against civilians. Furthermore, the logic of habituation should then apply to soldiers in general and not only during wartime; once socialised into the military, soldiers should be expected to be more violent in all situations; even after homecoming, which has not been the case (Doris and Murphy 2007, 31).

In summary, while many of these studies provide thorough theoretical reasoning, there are some issues with the existing understanding of violence against civilians perpetrated by militaries. While macro explanations emphasise systemic level factors, they assume that
violence is the same for the individual no matter the target; that the cost of violence for the individual perpetrator is the same irrespective of who violence is directed at, which has not been the case empirically. While meso and micro level studies are more sensitive to individual costs of violence, they often end up explaining violence against civilians with a permanent change in behaviour. This behaviour is said to be produced by military socialisation, wherein violence against civilians is theorised to always be produced in tandem with ‘normal’ military violence. Empirically, however, widespread civilian victimisation is rare in comparison to armed conflict. While all professional armies go through the process of enabling violent conduct, not all soldiers commit unauthorised violence. These theories are insensitive to the fact that the military is a professional organisation; which should produce a professional type of violence that is limited in scope and target. While acknowledging that violence is difficult and that a threshold of violence exists, violence is still assumed to be a uniform behaviour that is made easy after learning how to. What these theories do not mention is the difference that exists between civilian targeting and enemy targeting, a difference that should be pronounced as the military socialisation is based on the laws of war and since the organisational purpose of the military, governed by the laws of war, clearly articulates a difference between combatants and non-combatants.

The situations in which this organisational logic is lost, and violence is directed at non-combatants needs to be understood from a micro-dimensional perspective that not only outlines the situations in which violence against civilians is the outcome, but also why. Furthermore, a study needs to be conducted where individual differences can be taken into account, to see not only the situational changes that occur but also how different individuals respond differently to these. An explanation of violence against civilians has to capture reality; that during some particular situations a group of individuals target civilians while in other situations they do not. It is an impermanent and local change in behaviour that creates massacres during war, and by studying these instances the wider dynamics of violence and restraint can be further understood. Essentially, limiting wrongful conduct during war comes down to these situations; understanding when, where, how and why soldiers come to disregard the laws of war.

2.1 Theory

The theory presented here helps us understand the circumstances under which military personnel do things they are not trained to do. Violence against civilians is assumed to be an aberration; while the military learn to use violence, they learn to use it selectively and professionally. This
theory therefor builds on an assumption of a human sensitivity to the different codes of conduct that exists in different situations. As such, it is also connected to the legitimacy and authority of the military organisation, and the assumption that national armies have an interest in producing a very particular type of violence that is directed only at targets posing a threat to the state. In addition, the theory is sensitive to the context and does not assume that violence against civilians will be the outcome in every situation, as this has not been the case empirically. Military violence against civilians is theorised as the product of an impermanent and situational change in behaviour.

The theory on organisational scripts that has been developed by Gioia and Poole (1984) is useful for exploring the above defined research question as it revolves around the production of professional behaviours within larger organisations. The theory on scripts originates from the theorisation of schemas which are “generalised cognitive framework that an individual uses to impose structure upon, and impart meaning to, social information or social situations in order to facilitate understanding” (ibid 449f). A script is a schema for behaviour and is related to memory of schemas; how things have played out before and how situations usually develop. Scripts are knowledge structures concerning common situations and tell us both how those situations should work and how we should act and behave (ibid 450). Creating scripts means automating certain parts of behaviour, making our everyday life easier (ibid).

Organisations are places wherein many of the daily activities are predictable and occur according to a relatively stable and repetitive pattern. Much of the behaviour within organisations is thus scripted and the individuals working within that organisation behave accordingly. They know what is right and appropriate according to their role and the purpose of the organisation and even when faced with new situations they are able to handle those using previous knowledge (ibid 454). New situations also help to change scripts, and a gap filling mechanism of scripted behaviour occurs as knowledge is added (ibid 456). Introduction into an organisation thus means the learning and adoption of certain scripts. It relates heavily to socialisation, as scripts affect how we understand and behave in the social world. Being socialised into a certain organisation therefore involves including a series of new scripts into the individual (ibid).

Despite being one of the largest organisations in many of today’s states, the military is often overlooked as such and an interdisciplinary approach to the army which uses both organisational psychology and military theory is uncommon. The rigour of the military organisation and the fact that it includes one of the heaviest and most total socialisation efforts
in our contemporary society (Soeters 2018), speaks for the exploration of the military behaviour through the lens of organisational theory.

Applying script theory to the military organisation and the use of violence, military socialisation is theorised as a process by which the individual learns a new set of scripts that are specific to military conduct. Through training, militaries create scripts of how to behave in combat situations, essentially how to use violence against an armed enemy. Military training is about automating certain behaviour, and scripts create automated responses to stimuli. Furthermore, as scripts concern both behaviour and understanding, soldiers are provided with scripts of how to understand their own violence in the context of war and armed conflict, and their own role in relation to the military as a larger organisation.

The military is however an unusual organisation in the sense that the actual organisational behaviour can only be practiced and not applied until actual deployment (Soeters 2018, 256). Yet, given the inherent risk of combat, military socialisation cannot wait until the actual battlefield, instead scripts will have to be created concerning situations the soldier has never experienced. This is done through combat training. Military scripts will need to be strong; as there is little time for assessment and contemplation in war, soldiers will need to quite instinctively act out the right script.

This theory assumes that since the military is a professional organisation acting on behalf of the state, and since most states emphasise the rules of war and military conduct, there should be a pronounced part of military socialisation dealing with the norm of non-combatant immunity. That is, military training will train people to kill enemies, not civilians. The organisational scripts created by military training should therefore be specific about who, when and during what circumstances violence can be used. Creating scripts within one realm does not mean a change of scripts in another; organisational scripts hold that behaviour is adapted to situation. While scripts are created for the routinisation of enemy targeting for instance, those scripts are specific to that context and would only be used given the right situational circumstances. Script theory in that way assumes a human sensitivity to the context and an ability to adapt behaviour accordingly.

This leads to the theorisation of violence against civilians being the product of a failure of scripted behaviour, a so-called script error. According to Gioia and Poole these can occur in two different ways. One is that the situation presents such a vast amount of different types of information that individuals are unable to apply one script and understand the course of events. The individual is then likely to adopt a mechanistic approach, choosing one script and acting according to that despite that script not necessarily being the right one. This will be called a
wrong-script situation. The other way is that the individual is faced with a situation so drastically different from everything experienced before that there is not script to guide behaviour, and an improvised script will be created in order to handle the situation. This will be called unscripted situation (Gioia and Poole 1984, 452). Unknown situations are relatively uncommon in many other organisations, yet the military presents higher risks for completely unknown situations than many other organisations do (Soeters 2018, 256). In case of an unscripted situation, violence should be more chaotic and uncontrolled than in the case of a wrong-script situation; the product of a lack of script rather than a choice of wrong script. Informational overload might also be especially prevalent in combat situations, as there is often much informational input, many disturbances and a lot of stress to make quick decisions. In these cases, soldiers may choose the wrong script, and act as if the civilian population were in fact armed combatants. This type of script error should then produce a type of violence that is more organised than the unscripted one, as soldiers would then apply normal combat techniques to handle the civilian population.

A more specific theorisation of the steps in the process of script error will be outlined in the method section.

3. Research design

The study aims at exploring the research question how do individuals come to perpetrate violence against civilians during wartime? In this section the research design chosen to explore this question will be outlined. As the theory concerns a process of individual change, process tracing was chosen as the best method for the step by step investigating of script error. First of all, the choice of method will be motivated. After that, a theorisation of all the steps in the mechanisms will be outlined, followed by an explanation of the case selection. Sources of empirical data are described and lastly the method of thematic analysis for data collection as well as a description of how the individual subjects for analysis were chosen from the large material is provided.

3.1 Method

The theory used in this study concerns a process by which individuals come to target civilians through the mechanism of script error, and the most beneficial way to test this theory was to use a method that allowed for an analysis of that actual process. For this purpose, process tracing was the most useful method.
Process tracing allows for a solid test of the causal mechanism, and includes a careful theorising around the different steps and individual mechanisms that lead from the independent variable of script error to the dependant variable of violence against civilians (Beach and Pedersen 2013; Collier 2011). With the assumption that violence against civilians is the outcome of some form of change in military behaviour, process tracing is a suitable method which can help account for how that change occurs. Since the theory did not specify under which exact circumstances the script error occurs, process tracing also allowed for a theory building exercise in which empirical evidence from the case provided information on how the causal story went and what to further include in the theory. The mechanism of script error is not possible to see through quantitative analysis, but requires more in-depth qualitative study of the individual behaviour and motivation, and as the theory of organisational scripts has not been applied to the phenomenon of violence before, no such information exists. A theory-building process tracing was therefore conducted; wherein the dependent variable was present while the value of the independent variable was to be found out through the analysis of the material. While some theory-building process tracing studies start off completely in the blind about a theorised mechanism, using deductive reasoning based on empirical analysis (Beach and Pedersen 2013, 16f), this study started off from a theoretical foundation. The sequential steps leading from scripted behaviour wherein non-combatant immunity is respected, to civilian targeting, was theorised and then tested. The mechanism of script error was also theorised, however in a flexible way that allowed for both an open analysis of the data and a revision of the mechanism where that was necessary.

