

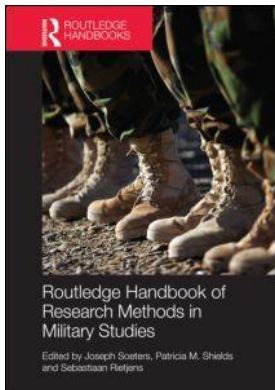
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Publisher: *Routledge*

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## **Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in Military Studies**

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### **Getting on the Same Net**

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203093801.ch3>

Nicholas Jans

**Published online on: 09 Jun 2014**

**How to cite :-** Nicholas Jans. 09 Jun 2014, *Getting on the Same Net from*: Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in Military Studies Routledge

Accessed on: 03 Oct 2023

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203093801.ch3>

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### 3

## GETTING ON THE SAME NET

### How the theory-driven academic can better communicate with the pragmatic military client

*Nicholas Jans*

**Charles Moskos (1977) 'From institution to occupation: Trends in military organization', *Armed Forces & Society* 4(1): 41–50.**

Moskos's seminal paper hit an important nerve, both within the scholarly community and the military institution itself. Its central thesis continues to shape the scholarly discourse and it has had an arguably profound influence on the way Western military leaders think about organisation and conditions of service.

In what became known as the 'Moskos thesis', the article contrasts two 'ideal models' of military organisation. At one pole was the Institutional model. This conceived of membership based on a common identity and core competencies, motivated by 'psychic income' at least as much as by conventional remuneration. At the other extreme, the Occupational model was legitimised in terms of the marketplace. It saw self-interest as being the core of the employment arrangement, with reward systems based on market demand and skill level; work performed by military personnel working alongside civilians; and grievances settled via the mechanisms of industrial relations and trade unions.

Each time one reads the Moskos article, one is struck by certain features. It is clearly written, with a minimum of sociological jargon. It addresses an issue – that of attracting, motivating and keeping service personnel – of permanent strategic concern. It introduces a simple and memorable frame of reference, one that helps academics and practitioners alike to make sense of the myriad complex interactions within the military institution. Finally, it presents its argument in terms of narrative rather than statistics. In all these ways, it is a model of how to communicate research in ways that improve the chance that it will be noticed and acted upon.

What has transpired more than three decades on? On the one hand, two of the thesis's three features – quasi-market based remuneration and functional integration of civilian and military organisational elements – can be seen at every hand in contemporary military organisations. However,

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these sit fairly comfortably alongside many of continuing traditional institutional features. At the same time, the brief experimentation with military trade unionism in a number of Western military institutions has petered out.

For the most part, the balance between the Institutional and the Occupational has been achieved by strengthening certain core institutional features so as to compensate for any excessive influence that occupationalism might have on professional values. Alerted by the Moskos thesis, the institution found ways to accommodate rather than resist social trends. In the famous phrase from a classic novel, its approach was that 'If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change'. Thus it improved leadership practices and developed more imaginative socialisation, while continuing its traditional emphasis on building social cohesion and institutional identity.

One may speak a language even if it is not one's native tongue.  
(Michael Mosser 2010: 1078)

### **An important and neglected issue**

The communication of scholarly research findings is part of the 'sense-making' process within the academic community. Academics conduct research and attend to other scholars' research in order to improve their understanding of how things work and to identify what questions need to be explored (as well as to improve their promotion chances). They focus on methodological soundness and appropriate interpretation, communicating their findings according to well-established and familiar structures. However, what scholars often tend to overlook – blinkered perhaps by familiarity with the conventional forms of their own disciplines – is the extent to which these forms inhibit communication of the value of the research for practitioners wanting to learn from scholarly discourse. While the scholar might be interested in 'puzzles', the pragmatic client is much more interested in 'problems' (Mosser 2010: 1078; Weick et al. 2005; Lawler 1985). As part of this process, practitioners often draw on a very wide range of information sources, attending to each to according to its utility. And if they often overlook scholarly research as part of this process, this is generally less the fault of the practitioner than it is of the scholar.

