



SAF 9th Core Value: Do But Don't Get Caught

by

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All Singaporean males, unless exempted, have to undergo mandatory enlistment to the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) or an equivalent. This conscription period is known locally as National Service (NS) (Enlistment Act, 1970). It is no secret that during NS, conscripts will be subjected to a highly regulated and disciplined lifestyle (CMPB, n.d.). Uniforms as a form of standardised attire, timetables that predetermine the activities conscripts will be doing and for exactly how long, even personal activities such as sleep – what Goffman calls a “total institution” (Goffman, 1961). Total institution is the concept of a closed social institution where people with similar situations lead a lifestyle under strong bureaucratic control, separated from the wider community. While serving NS, conscripts will undoubtedly be forewarned of the multitude of laws and rules to and the consequences that come with breaking them.

Anecdotally, when reminiscing about NS with others, countless great memories start with the sentence “we were supposed to do this, *but* ...”. Deviance, and to some extent crime, is a core part of the NS experience. Deviance unofficially ingrained itself into NS culture and an example is the widespread knowledge of the “9th SAF Core Value”. The 8 SAF Core Values are shared values created and used in the construction of a good SAF soldier (MINDEF, n.d.). Colloquially, the 9th SAF Core Value is “do but don't get caught”, highlighting how most conscripts understand that deviance during NS is normal and the focus should be on not “getting caught” by any authority for the fear of the consequences.

This essay will aim to use the ideas of labelling theory to analyse the experience of my interlocutor, John¹, who got caught for taking “in-camp photos” during NS – a “criminal act” condemned by the SAF – as well as the reaction of others and how it eventually did not lead to secondary deviance due to the normalisation of deviance in NS.

Taking “in-camp photos” is an official crime under the Official Secrets Act outlawing the unapproved cameras and photography in prohibited areas such as within a military base (Official Secrets Act, 1985). This includes both possessing the photo and sharing the photo to others, such as posting on social media. Ostensibly, this legislative framework is designed to forestall the disclosure of classified information, such as base topography and the equipment found in camp. This can be understood as a form of social control by the SAF. Only allowing approved pictures and media to be shared and criminalising all other sources of media, the military is able to control the prevailing narrative surrounding NS experiences, shaping public perception of NS as the perfect “rite of passage to adulthood” for young Singaporean males (Tan & Lew, 2017). However, despite this being a “criminal” act, many conscripts still engage in taking in-camp photos. Taking photos is considered a very normal way to document life moments in the

¹ Pseudonym used

digital age. Although the motivation for conscripts to capture in-camp photos and share them may vary, many conscripts believe that capturing in-camp photos is similarly a harmless and routine way to document and share their NS experiences. To contextualise the concept of “rule creators” and “rule enforcers” from Howard S. Becker (Becker, 1963, 147-163), the rule creators are the government officials and other experts who aided in the creation of the law and rule enforcers could be superiors or the military police, a role with authority to enforce the rules by checking the phone gallery of others to see if they possess or have uploaded any in-camp photos.

Primary deviance is defined as the initial instance of rule breaking, and will not cause long-term consequences (“Lemert, Edwin M.: Primary and Secondary Deviance,” 2010, 551-552). For John, this would be him taking a photo of his bed for his family. He saw many of the other conscripts in the bunk doing the same, and because their superiors are themselves resting at night, there would be no one trying to catch them. Their superiors, who are also their trainers during the day, are the same rule enforcers who are expected to catch conscripts for deviant acts after training hours. Hence when they, understandably, rest, the conscripts know that there is no time for their phones to be checked and hence are not afraid of being caught. Throughout John’s NS journey, he has never encountered anyone who was caught for possessing or sharing in-camp photos. The chances of getting caught were so low that everyone he knew did not care and even actively shared photos with each other. Moreover, whenever a check occurred, everyone would be warned about an hour prior, giving enough time to cover their tracks. Taking a Beccarian perspective, conscripts can be seen as rational people and due to the lack of promptness in the punishment, the deterrence to not take in-camp photos is extremely weak thus conscripts are still willing to commit this “offence” as the benefits of sharing their NS experience with their close ones outweigh the costs of the consequences.

However, John was caught by his military supervisor for sharing in-camp photos online towards the later half of his NS. He posted an in-camp photo onto his personal Instagram account which could be viewed by the public. John’s punishment was unofficially administered by his supervisors as they do with everyone else largely because they did not want to “cause trouble”. This meant that they were not willing to take the required administrative steps to officially charge and punish him. Moreover, they did not want to draw the attention of their superiors as that might increase the workload of their part-time role as rule enforcers. Thus, to informally punish him, he was made to stay in camp for an extra week while everyone else could leave. The supervisor even pitied John during this punishment and treated him to a meal on a weekend – a sign that even the supervisor did not treat the “deviant” act as one. When the punishment ended, the other conscripts called him an “influencer” to poke fun at him for being caught. Initially, John

took these comments to heart and stopped taking in-camp photos, not wanting to be made fun of. However, he realised after a while that they were benign jokes as he felt that other than being the butt of the joke at times, the other conscripts did not treat him differently. John, as well as other conscripts, did not change their attitudes towards taking in-camp photos and continued committing this “offence”.

It is clear from John’s experience, the primary deviance, continuous capturing and sharing in-camp photos, did not lead to secondary deviance. Secondary deviance refers to the internalisation of labels and stigma associated with the deviant behaviour and subsequent adoption of a deviant identity (“Lemert, Edwin M.: Primary and Secondary Deviance,” 2010, 551-552). There is an evident lack of a stigma or label attached to this “crime”. The act of taking in-camp photos is only considered a “crime” because the SAF as an institution deemed that it is. On the ground, conscripts however normalise and partake in this act and hence do not attach any negative connotation or stigma to deviants who take in-camp photos, despite the jokes. Moreover, punishment for being caught breaking rules is left to the discretion of rule enforcers, resulting in uncertainty regarding the consequences. Rule enforcers themselves do not apply a stigma or label the deviant for committing this “crime”. This could come from a variety of reasons, from their personal connection to the deviant, showing some sympathy to a “young soldier” by giving some allowance for a mistake done, to their lack of belief in the crime itself. Additionally, the supervisors’ main job is to conduct training rather than enforcing rules, and this may have contributed to the fact that John got off easy with his punishment. John did not go through the deviance process where the deviant would receive increasingly stronger societal reactions, despite regularly repeating the deviant behaviour of taking in-camp photos (“Lemert, Edwin M.: Primary and Secondary Deviance,” 2010, 551-552). John also did not internalise the deviant label, contributing to the absence of deviance amplification and hence continuously stayed as a primary deviant.

The normalisation of taking in-camp photos is an example of the many deviant acts which all play a part in this culture of deviance in NS. Anecdotally, many of these acts are only considered “deviant” or even “criminal” because they break certain rules set by the SAF. These rules could be used as a means of control, ensuring that conscripts fall in line, performing their duties as told. Conscripts as a response to these restrictions, attempt to bend and break these rules, justifying it as a “fun” experience or even as a bonding activity within conscripts, leading to the creation of SAF 9th Core Value. This perhaps contributed to the reasons as to which John is not considered a secondary deviant since taking in-camp photos was not treated as a serious offence by both the other conscripts and the supervisors, and John was let off the hook easily.

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