During process tracing, if strong evidence against one step of the mechanism is found, the entire causal story will have to be either revised or discarded. The steps only work in combination with one another, and since the causal story is theorised as one containing several necessary conditions for violence to play out, all those conditions needed to be present unless a viable alternative to one step was found (Collier 2011, 824).
3.2 Theorisation of the process

*Step 1.* The first step of relevance to the theory concerns the scripts which each individual in the military should get from basic training and training specific to deployment. These scripts concern the rightful use of violence; towards whom violence may be directed and under what circumstances. While the military provides many different types of scripts, the scripts of concern are those related to violence. The scripts that dictate behaviour towards civilian groups and that emphasise norms of non-combatant immunity are the most important. However, guidelines of handling of POWs or the illegality of orders were also of interest, since these shed
light on the overall restraints and use of violence. By looking at documents that describe rules of engagement, training procedures and the instructions that were given to soldiers during training and deployment, the scripts provided by the military were examined. What was looked for during the data collection were the rules of war as they are stipulated in the Geneva convention. Rules of engagement, training and instructions should therefore include that combatants and non-combatants should be distinguished at all times, that the civilian population must not be target of attack, and that no unnecessary or excessive suffering must be caused. The Geneva convention also specifies how captured civilians and enemies should be handled and during what circumstances lethal violence may be used, and these aspects were integrated into the data that was collected (ICRC 1988). In addition to looking at official military documents, interviews gave information on actual learned and behaved scripts in according to this; that is that the soldiers actually received this training and integrated it into their military conduct. Length of training and what type of training that was provided; if it were for instance class room instructions or practiced scenarios etc. was also examined.

**Step 2.** This step includes some form of encounter between the armed actor and the civilian population. This encounter need not be of a hostile kind from the beginning, but this step simply means that one of the preconditions for violence against civilians to occur is proximity between the armed actor and civilian groups. The form of this encounter may vary, and it is operationalised as to include ordered operations in a civilian area, for instance a specific search operation in the area, passing through a civilian area during an operation or a combat situation in proximity to a civilian area. A civilian area is operationalised as any place were a larger group of civilians exist, such as villages, towns, cities, agricultural areas, roads or refugee camps.

**Step 3.** In proximity to the civilian population, a situation occurs that causes the script error. This situation does not need to include the civilian population directly; that is, it need not be a direct interaction between the armed actor and the civilians that creates the situation, but it can be any situation upon which the armed actor has to act. This was theorised to happen in one of two different ways.

*a.* The first type of situation that was theorised to cause script error is one that contains many different types of information, making processing difficult and the actor unsure of which script to use. The situation may present too much information for the individual actor to assess and understand, or varying types of information making choice of script difficult. This is likely to relate to step 3, wherein certain types of civilian encounters create confusing situations for the actor. Potential situations include if there are large civilian groups in the combat area,
there are civilians among the armed combatants, if something happens within the unit that makes processing difficult, or if civilians behave in ways that cause suspicion among the individuals in the unit.

Due to the amount of information that the actors have to process and the fact that multiple things happen at the same time, actors will subconsciously choose one script and act on that. In this case, violence against civilians is the result of an automatic choice of the ‘enemy script’ and a handling of the civilian population as if they were enemies. The violence produced by this type of script error was theorised to likely be of a more organised kind than type b, with actors being better able to account for the course of action afterwards. This is a scripted type of violence directed at the wrong target, and the violence is therefore likely to be of a combat type; organised and behaviourally within the frameworks of ‘normal’ military violence.

b. A situation occurs that is completely new to the actor, so that no previous scripts apply. If this step is present, the actor explains the situation as something they had never experienced before and is likely to express feelings related to surprise and shock. The situation will be described as unusual and out of the ordinary, and the actor will express a lack of training, practice or expertise in reference to situations of that kind. What type of situation this might be was not hypothesised and inductive reasoning based on the material aimed to shed light on how this might occur. The situation need not be new in relation to the war or completely unique in character, rather it is new to the individual within it; something for which the basic training has not provided enough scripts.

Due to the novelty of the situation, actors are unable to choose the right script and will behave in unscripted ways. In an effort to handle the situation, violence will be used against the civilian population. Since this violence is unscripted and caused by an absence of choice of action, unscripted violence is operationalised as chaotic and unorganised. This means a type of violence which does not develop according to normal military standards, for instance that shooting and other types of violence happen sporadically and without concerted effort; essentially that violence appears to be more the result of random impulses rather than planned behaviour. Afterwards, actors will have difficulties understanding what happened as no scripts were used to make sense of the situation or to guide action. Violence is likely to be explained as the cause of an instinctual and unprocessed action, for which the actors will have difficulties completely accounting for post-violence. Should sexual violence, torture, or other brutal forms of violence occur, this would be evidence of unscripted violence, as those are types of violence that should not exist within the usual repertoires of military violence.
Step 4. As a result of the steps outlined above, the dependent variable, violence against civilians is produced. As the qualitative method allowed for in depth analysis of the material, a broad definition of the variable is used. Given the mechanism’s relationship to the laws of war, violence against civilians is operationalised using the definition of war crime. Therefore, “wilful killing, torture or inhumane treatment, wilfully causing great suffering or serious injury to body or health” (Mehraux 2006, 26) of unarmed civilians is the dependent variable to explain.

3.3 Case selection

The universe of cases that the theory applies to are those cases where a traditional national army engaged in an armed conflict perpetrated violence against civilian groups. Due to the focus of the theory, it was more informative to use a case in which a direct form of violence had been used and not a case where civilian casualties were primarily due to distanced violence such as air strikes. Looking at a case where several individuals had perpetrated a personal type of violence provided more information on the micro-dynamics of military violence.

Beach and Pedersen argue for using a deviant case in theory building process tracing (Beach and Pedersen 2013, 154). First of all, since the independent variable is untested and only theorised, it is not possible to choose a typical case as such a case will have to demonstrate a known and typical variation of the variables. Secondly, deviant cases are cases that exhibit a surprising outcome; they present an unusual result given the circumstances and the general knowledge of the phenomenon (Seawright and Gerring 2008, 297). They are therefore useful for theory building exercises as new theoretical approaches can help explain outcomes that are surprising given what we already know (Beach and Pedersen 2013, 155).

This limited the universe of cases to those instances where a large number of civilians had been directly and intentionally killed by a state army during armed conflict. Due to time constraints and language limitations the case selection also had to be done with consideration to availability of data. For this reason, the US military was chosen because of the availability of data in English, the rich primary material that exists on US soldiers and the fact that the American army has been involved in a number of conflicts during the latest decades.

Considering this, the massacre in My Lai by American troops during the Vietnam war was chosen. Looking at the Vietnam war, My Lai is an unusual outcome as no other situation of that magnitude of civilian targeting took place during the war. The case is deviant in terms of the relatively high levels of civilian casualties as compared to any other single instance during that war, and as it is the only instance for which American soldiers were put on trial for
war crimes during the Vietnam War. Given the theoretical knowledge in the subject, the case also presents a surprising value of the dependent variable, wherein around 400 civilians were killed during a short time period by a unit that had no previous history of such atrocity, nor had been given any clear instructions from higher up in the hierarchy to target those civilians (Olson and Roberts 1998). Finally, the case is an interesting case to study, not only because of the puzzle that it presents, but also because of the interest it has gotten both in and outside academics. It is an influential case, commonly mentioned in reference to mass violence and violence against civilians. Using My Lai for the exploration of this theory thus aimed at both providing further insight into a case that many find fascinating, and seeing how a massacre of such magnitude could occur within a unit that had no track record of such atrocities.

3.4 Sources of empirical data

The process outlined takes place at the individual level, and detailed individual accounts of the case was therefore necessary. Wartime testimonies from soldiers was analysed to trace the organizational-psychological process of script error. As a criminal investigation of the case of My Lai took place, much of the information was taken from criminal hearings and trials. These provided a rich description of the course of events from several different individuals who were at the scene. Furthermore, information on general codes of conduct and rules of engagement was provided through analysis of military documents from the Vietnam war as well as secondary sources on military training. Most of this material was found in the Peers’ inquiry; a large inquiry held in 1969 and which was conducted to both investigate the My Lai massacre itself and the scope of the initial army investigation that took place right after the event (Peers Inquiry n.d.). It thus held both information from the individuals involved in the attack and documents related to the operation in general. Volume II of the Peers’ inquiry contained over 20,000 pages of interviews with around 350 witnesses, divided into 32 books which are available online. These books have been the primary source material (Peers Inquiry; Volume II, Testimonies n.d.).

When using eyewitness accounts and the sort of self-reporting which wartime testimonies inevitably are, it is important to be aware of the potential misrepresentation of information that might occur. Given the sensitivity of the subject of war crimes and violence, people have incentives not to tell the full story, or over- or understate their own role in the course of events. Furthermore, even in the absence of a conscious misrepresentation of the event, the human ability to both take in information and remember it correctly has its flaws. This is especially the case when dealing with traumatic or stressful situations, such as war.
Criminal investigations also come with certain complexities, as all involved have incentives to limit their own role in the violence due to the risk of being indicted. In addition, the Peers Inquiry in particular creates certain problems, as it was conducted about two years after the event, making the risk of contamination of the facts even greater, and the chances of subjects remembering everything correctly significantly smaller. The data provided by testimonies therefore needed to be carefully assessed. Since the theory dealt with individual accounts of processes that largely take part cognitively in response to the situation, triangulation of some data was difficult. Course of events and actions of individuals were assessed using several accounts of the same situation, however information on individuals’ responses and motivation for action had to be based on individual testimonies, wherein the study had to rely to some extent on the accuracy of those accounts. This is an inherent problem in studying individual level processes, but the study had to rely on eyewitness reports despite the risks of inaccuracy. This was handled with a careful assessment of the facts and transparency concerning those facts that seemed questionable. As noted by Doris and Murphy, “the alternative to relying on eyewitness accounts is a phenomenologically impoverished account of the issues, and this carries a greater risk of distortion than do the vagaries of testimony” (Doris and Murphy 2007, 33). The use of the Peers Inquiry as the base for the data collection was therefore motivated, despite its inherent flaws.