Some scholars rail against this, blaming the practitioner's lack of perspective and openness to ideas. However, others argue that the scholarly community does itself a disservice when it is excessively 'purist' about its choice of research problems, analytical methods and means of communication, and that the solution to any communication problem lies much more with scholars than with practitioners. Consistent with this second line of argument, this chapter outlines a number of simple but powerful ways in which the theory-driven academic can better communicate with the pragmatic military client.

### **Military culture: Institutional perspective of 'research'**

An important but subtle foundation for the whole issue is concerned with military culture, so the argument begins with a brief discussion of culture and its influence on how people think about important and complex issues.

Culture can be thought of as a coherent view of the world and of thinking about and making sense of that world. Culture manifests itself in 'a complex system of elements – language,

symbols, stories, myths, heroes, artefacts, norms, beliefs, values, and practices – that are shared by and shape the identity of a group or community . . . [and which] coalesce and mutually support each other in meaningful patterns’ (Potorowski and Green 2012: 273). This results in a worldview that is shaped by mutually supporting beliefs into patterns or ‘mental models’.

A fundamental reason for lack of communication between academics and military practitioners is that each camp tends to adhere to different tacit beliefs and thus different theories of justification or worldviews (Potorowski and Green 2012: 273). While scholars will generally be guided by so-called *correspondence theory*, with its emphasis on scientific method and appropriate criteria for conclusions that are justifiable versus those that are not, military practitioners tend to take a *coherentist* view of the world. The coherentist view of the world regards the justification of a given belief as being at least in part contingent on its compatibility with other beliefs, many of which may be deeply tacit and derived from the influence of cultural norms. Within the military, this tendency is reinforced by the value placed by practitioners on qualities that are often difficult to describe and objectively analyse, for example values, relationships and character (Soeters 2000).

Three particular features regarding how culture is shaped in military organisations are worth noting. First, the adoption of explicit and implicit rules and norms is strongly shaped by ‘what works’, especially in times of crisis (Schein 2010). These rules are passed to new members as a ready framework for interpreting and interacting with the environment, and thus become deeply embedded even if the organisational reality shifts significantly. Thus, for example, the Australian Army has always found its professional identity in the warrior role at the regimental-or-lower level at the tactical level of warfare. Australian soldiers of all ranks put a high premium on the ‘professionalism of small things’: on the mastery of myriad routine and minor details, each perhaps petty in itself but profound in their combination (Jans and Schmidtchen 2002). Australian soldiers thus came to think of themselves as ‘artisans of war’, personified by the lightly equipped but highly adept warrior operating in a small team, doing the job with professional nonchalance, choosing to give loyalty to the institution through loyalty to local leaders as expressed in the strong social bonding in the small group, and worrying little about the higher ramifications of the campaign. For officers, battalion or regimental command is the professional ideal, essentially because the responsibilities involved are much more meaningful than those at higher command levels. In contrast, because of its larger size and strategic responsibilities, the US Army has always operated at a higher level of military operations, and hence professionalism is expressed in broader terms. Officers aspire not only to unit command but also to higher command appointments. Similarly, the distinctive historical circumstances associated with other military institutions will invariably have shaped their practices and norms and worldviews (Soeters 2000).

The second factor that distinctively shapes culture in military organisations is its career system. The career system contains a number of features that shape and reinforce particular ways of looking at the world (Jans and Schmidtchen 2002). The military career requires members to adopt particular values and then rewards performance to the extent to which it personifies such values. Career advancement thus depends on the demonstration of values-in-action, with the result that those in charge will further reinforce the process by creating institutional forms that are consistent with their values. Further, the high rate of job rotation to which military officers are subjected (Jans and Frazer-Jans 2004) tends to increase their levels of pragmatism and concern with ‘what works’ in ‘our context’.