3.5 Method of data collection

With the Peers inquiry including more than 20 000 pages of interrogations and documents about the My Lai incident, a selection process concerning what material to use had to be done. Since the theory concerns perpetrators of violence; those interrogations with individuals suspected of murder were extracted from the material with all the interrogations. While a broad definition of the dependent variable had been chosen which includes more types of violence than only lethal, lethal violence was chosen as the selection criteria for the material. This ensured reliability, and in those cases were lethal violence was observed, other types of violence were also present. A method of thematic content analysis was used during the data collection, based on Braun and Clarke’s instructions (2012). This method of content analysis allows for a detailed analysis of the data in relation to certain themes. It is a flexible way to look into data that makes it possible to both beforehand code and look for certain themes in the material, but also during the data collection include new themes that are recurring in the data and that are useful for the theory (Braun and Clarke 2012). This worked well with the combination of theoretical building and inductive reasoning that the study aimed at.
Firstly, the interrogations with those suspected of murder were analysed, and the themes were coded in accordance with the operationalisation of the causal steps. In order to broaden the picture of what happened, other interrogations than those suspected of murder were also included in the data material. Those who were in the higher chain of command and who ordered the operation were included as well. These were analysed in order to understand the different decision-making processes at the various levels of the military chain, and also in order to understand the violence in relation to the broader goals of the operation. Secondly, some individuals not suspected of murder were included. These were chosen based on a micro-massacre that happened during My Lai; an instance where a large group of civilians were killed in a ditch. This event stood out during the data collection as the one instance where the largest group of civilians were targeted, and a situation which seemed to be prevalent in several individuals’ memory of My Lai. These individuals who were present at the scene yet who either were not ordered to kill or refused to kill were included in the analysis in order to provide depth to the understanding of this situation. The strong presence of the theme of obedience to authority that the thematic analysis showed, further motivated an inclusion of those who disobeyed order to further be able to make sense of the situation.

In the end, this meant that the data material consisted of a total of 26 soldiers suspected of murder, out of which five refused to testify and three refused to talk about the specific instance of My Lai, yet talked about training and the overall operation in the area. One of the five that refused to testify was Lieutenant Calley, however his testimony could be found in the CID investigation and the subsequent trial from which unedited extracts have been provided in Olson and Roberts (1998), and some additional information in the summary of findings that were provided at the end of the Peers inquiry. Furthermore, the interrogations of the two commanders who were directly in charge of the operation were included as well. Lastly, four other individuals were included, all who were present at the micro-massacre. This left the empirical material with a total of 28 interrogation of individuals involved in My Lai, for which a full list is provided in Appendix A.

4. Empirical analysis

4.1 Case background

During 1968, North Vietnam decided to launch its biggest operation so far in the Vietnam war; the Tet offensive. The goal was to, in a series of attacks, take over important strategic positions in South Vietnam from American and South Vietnamese forces, and essentially make a last big
effort to win the war. The offensive failed; North Vietnamese forces were unable to take over the two main targets, Saigon and Hue, and were forced to draw back (Moïse 2017, 135f). Quang Ngai province was one of the areas in South Vietnam that came under attack. This was an area that, despite being officially under the control of the South Vietnamese government and American forces, had been subject of heavy recruitment from Vietcong with much Vietcong support in the rural areas. Beginning in 1967 efforts were made by the US to clear the area of Vietcong support, and additional ground forces were put in. Several companies were brought in under the Americal Division for the operation Task Force Barker, and after January 1968 their primary goal became to locate and eliminate the Vietcong’s 48th Local Force Battalion that was retracting through Quang Ngai after the failed Tet offensive (Olson and Roberts 1998, 13ff).

It was during this operation that Task Force Barker went through the village of My Lai, in the Pinkville area. My Lai was believed to be a strong hold for the 48th battalion, and on the 16th March 1968 the three companies of Task Force Barker were supposed to go in and clear the area. The companies had looked for the 48th battalion since January that year, yet never encountered it in a face to face combat. While Alpha and Bravo company were planned to go around the village of My Lai and act as a blockade against fleeing Vietcong soldiers, Charlie company, led by Captain Ernest Medina was going to launch the attack on the village (Olson and Roberts 1998, 17; Peers Report; Summary of Findings 1970, 10). On the evening of the 15th March 1968 captain Medina briefed Charlie Company about the operation that was to take place the following day. The briefing followed a funeral held for a soldier who was killed by a booby trap some days earlier. Medina said that My Lai was a strong hold for the Vietcong 48th battalion and as other units had faced heavy resistance in the Pinkville area, Medina also told the soldiers to prepare for a tough battle (Peers Inquiry; Summary of Findings 1970, 13). The soldiers were informed that the civilians who usually live in My Lai would be away at the market in the neighbouring village (ibid). The operation was of a search-and-destroy type, where one unit would go through the village and push everyone out, one unit would clear the houses, bunkers and tunnels and one final unit would burn the houses and kill the livestock (ibid).

As the Charlie company landed their helicopters on the landing zone just outside of the village, some reports came forward that there was enemy fire, yet the investigation showed that not at any time during the day was any resistance encountered (Peers Inquiry; Summary of Findings 1970, 2;3). The majority of the civilian population in the village was not at the market, instead they were in the village. Some started running towards the forest when the unit
approached. As the unit walked through the village, there was widespread killing of the inhabitants. A majority of those who were not killed immediately were rounded in two groups and executed; one group in a large ditch and the other on the trail leading out from the village. There were also several reports of rapes. The estimate for civilian casualties has varied, yet the criminal investigation division estimated the number to be around 400 (ibid).

While information about what happened in My Lai came forth to higher commanders, no thorough investigation immediately followed the massacre. Commander Henderson held brief interviews with some of the soldiers involved, yet no official investigation started. The final report about the attack stated that the result was 128 killed Vietcong (Peers Inquiry; Summary of Findings 1970, 28ff; Olson and Roberts 1998, 23; Allison 2012, 62). In 1969 Ronald Ridenhour, who had been in the Charlie company, yet not present in My Lai, got information about the event and wrote to a number of leading government officials. This prompted an investigation on the event, led by Lieutenant William Peers and which lead to a series of war crime charges and a larger criminal investigation. In the end, only Lieutenant Calley, second in command after Medina, was found guilty of the murder of 22 Vietnamese civilians (Olson and Roberts 1998, 24ff).

4.2 Results

Step 1. Scripts

The soldiers first received basic military training in various places in the US, followed by specific training in relation to Vietnam in Hawaii and finally training upon arrival to Vietnam (Olson and Roberts 1998, 10). Due to a large amount of soldiers not considered deployable under the existing deployment criteria, the brigade had several rounds of replacements during training in Hawaii, and the training period was shortened from eight weeks to four weeks (Peers Inquiry; Summary of Findings 1970, 4;5). The main focus during these weeks of training was on combat and jungle warfare (ibid). During the first day of training in Vietnam, instructions were supposed to cover laws of war, handling of prisoners of war and handling of civilian groups. Instructions on the Geneva convention were directed to be given to everyone during this day as well. Furthermore, each soldier was to receive two wallet sized cards on the codes of conduct (ibid. 4;7f, 9;5). The card ‘Nine rules’ concerned the relations with the local population, and while not mentioning anything about violence against civilians specifically, it outlined general appropriate behaviour towards the Vietnamese population (see Appendix B). The card ‘The enemy in your hands’ explained that the Geneva conventions concerning
prisoners of war had to be followed and that all prisoners should be treated humanely (see Appendix C).

Among the soldiers the knowledge of these codes was varying. Several did not remember any training in the laws of war nor the handling of non-combatants. Neither did they remember being given any of the cards (Mitchell, 23; Arcoren, 34; Bernardt, 37; Dursi, 32), while others remembered getting training yet not receiving any of the cards (Bergthold, 23; Mitchell, 23; Hutson, 35). Those that did remember training stated that it was mostly in relation to the handling of POWs and not as much about non-combatants, and they also often referred to it being very brief and vague in their memory (Carter, 4; Dursi, 32; Hooton, 13; Medina, 76, 73; Hutto, 31; Hutson, 35; Stanley, 37; Bergthold, 23f, Conti, 6). Carter was asked about the wallet sized cards, and the conversation is one example of how the training appeared to be very shallow in people’s minds.

Q [interrogating officer]. Did they issue everybody one?
A [Carter]. I know I had one. I can't say everybody did.
Q. What did you do with yours?
A. I threw it away.
Q. It is actually a wallet-sized card?
A. Right, but I never carried a wallet in Vietnam, sir.
Q. Did you read the card at all?
A. Yes, I did. I glanced over it.
Q. Do you recall what it said?
A. No, I don't. I wasn't that much interested in it. (Carter, 4).

When asked by the interrogating officer to explain how to handle POWs or civilians, many of the soldiers became confused with the question and little consensus was found among the soldiers as to the exact way to act (Hutson, 35; Mitchell, 23; Stanley, 37). Some also expressed confusion in relation to the training and the actual conduct on the ground (Bergthold, 25; Carter, 3; Dursi, 32). For instance, in reference to what to do if an individual would run away even when ordered to stop, scripts appeared to differ between individuals. Bergthold explained how they were taught that if they came across a man of military age, they should ask him for ID and if he ran away from them, they should first tell him to stop in Vietnamese, then fire into the air, to lastly shoot the individual in the leg (Bergthold, 25). Hutto explained the same procedure, yet without reference to the specification of military aged male, instead he uses the word
‘Vietnamese’ (Hutto, 33). Carter instead noted that if a Vietnamese would run from him, he would automatically assume him guilty and therefore shoot him (Carter, 5). Furthermore, Bernardt, who did not remember being trained in the Geneva Conventions nor the handling of non-combatants, neither was he given any of the cards, recounted an instance when he came across an old lady whom he asked to stop. When she did not stop, Medina allegedly told him that whenever a Vietnamese does not stop when ordered to do so, they should shoot them (Bernardt, 38).