Career practices and their parent, institutional culture, also shape ‘expertise’ and the way that it is defined within the military profession. Not surprisingly, experts tend to be better at sense-making and problem diagnosis than non-experts (Chi 2006; Schön 1983). They also identify exceptions to a rule more often because they ignore less relevant surface features,

conceptualise problems in terms of their deep structure, and identify what key information is missing. However, even experts have shortcomings. For example, experts can be overconfident, bound by their disciplinary training when diagnosing problems in offering solutions, and not as flexible and adaptable as one might expect – in part because they often see more costs and risks than benefits in being open to the perspectives outside their particular expertise boundaries (Weiss and Shanteau 2012). Further, because expertise in the military is attained by steady progression, there is a strong link between expertise and its twin, ‘professional judgement’, on the one hand, and rank, on the other. Reliance on rank as the indicator of expertise becomes particularly important when problems are complex and where professional judgement is seen as a major strategy for dealing with such complexity. But such reliance can be fraught with pitfalls, especially when – as tends to happen – those at the top of the military profession comprise a highly homogeneous group, of similar age and similar career and educational experiences.

The situation is far from intractable, however. As the next section shows, military practitioners who are considering research evidence look for certain features in such research (relevance, alignment with and support for cultural norms, and stemming from a ‘reliable source’). Scholarship is thus likely to be welcomed to the extent to which it has such features.

## **Institutional reaction to scholarly research**

### ***Relevance***

Practitioners in all fields, military and civilian, tend to welcome and attend to scholarly research to the extent to which it is seen as being ‘relevant’ (Giluk and Rynes-Weller 2012; Lueng and Bartunek 2012), especially in terms of its association with ‘core business’. Military practitioners are likely to pay close attention to research that addresses operational issues (doctrine, tactics, weapon systems, equipment and logistics) or basic motives for serving (such as are represented by the Moskos institutional-occupational thesis). The reception will be somewhat less enthusiastic for research that investigates areas tangential to core business, such as the work in staff organisations (Jans and Schmidtchen 2002). And the reception will be unlikely to be even more than lukewarm for research that seems to be concerned with issues outside the institution’s day-to-day ambit.

The example of the Moskos institutional-occupational thesis was introduced in the text box to this chapter as an example of how scholarly research can be made relevant. Another example, but of research seen as not being of significant relevance, relates to that which focuses on the activities of organisational elements that are not part of the military career mainstream. Thus while the Australian Army has welcomed the work of research on leadership in operational units (Grisogono and Radenovic 2011; Mueller-Hanson et al. 2007) because it deals with a challenging and highly relevant and topical issue, it has been less receptive to research on leadership in staff organisations (Jans and Harte 2003). This is because the Australian military places a lower cultural value on staff work compared to the ‘true work’ done in the operational and command spheres. Another factor in such acceptance is pragmatic appreciation of the feasibility of acting on its findings. Issues associated with practice in mainstream units can be readily dealt with because of the continuity within such units, in contrast to the discontinuity and the resulting periodic losses of ‘corporate memory’ that stem from the continual job rotation of officers within staff areas.

### ***Alignment with and supportive of cultural norms***

Research that presents an implied threat to the professional identity of the warrior or prestige of the ‘expert practitioner’ is also likely to be resisted – for example, when such research draws

conclusions contrary to long-standing practices and cultural norms or to the views of ‘expert practitioners’ (Potorowski and Green 2012). Conversely, research will be welcomed if it is seen to be consistent with or sympathetic to cultural norms (as in the example of the US Army’s reception of the Moskos thesis).

This threat/anxiety issue is particularly likely to arise when research findings are contrary to those that the practitioner expects or hopes to emerge. People’s expectations and indeed their hopes can influence what they believe is possible or ‘true’ (what is ‘common sense’) and thus their reaction to any particular piece of research is often shaped in part by such expectations (Bastardi et al. 2011; Lord et al. 1979; Nickerson 1998).

For example, a consultancy study of Australian Army reservists’ remuneration and conditions of service (Jans et al. 2001) found that junior reservists placed little importance on remuneration as a motivator, and considerable weight to the opportunities afforded by military training for personal fulfilment, adventure/stimulation and career development. The modelling that was central to the research method showed that junior reservists would be comfortable with losing the tax-free element of their reserve pay – and thus with receiving lower net remuneration for their time and efforts – in exchange for more meaningful training and for more operational service opportunities. However, when they were presented with the findings, senior reservists rejected them on two grounds. First, they argued that the findings were contrary to common sense: they simply could not comprehend how someone would willingly accept a remuneration arrangement that put less money into their pockets (i.e. untaxed versus taxed military pay). Second, senior reservists argued that tax-free pay should not be lightly put aside because of its symbolism as a tangible indicator of the value placed on reserve service by society. In this conflict between the ‘rational’ and the ‘cultural’, the cultural factor (perhaps inevitably) prevailed. However, a retrospective consideration suggests that this was probably the appropriate decision – not because of its ‘not making sense’ (because this did make perfect sense to those at the junior levels one) but because it was consistent with the special status of military reserve service in society.

### *Findings from a ‘reliable source’*

The source of research findings is another factor that affects the attention they get amongst practitioners. Most cultures give greater reliance to the perspectives of insiders than of outsiders, however ‘expert’ (Cialdini and Goldstein 2004; Weiss and Shanteau 2012). A further issue is the type of problem in question. Expert advice on ‘complicated’ problems (i.e. those where there is a ‘right answer’ and ‘right approach’ that an expert can determine) will tend to be accepted on its merits, regardless of its source. But the situation becomes different when a problem shifts from ‘complicated’ to ‘complex’ (i.e. to one in which there is no single ‘right answer’ that an expert can work out and apply, and which thus requires ‘judgement’). In such cases people tend to rely on advice from representatives of the social majority rather than from a minority, however supposedly expert (Madhavan and Mahoney 2012). The tacit assumption here is that the insiders bring a more valid perspective because they can, at least implicitly, place the findings in the context of cultural values (Gino and Moore 2007).

This issue arises particularly when the research concerns a question that is part of a broader constellation of issues, for example the above illustration with respect to Australian Army reservists’ pay. Again, the practitioners’ reservations result often from their lack of confidence that the researcher has appropriate comprehension of this broader constellation or of the ‘strategic’ context and hence cannot be expected to appreciate its full implications (Madhavan and Mahoney 2012).

For example, an important factor in Charles Moskos’s acceptance within the military was the credibility he possessed because of his career experiences. Moskos had been drafted into the US

Army as an enlisted soldier in the late 1950s and he used the experience wisely and shrewdly in his subsequent dealings with the military institution. His service experience had taught him the forms by which senior people expect to be approached, and so his subsequent communication with them – however informal – was always respectful and reflective of his understanding of his status as a civilian versus their status as senior professionals; and he had always been an assiduous networker even as a private soldier. Finally, his experience in the ranks (as an enlisted soldier rather than as an officer) conferred on him a certain tacit ‘grass-roots’ credibility. This was strengthened by his making frequent visits to service personnel in operational areas, from Vietnam through to Bosnia and then Iraq and Afghanistan. His shrewd and broadly informed observations of what he saw and heard in such places were valued by his many senior champions in uniform in the Pentagon and the like. And it kept him in touch with the evolving military culture.

### **Bridging the gap between research and practitioner acceptance**

Of the many things ways of bridging the gap between social science research and practitioner acceptance, three in particular are proposed as having utility in communicating with military practitioners.