Concerning training in legality of orders, some soldiers did not receive any instructions in this aspect (Mitchell, 26; T’souvas, 24). Others explained that while they were aware of the fact that some orders could be considered illegal and that they might have a judicial right to refuse them, training had primarily been about obedience (Stanley, 37; Hutson, 35; Hutto, 32; West, 29; Dursi, 32). One soldier referred to rumours that during WWII, soldiers would get shot on the spot if they refused to obey (T’souvas, 24). There appeared to be a general consensus among the soldiers that hard repercussions would follow in the case of disobedience. They also said that praxis in the case of illegal orders was to execute the order and then turn to the higher chain of command (Stanley, 37; Hutson, 35; Hutto, 32; T’souvas, 24, West, 29). Furthermore, when asked why they did not report the incident of My Lai, or other illegal conduct, a majority explained that they did not know where to turn to do such report. Soldiers also expressed not being given adequate information about what an illegal order was, and not being taught any examples of what might classify as one (Stanley, 37; Hutson, 35; Hutto, 32; T’souvas, 24, West, 29; Dursi, 32). This would relate to general scripts concerning non-combatants; training in handling of civilians should provide soldiers with information on what is legal and what is not.

West’s answer to the question on training on obedience captures a general confusion that was present among several soldiers.

“Well, yes I was taught in basic training that I didn't have to obey an illegal order, but they never did stress what, you know, exactly what an illegal order was. Now, also I was taught during my [...] training when we was in Hawaii that we could, you know, if you disobeyed a order in combat--well you was liable to court-martial at that time anyway. This kind of puzzled me. Now, how can you be liable to a court-martial if you obey a order and then still be liable to a court-martial if you disobey a order” (West, 29)

Both Colonel Henderson, Captain Kotouc and Commanding General Koster stressed that they always made sure their unit was aware of the rules of engagement, and that civilians were
treated respectfully (Henderson, 235; Koster, 115; Kotouc, 55-56). This is not corroborated by the rest of the data, and since they have incentives to misrepresent this information due to higher level of responsibility for the course of events, their statements in these questions cannot be regarded as trustworthy. Koster also noted that there were strong rules around the burning of houses, however the rest of the data suggests that these were not transmitted to the unit (Koster 115-116).

Lastly, the data showed some tendency for soldiers to have difficulties in distinguishing between combatants and non-combatants, and that there was no instruction as to how they would go about doing this on the ground (Mitchell, 16; Bernardt, 38).

[Interrogation leader]: In a soldier's terms, how do you define a noncombatant in your own mind?

Mitchell: First, sir, I guess I'd have to define who was combatant. The simple fact is that you could pass anyone en route to a mission who would seem like any everyday farmer, I imagine. However, I wouldn't vouch for the fact that the man wouldn't shoot at me when we turned the corner. Therefore, it would be hard for me to define a non-combatant, unless he was completely or totally disabled or too young (Mitchell, 16).

This showed that an essential part of training in the laws of war concerning the difference between combatants and non-combatants was lacking.

To summarise, the training given to the soldiers was neither coherent nor extensive as to how they should handle civilians. The fact that instructions on the laws of war were so brief and that not everyone got them or remembered them makes it likely that none of the soldiers had strong scripts in relation to non-combatant immunity. What most people had taken away from training instead concerned obedience to authority, and the data on the first step of the process therefore shows that obedience to authority was the strongest script among combatants.

**Step 2. Civilian proximity**

The operation was not expected to have any extensive civilian proximity. The civilians in the village were according to intelligence reports supposed to have been at the market in a neighbouring village, and no major civilian encounter was thus expected. Commander Kotouc however noted that one could never assume a complete absence of civilians in Vietnam, as every operation he had been in had experienced some degree of civilian presence (Kotouc, 9, 62). When arriving to My Lai, most inhabitants were present and testimonies suggest that the
company encountered civilians as soon as they landed the helicopters (Bergthold, 7). My Lai would count as a situation in which the civilian proximity was in direct relation to the operation itself, as the goal was to take over My Lai as a Vietcong stronghold. The soldiers conducted a search and destroy operation, which put them in direct contact with the civilian group that inhabited the village. People were hiding in houses and bunkers, which meant that the search mission had to be performed by gathering the civilians from various locations in the village. It was during this process that civilians were killed (Peers Inquiry; Summary of Findings 1970, 26ff; Bergthold, 7; Stanley, 8-10)

**Step 3a. Wrong-script situation**

Evidence was found that an enemy script was used to handle the civilian population, however very little data suggested that this was due to a situation with too much information to assess. No soldiers testified to the situation being overwhelming prior to the civilian targeting. Some testified to feeling overwhelmed when witnessing the killing or seeing the amount of bodies (Carter, 29; West, 10; Stanley, 34), yet this was evidently after the violence had started and does therefore not explain the outbreak of violence. The unit was not shot at during any time of the day, which suggests that a situation of confusion due to stress or several different types of information is unlikely to have developed. There were no other actors in the area, no enemy fire, no land mines or booby traps or other hidden weapons, and no other situation to handle than the civilian groups who were present in My Lai (Peers Inquiry; Summary of Findings 1970, 26ff).

Much evidence points towards that fact that people killed civilians because they felt like that was the order of the day. Most people referred to the briefing held by Medina, in which he gave the impression that all civilians would be absent, that everyone in My Lai would be Vietcong or Vietcong sympathisers and that the objective with the operation was to destroy the village. The shooting of civilians was thus a way to carry out what people understood the orders to be (West, 6; T’souvas, 6; Widmer, 7-8; Williams, 6; Conti, 27-28). Some recognised that these were not direct orders to kill civilians, and instead explained how that briefing created a general feeling that everything and everyone in the village was to be destroyed (Smith, 6; Stanley, 5; Lacroix, 6-8; Hutto, 21; Widmer, 7-8). When arriving to the village, these soldiers testified to different situations that made them shoot. West recalled how he and some other soldiers saw people running from the village and together agreed that the group was military aged males. After some people in the group were shot, the rest stopped, and West and the other
soldiers gathered them and separated the men and the women, evidence to the fact that the initial assessment of the group being all male was wrong (West, 11). Others also testified to shooting people who were running from the village, and they explained how the running made them assume it was Vietcong while the distance made it hard to see if they had weapons or not (Williams, 13; Hutto, 10; Hutso, 11, 26-27).

There were also soldiers who did not interpret the briefing as stating that everyone in the village should be shot (Bernardt, 2; Carter, 23; Stanley, 5; Maples, 3-4). Maples for instance testified to not understanding it as if Medina’s orders were to kill women and children (Maples, 3-4).

There were testimonies that related to the separation of combatants and non-combatants. The briefing was by some interpreted as saying that there were only combatants in the village; that women had been seen using weapons and children setting up booby traps and that the traditional category of non-combatants was removed (Cowan, 15; Conti, 28; Smith, 18; Williams, 6, 27). For instance, when saying that the order was that everyone in the village was Vietcong, Williams was asked by the interrogating officer if he thought this extended to women and children as well even though they posed no threat, he replied that they might not be carrying a weapon that day, but could be the next (Williams, 6, 27). Dursi remembered Medina saying that if they saw a man, woman or child, chances would be that they carried weapons or supplies for Vietcong (VC), indicating that even though Medina never ordered the killing of civilians, he more or less said that everyone was an enemy (Dursi, 6). Calley said that since Medina had stated that the village would be all VC, he did not assess the groups that he encountered

*I was ordered to go in there and destroy the enemy. That was my job on that day. That was the mission I was given. I did not sit down and think in terms of men, women and children. They were all classified the same and that was the classification that we dealt with, just as enemy soldiers* (Calley in Olson and Roberts 1998, 185).

Other examples of being directly ordered to kill were brought up. One situation that was mentioned several times in the material was the micro-massacre mentioned previously, where Calley brought a group of civilians to a ditch were Conti and Meadlo stood, telling his men to “take care of them” (Conti, 32). Dursi and Carter also testified to being present at the scene, as well as Stanley and Bernardt (Bernardt, 95-96; Carter, 36-37; Dursi, 12; Stanley 19-20). Conti and Meadlo interpreted the order as guarding the group, and did so until Calley came back a while later (Conti, 32). Conti testified to Calley saying “I thought I told you to take care of
them”, to which he replied “we are taking care of them” (Conti, 32). Calley is then to have said “I mean kill them” (Conti, 32). According to Dursi, Calley came up and said “Why haven’t you wasted them yet?” (Dursi, 12). Conti explained how he and Meadlo looked at each other, none of them wanting to do it, while Calley lined the people up (Conti, 32). In Dursi’s account, Calley placed the group in a ditch and told them all to fire into the ditch. Carter refused and walked away, while Meadlo and Calley started firing (Dursi, 12). Both Dursi and Conti testified to Meadlo crying while shooting. Dursi testified

“She turned to me and said, "Why aren’t you firing? Shoot." He was still crying. I just said, "I can’t" I had told Lieutenant Calley, "Send me to jail, but I’m not going to shoot" (Dursi, 12).

While it is unclear who else fired into the ditch, the event is also mentioned by Stanley and Maples who witnessed it. Stanley testified to Maples refusing to shoot; that Maples responded to Calley’s order by saying “you can’t order me to do that” (Stanley, 19). In reference to this situation, Calley explained how he only saw a group of enemies that were to be destroyed, since that was his job that day (Calley in Olson and Roberts 1998, 185). This relates back to the classification of enemies; Calley claimed that Medina had given them the classification during the briefing that everyone in My Lai would be enemies. When asked specifically about women and children, Calley said that Medina did not “break it down like that” (ibid 186), instead they “had been taught from the moment they got there that men, women and children were enemy soldiers” (ibid). Furthermore, in reference to the situation in the ditch, Calley testified to Medina ordering to shoot the civilians if Calley was unable to get the group to go with them. Calley described that his main goal at the time was to get his unit across the ditch, and that he did not want anything slowing them down. This, in combination with Medina’s alleged order; “waste the Vietnamese and get my people out in line, out in the position they were supposed to be” (Calley in Olson and Roberts 1998, 185f), made him order the killing. In his account, it appears that the group of civilians and the ditch did take on a rather militaristic value, where he felt the need to prioritise the movement of the unit and therefore had to get rid of the obstacle that the group posed.

During Meadlo’s interrogation, Meadlo first asked if the interrogating officer was ever in Vietnam, and then said “did you know who your enemy was? Can you honestly say who the enemy was” (Meadlo, 11). After that he asked if the officer knew about anyone who refused orders, and when the officer replied that they just had a soldier who testified to refusing to kill, Meadlo said:
“From the first day we go in the service, the very first day, we are learned to take orders and not to refuse any kind of order [...] An officer tells you to go and stand on your head, it’s not your right to refuse that order, and you go out there and do it because you’re ordered to. [...] If you refuse the order, the son-of-a-bitch might shoot you or the next day you spend the rest of your life in the stockade for refusing an order, but you’re trained to take orders from the first day you go to that damned service, and you come back and, all right, you want to try some people that had to take orders.” (Meadlo, 11).

Hutto explained how the shooting first started as the company was walking in line through the field towards the village and said that he never heard an order to start firing. Someone started shooting and then everyone followed, so he just assumed that an order had been given (Hutto, 10). While Dursi concluded that he thought the entire assault happened because Calley misinterpreted Medina’s order, he explained his own violence as a mistake. He saw someone on the rice field who did not stop when he ordered them to, so he shot and when he approached the body he realised it was a woman carrying a child. He explained; “I didn't know she had the baby, and I thought it was a man” (Dursi in Peers Inquiry; Volume II, Testimonies, Book 31, Confidential). Dursi also confirmed the statement by Hutto that all of a sudden everyone started firing and that it was unclear who or when the order had been given (Dursi, 8-9).

When moving into the village from the landing zone, the company moved in an organised line, firing as they were moving forward (Hutto, 8-9; Stanley, 9-10). This continued as they moved through the village (Hutto, 8-9) suggesting civilians were targeted as if they were enemy soldiers.

To summarise, much evidence suggests that the wrong script was applied to the civilian population; that civilians were targeted in an organised and militaristic fashion. This did however not happen due to an overload of information; since there were no Vietcong in the area the unit did not experience any chaotic nor difficult situation in the sense of a battle or heavy firing. Instead, it appears like the wrong script was used due to a misinterpretation of the situation beforehand leading to a belief that everyone in the village was in fact the enemy. While some were directly ordered to shoot, others shot civilians because everyone else did. Thus, there appears to have been to layers to the trigger of the violence; one including the direct order of shooting and one including the more indirect conformity to what everyone else was doing. Both of these layers appear to have been informed by the misinterpretation of the village as a stronghold, leading to the wrong script being applied to the civilian population.
Step 3b. Unscripted situation

The data did not provide much evidence of the situation being so completely new that no script could apply. The factors that were described as unusual with the situation was that the company expected heavy resistance and had been told that My Lai would be a heavily fortified strong hold wherein they would face a tough battle. It was the first search and destroy mission for the Charlie Company (Williams; Peers Inquiry; Summary of Findings 1970), which might have contributed to experiencing the situation as very new. As the company had suffered several casualties without actually facing the Vietcong, instead loosing 42 soldiers to booby traps and land mines since being assigned to Task Force Barker (Peers Inquiry; Summary of Findings 1970, 11), some testified of a feeling of excitement in finally getting to fight the Vietcong (Carter, 14-15; Hutto, 5-7; Maples, 14-15; Conti, 28). Furthermore, they remembered Medina talking in the briefing about My Lai being a chance to get back at the Vietcong, and get revenge for their lost comrades (ibid).

Mentioned was also the funeral that was held right before the briefing on the 15th, and how this might have contributed to the feeling of wanting to get even (ibid). On the 14th March, a soldier had been killed and four others injured in a booby trap (Peers Inquiry; Summary of Findings 1970, 11). Conti described a feeling of everyone being psyched up about the battle (Conti, 28). The fact that there was no armed resistance upon arrival to the village, but only civilians, can in that way be seen as an unusual situation. Hutto said that it was possible that everyone expected a very heavy battle, and when there was no one to fight the soldiers simply went through the village, killing civilians instead (Hutto, 21). West talked about no orientation being given as to what the unit was supposed to do if what they expected to find was not present (West, 28). This relates back to the conclusion that Medina had given no instructions as to how potential non-combatants found in the hamlet should be handled (Peers Inquiry; Summary of Findings 1970, 13). It is an interesting aspect in relation to scripts; the fact that West explained how the situation happened because of a lack of script, or orientation in his words, as to what the unit was supposed to do in the event of no enemies (West, 28).

Some soldiers reacted to the orders to target civilians as being unusual, for instance the situation with the ditch that was described above (Carter, 36-27; Stanley, 19-20). For Meadlo, who was crying as he fired, it was clearly a situation to which he did not know how to react. Carter, who was also ordered to fire into the ditch but refused, later during the day shot himself in the foot and had to be evacuated. Stanley suggested that Carter was shocked by what
was happening and that he therefore deliberately hurt himself in order to get out, while Carter himself stated that his pistol jammed (Stanley, 15; Carter, 7, 41).

Reference to obedience to orders would suggest that the violence occurred in a wrong-script situation, yet how the orders came about would have to be explained further and could possibly be captured by an unscripted situation. When individuals refer to violence being ordered, the script error of an unscripted situation would then have to be placed higher up in the hierarchy wherein something causes the authorities of the group to order violence. In this case this would be Calley’s order on site to kill the civilian group. As his testimony provides more evidence to the fact that he used the wrong script for the civilian population (Calley in Olson and Roberts 1998, 185f), there is little data that suggests an unscripted situation in relation to ordered violence.

According to Carter, the first killing occurred as the troops were leaving the landing zone, when an old man approached the unit, waving his arms over his head. Allegedly, Calley or Medina, Carter could not remember who, ordered the men in the unit to kill the old man, and someone opened fire (Carter, 29). Shortly after landing the helicopters, Medina testified to shooting a woman. He said that he first saw her on the ground, and assumed she was dead. When he turned around he saw her move in the corner of his eye, and shot her (Medina, 24). Several soldiers witnessed this incident (Carter, 30; Bernardt, 13; Thompson, 53). Even in the absence of direct orders, behaviour of the leaders of the unit might have triggered confusion among the troops as to the appropriate way to behave, and this could be interpreted as an unusual situation created by the commanders.

In terms of unscripted behaviour, two soldiers testified to witnessing several rapes during the attack (Lacroix, 17; Hutto, 13, 16). Soldiers also stated that rape was a common occurrence in the C-company (Bernardt, 44; Lacroix, 45). Bernardt explained how it was almost standard procedure to mistreat civilians as they were going through villages; stealing things, burning houses and raping people. It happened with close to complete impunity, and Bernardt explained how people came to avoid him as he spoke up against it (Bernardt, 43).

Carter, who claimed to not have killed anyone, testified to the entire situation in My Lai being chaotic and difficult to watch. Several times he described feelings of disgust and shock in relation to what he saw. To him, the violence perpetrated in My Lai appeared to be more brutal and unusual than during other operations, as this is the event he claimed to have afterwards kept him up at night (Carter, 47). Bergthold also explained moments of confusion, for instance when they first came to the village and everybody was firing while he did not understand why (Bergthold, 7). The moment before Carter shot himself in the foot, him and
Stanley; some of the people who testified to reacting strongly to the situation and who both interfered or refused to kill during the day, sat down inside the village. Carter said that Widmer asked if he could use Carter’s gun, which he could. Widmer then allegedly went around shooting wounded civilians, appearing to enjoy himself up to the point that the pistol jammed (Carter, 40-41). Widmer’s behaviour was described by Carter and Stanley as surprising and shocking (Carter, 40-41; Stanley, 13-14). Dursi talked about being shocked by the way violence was perpetrated; saying that the way people were lined up and shot in the ditch reminded him of “newsreels of Hitler” (Dursi, 20). The ditch appears to have been something that stuck in several people’s mind. Thompson first expressed how he could not understand how people got into the ditch. He later explained how the people in the ditch made no sense to him, as Vietcong would never have decided to hide in the ditch in the first place and the unit would never gather dead bodies in a ditch after killing the enemy (Thompson, 82, 113).

Thompson is one of the individuals who appears to have been the most shocked by the situation; so shocked that he decided to land his helicopter twice and attempt to stop the killing. He testified to several times reporting over the radio that civilians were being killed. One time he landed close to the ditch and the other time he saw a group of civilians hiding in a bunker and some American soldiers approaching the bunker (Thompson, 10-11). This situation was noted by other soldiers, both because of the unusual behaviour of Thompson landing the helicopter without being ordered to do so and because of what happened afterwards (Koster, 47; Medina, 37). The interrogating offices noted that other soldier testified to Thompson asking his co-pilot to cover him from American troops; that he was scared of getting shot by his own unit. Thompson himself was vague about this fact, yet admitted that he in the state of mind he was in at the time could have said that (Thompson, 73-75).