#### ***Using research to develop relevant frames of reference***

The first and probably most important recommendation is to use research findings to enhance practitioners’ understanding of the situations that they face. Lawler (1985) proposes that the best way for academics to contribute to improving practice is not by producing facts but presenting simple but valid ways of organising and thinking about the world (what he calls ‘frames of reference’). As he puts it, managers and practitioners ‘constantly want to know what happens to Y if they do X and they also want to know the best way to change organisations’ (Lawler 1985: 10). Similarly, Mitroff (1985) urges researchers to get below what seems to be going on at an organisation’s surface in order to understand the frames of reference used by executives in their decision-making processes. And Schön (1983) observes that, given that managers typically face situations characterised by uncertainty, complexity, instability, uniqueness and value-conflict, ‘useful research’ will be that which focuses on framing and clarifying problems as much as on exploring ways to solve them. (An important side-effect of taking a frame-of-reference approach is that such an approach will also help researchers to understand the institution from the practitioner’s perspective.)

Moskos’s model of institutional-occupation is a clear example of the value of focusing research on a frame of reference. The I-O thesis gave practitioners and academics alike a comprehensible and comprehensive way of making sense of a range of issues. It encompassed a wide range of organisational issues and processes, including professional values, conditions of employment, professional development, recruitment, and even leadership styles; and all done within the neat rubric of the institutional-occupational paradigm. It was a way of strategically viewing all of these factors in a way that was flexible, simple and powerful. Little wonder that it hit such a nerve.

A somewhat different way of thinking about the ‘frame of reference’ issue is in respect to research *methods* as opposed to research *findings*. It sometimes happens that a particular methodology can stimulate the pragmatic client to think about issues in a fresh and useful way. Such an example happened with a series of research programmes initiated in Australia in the late 1990s (Jans et al. 2001; Jans 2006). This research introduced the military institution to a modelling



process that came from a collaboration between researchers involved in the twin fields of marketing and HR, a collaboration that had produced a hybrid methodology called ‘employee choice modelling’. The method allows employees’ decisions about employment issues to be simulated, modelled and quantified. This not only enhanced the rigour of such research but also involved a shift from focusing on the somewhat nebulous areas of feelings and attitudes onto the more tangible and useful factors of choice and behaviour. Another benefit was to bring examination of the practical issue of making policy analysis trade-offs to a more systematic level, including providing policymakers with easy-to-use aids for decision-making. However, notwithstanding the ready practitioner acceptance of the method, this would not have been possible had not the methodology first captured their attention by its obvious relevance for investigating long-standing personnel problems.

### ***Involving practitioners and researchers in each other’s areas***

Another way of building closer intellectual connections between scholars and practitioners is to include practitioner representatives in the research process or to embed researchers within practitioner organisations. This can be done, for example, by incorporating such engagement into the curricula of staff colleges and the like. Course members at such educational institutions could be involved in the processes of framing, researching, and communicating such research. In doing so, they will often learn much as well as contribute, with such involvement also helping to clarify the practitioners’ perspectives and to enhance the acceptability of the subsequent findings (or simply even to get clearance to study the issue in the first place).

For example, it is likely that a major reason for the penetration of the Moskos model came from his credibility, his networks and his many opportunities to communicate with middle- and senior-level officers at military educational institutions. The I-O thesis served as a major vehicle for his and other military sociologists’ entrée to service academies and other institutions of higher learning. Here they had the opportunity to convey their views and to share their understanding of the sociological basis of military organisations with the future leaders of the world’s largest and most influential military establishment. In turn, these future leaders would have been instrumental in passing those views and values to both their own institution and to their counterparts in other countries.

Embedding researchers within practitioner organisations can be achieved by, for example, having a ‘scholar in residence’ scheme at senior headquarters or, as in the Moskos example, having a small team of scholars regularly present and leading discussions on relevant research topics and findings at headquarters or educational institutions. The idea is for the practitioner to become familiar with the potential contribution of past or existing research for ongoing problem-solving. Mosser (2010) notes the way that this has been done in the US Army, with the involvement of soldier-scholars such as John Nagl, David Kilcullen and H.R. McMaster on the personal staffs of influential generals. He also draws attention to the Minerva Initiative, a university-based social science basic research programme recently initiated and sponsored by the Department of Defense. In a speech that outlined the Minerva Initiative in April 2008, Secretary Robert Gates compared it to the US National Defense Education Act that increased funding to universities at almost every level in the late 1950s but which in return required scholarly support for the Cold War effort against the Soviet Union.