In summary, while some soldiers did express the situation as unusual, this was mostly in relation to the violence being perpetrated. It appears as if the most unusual factor with My Lai was the discrepancy between the expectations and the reality. Some elements of the unscripted situation were found; for example the one soldier who said that there were no instructions of what to do if they did not find what they expected. Furthermore, it was their first search and destroy mission, and the combination of being faced with a new kind of operation and then getting surprised by the absence of Vietcong and the presence of civilians might have startled people to act unscripted. Yet, the organised nature of the violence and the fact that the situation prior to the violence was not extremely out of the ordinary according to most of the soldiers suggests it was more of a wrong-script situation that an unscripted one.
Step 4. Violence against civilians

The summary of findings from the Peers inquiry stated that approximately 400 civilians were killed as a result of the My Lai attack, and that these were killed by artillery, gunship and small arms fire. Some casualties were concluded to have occurred in situations that “would preclude the assignment of blame” (Peers Inquiry; Summary of Findings 1970, 52f) while most were the result of direct killing (ibid). There were also testimonies to other types of violence, such as sexual violence and excessive violence, as mentioned previously (ibid). Criminal investigation command investigations compiled reports of around 20 instances of rape (Olson and Roberts 1998, 99). The largest group of civilians was reported to have been killed in the ditch mentioned before, where between 50-75 bodies were seen (ibid 14f).
Figure 2: Empirics applied to the theorised process of script error

Scripts:
- Shortened training period and lack of training meant no scripts or inadequate scripts of non-combatant immunity.
- Scripts of obedience to authority produced by training and experiences after deployment. Enforced by rumours of hard repercussions. Inadequate information on the refusal of illegal orders.
- Scripts of indistinguishability between combatant and non-combatants in Vietnam produced after deployment

Civilian proximity:
Operation in civilian area expected to be 1) Vietcong stronghold and 2) emptied of civilians

Wrong-script situation and behaviour:
- Expectations of VC stronghold
- Obedience to the order of the day as well as direct orders
- Lack of clarity concerning who was combatant and who was non-combatant
- Civilians killed as if enemy
  - Organised violence

Unscripted situation:
- New situation
  - Expectations of the first VC encounter
  - Expectations of an unusually difficult battle
- People higher up in the hierarchy using violence and ordering violence

Violence against civilians
4.3 Interpretation of results

The hypothesised causal mechanism did not fully capture the course of events. The first step of the mechanism was not present as expected, since inadequate training in the handling of non-combatants failed to produce general and universal scripts in reference to civilians. A number of soldiers did not remember receiving any training at all in norms of non-combatant immunity. The ones that did, testified that the training was very brief and shallow, and mostly involving classroom instructions. Arguably, the training received did not produce the scripts necessary to prevent non-combatant targeting. The training period was significantly shortened which likely contributed to lack of scripts. The cards that were supposed to have been issued to all personnel would, given the premise for how scripts develop, probably not have produced the type of strong scripts that would have been necessary. As scripts are supposed to act in somewhat unconscious ways, guiding both cognition and behaviour, the soldiers would not have been able to develop any strong scripts simply based on the reading of a few, very brief instructions. The training in the cases where it was given was more comprehensive and might have helped to provide a deeper knowledge and a stronger script for the handling of non-combatants. Yet, since scripts are developed through a process of behaviour, the instructions did not provide enough opportunity to make norms of non-combatant immunity a part of the soldier’s normal behaviour.

The strongest evidence of a lack of relationship between scripts of non-combatant immunity and violence against civilians, showing that the mechanism did not play out as expected, was that there was no relationship between training and instructions, and actual behaviour. Some soldiers remembered the training, and remembered being given the cards yet still killed civilians. Other soldiers did not remember the training, nor the cards, and did not kill any non-combatants.

The data collection showed a recurring reference made by the soldiers to scripts of obedience. Almost every soldier who was asked about the refusal of illegal orders explained how they, despite being somewhat aware of the fact that there was the possibility to refuse to act out an illegal order, did not see any situation in which they actually would. It appeared that their strongest impression from their basic training was in reference to this; that they were taught to follow the orders of their commanders. Even in the face of an order they felt illegal, most soldiers explained how they had learned to first carry out the order and then report it. This script appeared to be the strongest, which suggests a hierarchy of scripts in the minds of the soldiers. Meadlo is evidence of this. Whether or not he received the norm of non-combatant
immunity from military training or if it was more about a general moral inhibition to violence against civilians, the fact that he suffered emotionally from the killing he was ordered to do, is evidence that some script existed within him that made him averse to the killing of civilians. Yet he did it, and later explained how strong the script of obedience was in him. To him it became a question of survival as he talked about rumours of getting shot as a punishment for not obeying. Relating this to scripts, there is thus a need for scripts to both be practised and engrained in the individual, but also enforced. Since the scripts develop in response to what usually happens, it is likely that stronger scripts are to be developed in response to situations that have stronger consequences. There was no evidence found that the soldiers had been through a situation wherein someone was killed or severely punished for disobedience, however it might have been enough with the emphasis on obedience in training and the general perception that there would be severe consequences in the case of disobedience, in order to produce a strong script. Furthermore, the only practical and applied training that the soldiers went through concerned combat, meaning that obedience to orders was practiced while non-combatant immunity was not. As noted by some soldiers, violence against civilians was common and practised repeatedly and with impunity. In the hierarchy of scripts, it is therefore not strange that obedience was placed above non-combatant immunity, since there were no experienced negative consequences of not behaving according to the rules in the latter case.

In addition to this, it needs to be added that scripts are likely to form during active deployment as well and not only during basic training. Given that the soldiers essentially had no scripts or only very weak scripts in relation to non-combatants, a widespread pattern of violence against civilians in the company is likely to have produced scripts of civilian targeting among the individuals, or at least removed or changed the few scripts that existed which prohibited violence against civilians.

The step of civilian proximity was present, and most notable in relation to this was that the soldiers did not expect to be in such close contact with that big of a civilian group. They did however expect some civilian presence, as this was usually the case. The situation itself is arguably one with the highest risk of civilian targeting; a type of civilian proximity where the actual operation is in close contact with civilian groups, inevitably making the civilians a part of the military operation.

Moving on to the actual situation in which violence broke out, the theorised mechanism was present to a certain degree, yet not completely as theorised. The strongest evidence was found for a wrong-script situation; where the civilian population was targeted as if being enemies. They were systematically killed in a combat manner, and even though some soldiers
testified to the situation being chaotic and confusing, this seems to be mostly in relation to the amount of civilians killed and does in that way not refer to the trigger of the killing. To a majority, what seems to have triggered the violence was a combination of the revenge attitude given at the briefing, the fact that the village was ordered to be destroyed, and the surprising element of not finding what they expected in the village. In expecting to find a Vietcong stronghold largely emptied of civilians, and instead finding no Vietcong resistance and a large population of civilians, the enemy scripts appear to have been used to handle the civilian population.

The puzzling aspect of this is that upon arriving to the village, the soldiers should have been able to realise that the people they were facing were not combatants. The data suggests that there was no one single general reason for the fact that this did not happen, arguably showing the strength of an individual-centred approach. Some people had the impression that there were no civilians; that there was a consensus around the fact that children were future Vietcong and that women had been seen setting booby traps etc. This consensus does not appear to have been formed during the briefing the previous day, and does in that way not directly relate to any specific order to kill all civilians. Rather this notion seems to have been produced over time among the individuals. Others felt like that consensus was a direct order; that Medina had said that everything in the village was to be destroyed because anything they would find in there was proven to be Vietcong. Yet others killed on orders that were given during the attack; direct orders to kill a specific group of people. In these cases there was an awareness of the group being civilian, but the script of obedience was stronger. Notable in these cases are the individuals that despite being ordered to kill, refused to do so. These individuals obviously placed non-combatant immunity above obedience despite being given the same training as the rest of the soldiers. In the cases of these soldiers there appeared to be a general and strong feeling of that refusal was the morally right thing to do, without reference to military training. Their scripts of non-combatant immunity thus seemed to be unconnected to the military as a whole and their unit, instead coming from a deeper, more personal sense of right and wrong.

There is also the perpetration of a type of violence for which there should be no script. In the case of lethal violence, such as for instance shooting civilians, soldiers would use the violent military scripts that they have and direct it at the wrong target. However, as in the cases of sexual violence, is difficult to associate that type of violence to what has been learned during basic training. This is a type of violent script that is developed after deployment. Initially, this was theorised to be evidence of unscripted behaviour; a type of improvised violence that was expected to be the result of a new situation for which the soldiers were forced to adopt new
scripts. The data collection instead showed that My Lai was not the first situation where soldiers had used sexual violence; rather it was a quite common practice. This leads to the conclusion that sexual violence alone cannot be viewed as evidence of an unscripted type of violence, if that is a type of violence that has been practiced before.

The situation with the ditch is also important to discuss in relation to this. It is not military practice to execute people like that, and the way the ditch reminded of a mass grave is evidence of a behaviour outside the realms of normal military scripts. Dursi felt like the executions reminded him of Hitler, and that is an important piece of evidence as it shows that My Lai had some features that were completely new to individuals in the company.

If most soldiers referred to the civilian targeting as being a product of the ‘order of the day’, whether those were direct orders at the scene, indirect or direct orders from the briefing the day before or a general consensus that there was no such thing as a completely innocent civilian in Vietnam, there is still a need to understand how that situation was created and what it was specifically about My Lai that made it the scene of a mass atrocity. Despite having instances of civilian victimisation previously, and constantly encountering and interacting with civilian groups, My Lai stands out in the number of civilian casualties.

The evidence that was found to this situation being particular mostly concerns the expectations of the situation. The company had not encountered Vietcong in any face to face battles, instead they had looked for them for a long time and suffered casualties from distanced violence such as booby traps and land mines. The funeral held before the briefing was said to have reminded people of this. Despite uncertainties of the exact information, the data showed that Medina said something about getting back at the Vietcong during his briefing, and also made sure that there would be no civilians in the village and that everyone that they found in there was suspected Vietcong. The soldiers were told to expect a tough battle; their first actual direct combat as a company. When arriving to the village, they faced only a civilian population. Based on the data collection, these are the factors that appear to be most prevalent when soldiers are to make sense of why such an unusually high number of civilian causalities was the result of this particular attack. The data thus showed that the factors that were initially theorised to be evidence of an unscripted situation, in reality turned out to be more related to the trigger of the violence. While the lack of scripts of non-combatant immunity and presence of scripts of obedience and uncertainty to who the enemy was were constant features of the experiences of the company, and civilian proximity nothing unusual, the aspects brought up in the data on unscripted situation are the most proximate and specific to My Lai. In that way, the novelty of the situation and the difficulties in handling an unknown event could be seen as what lead to an
application of the enemy script to the civilian population. It might be that wrong-script violence does not come from informational overload, but rather from unexperienced situations, where one simply relies on a well-known script. In table 2 (p. 36) an arrow from unscripted situation to wrong script situation has been included to demonstrate this relationship.

The concept of scripts concerns both formal and informal production of scripts, and since they are formed based on an understanding of the normal course of events, they incorporate an interactive aspect between the individual and the surrounding. The theory assumed that the military as a professional organisation would be permeated at all levels and in all actions with its professional goals, and the restraints associated with these. As it turned out, scripts associated with the higher goals of the military were not properly disseminated into the lower levels; soldiers were not uniformly taught the laws of war and the norms of non-combatant immunity. However, this does not appear to have been the deciding mechanism when it came to individual level violence, at least not with the training in these questions looking like it did. A more important aspect appears to have been other types of behaviour developed post-deployment, which created new scripts according to which the actors behaved. Furthermore, there was no enforcement of those scripts that should have limited violence. While no other instance of the same magnitude as My Lai had happened in the unit history, they had still used violence against the civilians. This had been done with close to complete impunity, creating scripts that informed the soldiers that violence against civilians was a behaviour without negative consequences. While not all soldiers engaged in this, there was still a general agreement among the unit that this was a behaviour that was perhaps not condoned, but it did not have any negative social nor legal repercussions. Instead, it was Bernardt who spoke up against the sexual violence who was ostracised.

While much has been written on the subject of restraint and the importance of punishment in fostering correct behaviour, the application of script theory helps us understand the social mechanisms of restraint. Through the lens of scripts, restraint becomes more of a social feature than a practical one, showing how certain behaviour is restrained or promoted socially within the group, and how promoted behaviour turns into scripted actions while restrained behaviour is removed from the individual’s repertoire of possible scripts.

The hierarchy of scripts showed that strong scripts will dictate behaviour, however the scripts will be ordered internally, which will create individual-level differences. Some people did hold the script of non-combatant immunity higher than the script of obedience, and refused to kill civilians, yet these individuals were rare, and this behaviour had little relation with the training they had received. Instead, they referred to general norms of behaviour, unspecific to
their military socialisation and scripts. While these might have been individuals with an especially pronounced inhibition to the killing of non-combatants, it can also be interpreted to show that strong scripts can limit excessive violence, even in situations where other factors promote it.

The specific features of counterinsurgency warfare were in the data a prevalent mechanism affecting the targeting of civilians. While the close ties between civilians and insurgents and the muddy nature of separation between civilian groups and guerrilla fighters is a common and useful explanation to the occasionally high levels of violence against civilians during counterinsurgency, the theories seldom specify the process by which civilians come to be targeted. While this can be seen as an alternative explanation; that the nature of the war prompted people to target civilians, it can also be argued that the features of counterinsurgency war can be captured by the concept of scripts as well. Given the nature of the conflict, soldiers developed scripts of uncertainty as to who the enemy was. Training did not provide enough scripts around the separation of combatants and non-combatants. Soldiers were instead left with traditional views of these two groups; and the distinction was drawn between men of military age and civilians consisting of older men, children and women. Events during deployment did however not confirm these scripts, instead all elements of society appeared to be involved in the Vietcong fight. Many of the soldiers had difficulties accounting for why they shot civilians, and they were left with a feeling of having done so because that was ‘the order of the day’. Lack of pronounced scripts of distinction between enemies and civilians, and the presence of vague yet experienced and repeated scripts of anyone being an insurgent led to soldiers behaving in way they were scripted to, however without having the narrative to explain it.

In essence, it appears as if existing scripts on obedience and counterinsurgency warfare, as well as civilian targeting, created the possibility for the unit to commit the massacre, leading to a script error in the form of a wrong-script situation. The particular situation itself, that the violence happened at that exact time and place and not during another attack, appear to have been more in line with the unscripted situation; a situation that was unlike previous situations that somewhat startled the group and triggered the violence.

5. Summary and conclusion

The study aimed at answering the question *how individuals come to perpetrate violence against civilians during wartime* with the theorised mechanism of a script error. The goal was to further
shed light on the micro-dimensional factors that make individuals in a professional state army behave in ways they have not been taught and perpetrate violence against civilians.

The empirical analysis of the case of My Lai showed that a script error was present to a certain degree, yet not completely as theorised. First of all, the military training that the soldiers went through was inadequate in producing scripts related to norms of non-combatant immunity, meaning that already before deployment this script was not sufficiently present among the individuals. The study showed that soldiers develop scripts both during and after training, and that the strongest scripts were developed in relation to those things that are both instructed, practiced and enforced. A hierarchy of scripts was found, wherein the most practiced script, and the scripts that had the most severe consequences if broken, were the strongest and most important to the individual. In the case of My Lai, obedience to authority was stronger than most other scripts, followed by the script of uncertainty as to who was Vietcong or not. It appears that the situation was created by a slow development of scripts during training and deployment which promoted obedience and suspicion towards the Vietnamese population, and which allowed civilian victimisation and, in some cases, even punished adherence to the laws of war. This produced a situation resembling the theorised step of a wrong-script situation in My Lai, yet without the proximate situation of an informational overload. The somewhat unexpected situation of My Lai, with the absence of the large Vietcong force that was expected, meant that the wrong script was triggered and violence was directed at the wrong target in an enemy-fashion.

As previously mentioned, existing research on mass violence has to a large degree assumed that there is no difference in costs for the individual perpetrator depending on if the target is military or civilian (Kalyvas 2006; Wood, Kathman, and Gent 2012; Wood 2010; Wolfendale 2007; Hoover Green 2016). This has led to assumptions of military socialisation producing a general propensity to violence; the use of violence is seen as a uniform behaviour and no distinction is made between violence against civilians and violence against enemy soldiers. The results presented here show that this is not the case. Instead, many of the individuals involved in My Lai testified to having suffered from the experience and the violence they perpetrated. Many were reluctant to execute the orders, showing that there is indeed a high cost for civilian targeting. This speaks against a habituation mechanism of violence, at least as an explanation for unauthorised violence. Since this study did not look at any situations of enemy targeting, it is however difficult to conclude if the individuals involved would have suffered similarly from enemy targeting.
When it comes to studies on ethical decision making and the stress of combat (Litz et al. 2009; Doris and Murphy 2007), findings from this study complement rather than disagree with previous research. This study showed that ethical decision making can be faulty even in the absence of combat, as other situations can be experienced as equally stressful. When faced with a difficult situation chances are that individuals act intuitively, and that ethical decision making becomes insensitive to the context and rather rely on the most prevalent scripts one holds.

Obedience to authority has been one of the most commonly cited reasons for mass violence and atrocity in previous research (Kelman and Hamilton 1989; Wolfendale 2007, 3f; Milgram 2017; Post and Panis 2005, 34), yet often without nuances as to the different individual motivations in relation to ordering and being ordered to do something. It needs to be said here that the previously mentioned critique of finding obedience to authority as a main mechanism of violence against civilians when the study is based on post-violence testimonies, is applicable to this study as well. As it is a convenient truth to tell while being trialled for war crimes it poses certain questions around the truthfulness of the statements, and there is no getting around this. This study however focused on a somewhat different type of obedience to authority, which can be regarded as less of an excuse and more of a way of thinking that actually was present among the individuals.

The mechanism of scripts managed to capture obedience to authority within a larger framework, and the micro approach allowed for an analysis of the different kinds of obedience that existed. Most importantly, the study showed that obedience need not be about blindly following the orders of an authority at the moment of killing, rather it is a mechanism that is developed over time. Furthermore, the fact that most people referred to the ‘order of the day’, that is, not direct orders but rather a general objective with the operation, helped to bridge the gap between the motivations of the authority and the motivation of the soldier, and served to situate individual obedience within the organisation of the military and the broader goals of the military operations. This would be in line with previous findings on the role of group of conformity in violence against civilians (Browning 2001; Waller 2007, 203). Obedience was practiced, not imposed, and it was related both to a larger organisational framework through general military scripts and to the smaller unit where the orders were grounded in the general perception of the operation. In the setting, the orders made sense to most of the individuals, and the motivations were quite similar between commanders and soldiers because they had a similar perception of the ‘order of the day’.

This implies that events like My Lai do not have to happen, and the finding that it was not about blind obedience but instead about learned behaviour means that there are possibilities
to form other scripts; to learn other types of behaviour and create scripted restraint and limitations of violence. While the case of My Lai might have been extreme in the sense that such a large number of soldiers were drafted on short notice and received inadequate training, the study still showed that training is essential in producing behaviour during deployment. Active training and conditioning are what produced the script of obedience, and chances are high that scripts of non-combatant immunity can be produced in the same way. Furthermore, the study showed the importance of information on the possibility to refuse illegal orders, avenues for reporting behaviour that is against the laws of war, and the active promoting of actions that help to limit wrongful conduct.

While this study focused on perpetrators of violence and did not go in depth to study the individuals who did not kill or refused to kill, My Lai would be a useful case to look into to learn more about what created the difference in behaviour. The Peers Inquiry concluded that it was a few individuals who did most of the killing; out of around 300 soldiers only 26 were suspected of murder. This study only looked at three individuals who refused to shoot when ordered to and that very small sample showed that the training in non-combatant immunity that was given had little to do with them refraining from killing. This is a potentially interesting study to conduct; to look more into the difference between those who perpetrated violence and those who did not in order to get more insight into the mechanisms of restraint.

This study theorised violence against civilians by state armies as a violence that should not occur given the professional standards of the military organisation, and tried to explain the immediate situations which cause individuals to act in ways they have not been taught to act. With the individual-centred perspective, this study managed to capture individual-level differences that often go missing with other approaches, and as such managed to make sense of violence as something produced by the combined mechanisms of training, immediate circumstances and individual differences. The incorporation of one of the most commonly cited mechanisms for violence against civilians and mass violence: obedience to authority, into the theory of organisational script, showed the theoretical gains that can be made from viewing the military as a professional organisation that can be analysed using organisational psychology. For the larger field of mass violence this is an important aspect to take into account in order to understand how violent scripts can develop within organizations, which allow for and promote certain types of behaviour. This is however not inherent in the military organisation per se, but dependant on what type of scripts are emphasised during training and after deployment. This presents possibilities to create scripts which emphasise the laws of war and in extension hopefully help limit excessive violence.
Bibliography


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https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2016.1140993.


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## Appendix A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>List of individuals</th>
<th>Interest</th>
<th>Testimony</th>
<th>Duty assignment on the 16th March 1968</th>
<th>Peers Inquiry</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kotouc</td>
<td>Charged for murder</td>
<td>Captain, intelligence officer for the 11th brigade</td>
<td>Book 16, pp. 78-163</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eikenberry</td>
<td>Charged for murder</td>
<td>Did not talk about the My Lai incident</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Book 17, pp. 146-178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hooton</td>
<td>Charged for murder</td>
<td>Point team</td>
<td>Book 19, pp. 216-286</td>
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<tr>
<td>Taylor</td>
<td>Charged for murder</td>
<td>Declined to testify</td>
<td>Rifleman</td>
<td>Book 20, pp. 377–387</td>
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<tr>
<td>Willingham</td>
<td>Charged for murder</td>
<td>Declined to testify</td>
<td>Platoon leader</td>
<td>Book 20, pp. 460–466</td>
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<tr>
<td>Medina</td>
<td>Charged for murder</td>
<td>Commanding Officer of Company C, 1st Battalion of the 20th Infantry</td>
<td>Book 23, pp. 381-482</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dursi</td>
<td>Charged for murder</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Book 24, pp. 462-516</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widmer</td>
<td>Charged for murder</td>
<td>Radiotelephone operator to Medina</td>
<td>Book 24, pp. 97-120</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bergthold</td>
<td>Charged for murder</td>
<td>Machinegunner</td>
<td>Book 24, pp. 189-247</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boyce</td>
<td>Charged for murder</td>
<td>Did not talk about the My Lai incident</td>
<td>Rifleman</td>
<td>Book 24 pp. 247-255</td>
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<tr>
<td>Calley</td>
<td>Charged and convicted for murder</td>
<td>Declined to testify in the Peers Inquiry</td>
<td>Platoon leader, 1st platoon, C Company</td>
<td>Book 24, pp. 255-262</td>
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51
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Charge</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Book Pages</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conti</td>
<td>Charged for murder</td>
<td>Minesweeper</td>
<td>319-372</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cowan</td>
<td>Charged for murder</td>
<td>Platoon seargent</td>
<td>372-441</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meadlo</td>
<td>Charged for murder</td>
<td>Did not talk about the My Lai incident</td>
<td>Rifleman</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mitchell</td>
<td>Charged for murder</td>
<td>Squad leader</td>
<td>86-117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stanley</td>
<td>Charged for murder</td>
<td>Grenadier</td>
<td>235-258</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hutson</td>
<td>Charged for murder</td>
<td>Machinegunner</td>
<td>263-314</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hutto</td>
<td>Charged for murder</td>
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<td>314-371</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lacroix</td>
<td>Charged for murder</td>
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<td>371-426</td>
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<td>Doherty</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shiel</td>
<td>Charged for murder</td>
<td>Declined to testify</td>
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<td>Smith</td>
<td>Charged for murder</td>
<td>Rifleman</td>
<td>505-531</td>
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<tr>
<td>T'Souvas</td>
<td>Charged for murder</td>
<td>Machinegunner</td>
<td>4-47</td>
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<tr>
<td>West</td>
<td>Charged for murder</td>
<td>Squad leader</td>
<td>47-84</td>
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<td>Williams</td>
<td>Charged for murder</td>
<td>Rifleman</td>
<td>84-120</td>
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<tr>
<td>Arcoren</td>
<td>Charged for murder</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>165-223</td>
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### Commanders

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<th>Position</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Koster</strong></td>
<td>Commanding general for the Americal Division</td>
<td>Book 3, pp. 28-306</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Henderson</strong></td>
<td>Brigade Commander, 11th Infantry Brigade, Americal Division</td>
<td>Book 12, pp. 4-459</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Barker</strong></td>
<td>Died three months after My Lai</td>
<td>Commander of Task Force Barker</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Others

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Source</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Carter</strong></td>
<td>Present at the ditch massacre; Refused to shoot.</td>
<td>Tunnel rat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bernardt</strong></td>
<td>Witnessed the ditch massacre</td>
<td>Rifleman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Maples</strong></td>
<td>Present at the ditch massacre; Refused to shoot.</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Thompson</strong></td>
<td>Witness the ditch massacre and landed his helicopter to hear what was happening</td>
<td>Helicopter pilot</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B

NINE RULES
FOR PERSONNEL OF US MILITARY ASSISTANCE COMMAND, VIETNAM

The Vietnamese have paid a heavy price in suffering for their long fight against the communists. We military men are in Vietnam now because their government has asked us to help its soldiers and people in winning their struggle. The Viet Cong will attempt to turn the Vietnamese people against you. You can defeat them at every turn by the strength, understanding, and generosity you display with the people. Here are nine simple rules:

DISTRIBUTION — 1 to each member of the United States Armed Forces in Vietnam

(Peers Inquiry; Miscellaneous Documents 1970, Exhibit M-2)

NINE RULES

1. Remember we are guests here: We make no demands and seek no special treatment.
2. Join with the people! Understand their life, use phrases from their language and honor their customs and laws.
3. Treat women with politeness and respect.
4. Make personal friends among the soldiers and common people.
5. Always give the Vietnamese the right of way.
6. Be alert to security and ready to react with your military skill.
7. Don't attract attention by loud, rude or unusual behavior.
8. Avoid separating yourself from the people by a display of wealth or privilege.
9. Above all else you are members of the U.S. Military Forces on a difficult mission, responsible for all your official and personal actions. Reflect honor upon yourself and the United States of America.
Appendix C

KEY PHRASES.

ENGLISH | VIETNAMESE
---|---
Halt | Dừng lại
Lay down your gun | Bượt súng xuống
Put up your hands | Dái tay lên
Keep your hands on your head | Dái tay lên đầu
I will search you | Tôi khám lòng
Do not talk | Đừng nói chuyện
Walk there | Lái dẳng kia
Turn Right | Xáy bên phải
Turn Left | Xáy bên trái

"The courage and skill of our men in battle
will be matched by their magnanimity when the battle
ends. And all American military action in Vietnam
will stop as soon as aggression by others is stopped."

21 August 1965
Lyndon B. Johnson

THE ENEMY IN YOUR HANDS

1. HANDLE HIM FIRMLY, PROMPTLY, BUT HUMANELY.
   The captive in your hands must be disarmed, searched, secured and watched but he must also be treated as a human being. He must not be tortured, killed, mutilated, or degraded, even if he refuses to talk. If the captive is a woman, treat her with all respect due her sex.

2. TAKE THE CAPTIVE QUICKLY TO SECURITY
   As soon as possible evacuate the captive to a place of safety and interrogation designated by your commander. Military documents taken from the captive are also sent to the interrogator, but the captive will keep his personal equipment except weapons.

3. MIS TREATMENT OF ANY CAPTIVE IS A CRIMINAL OFFENSE.
   Every soldier is personally responsible for the enemy in his hands.
   It is both dishonorable and foolish to mistreat a captive. It is also a punishable offense. Not even a beaten enemy will surrender if he knows his captors will torture or kill him. He will resist and make his capture more costly. Fair treatment of captives encourages the enemy to surrender.

4. TREAT THE SICK AND WOUNDED CAPTIVE AS BEST YOU CAN.
   The captive saved may be an intelligence source. In any case he is a human being and must be treated like one. The soldier who ignores the sick and wounded degrades his uniform.

5. ALL PERSONS IN YOUR HANDS, WHETHER SUSPECTS, CIVILIANS, OR COMBAT CAPTIVES, MUST BE PROTECTED AGAINST VIOLENCE, INSULTS, CURIOUSITY, AND REPRISALS OF ANY KIND.
   Leave punishment to the courts and judges. The soldier shows his strength by his fairness, fairness, and humanity to the persons in his hands.

(Peers Inquiry; Miscellaneous Documents 1970, Exhibit M-3)