### ***Communicating more imaginatively***

The final suggestion relates to the way that research findings are communicated. Experienced researchers characteristically report results in terms of the standard format of introduction,



objectives, method, findings, discussion and conclusions, with appropriate emphasis on hypotheses and statistics. However, while this works well in the academy, the same cannot be said for the client audience. For this audience, stories and narratives tend to be more effective and engaging ways of communicating (Sachs 2012), particularly if they resonate culturally.

This extends to the general context as well as to the examples addressed here. A research report based on the analysis of case studies is one of the main strategies for improving researcher–practitioner communication suggested by contributors to the recent *Oxford Handbook of Evidence-Based Management* (Giluk and Rynes–Weller 2012; Lueng and Bartunek 2012; Madhavan and Mahoney 2012; Potorowski and Green 2012). Moreover, such an approach is certainly central to the success of most of the better selling books in the management–leadership field.

Again, Moskos was adept at this particular style. It is notable that his seminal paper contains not a single statistic. Instead, it concentrates on telling the story through example and discussing the implications of the institutional–occupational paradigm in narrative form. (And this was the written medium: in face-to-face communication, he was even more engaging.) The extent to which this reflected his approach in general is illustrated by his instructions to contributors to the conference in 1985 at the U.S. Air Force Academy that resulted in his book on the international experiences of institutional–occupational military employment (Moskos and Wood 1988); he stressed in his guidance the need to include case studies and stories as much as, and as well as, statistics. (In fact, he was quite happy to get papers that were based on case studies and stories without recourse to statistical evidence.)

In the same vein, a recent study on Australian military strategic leadership (Jans et al. 2013) used case studies copiously and avoided statistical tables and the like. Each of its chapters began with a one-page case study drawn from a relevant Australian military example, with the issues contained by the case study then used to illustrate the points made in that chapter.

## Conclusion

The issue of academic–practitioner communication is one that has the keen attention of scholars beyond the field of the military application of the social sciences. The sources for this chapter have come from diverse fields that included organisational and medical studies as well as the military. The clear message is that, if we wish our research findings to have more impact, we as scholars need to develop broader and more flexible modes of researching and communicating.

All scholars who desire ‘relevance’ for the research can learn from Charles Moskos’s pragmatic approach to academic–practitioner communication. He took advantage of his time in uniform as a conscript, an experience that undoubtedly gave him a well-tuned ear for communicating with the military institution at all levels, as well as an outsider–insider’s perspective on its major sociological issues.

The general argument extends to the acceptance of more sophisticated research methodology. As the academy finds ways to increase the relevance of its research findings and research topics to the pragmatic military practitioner, scholars are likely also to find ways to improve practitioner awareness of and appetite for research methods that go beyond interview surveys and the simplest of statistical analyses.

This chapter has been tackled in the spirit of addressing things that I wish had been drawn to my attention much earlier in my career. The pragmatist in me had always been drawn to the practical application of whatever findings I and my colleagues produced for the military institution. And if my track record in terms of getting attention from the military practitioner is less than stellar (as is attested by some of the examples given herein), it is probably because for too

long I paid insufficient attention to the old adage of ‘keeping it simple, stupid’ – always remembering that ‘simple’ doesn’t mean ‘simplistic’.

The suggestions made herein for improving the degree to which the pragmatic practitioner will take notice of the theory-driven academic – suggestions that include focusing focus on frames of reference, recruiting practitioners for communicating research teams, and communicate findings in narrative as well as or in lieu of statistical form. If we as scholars want our research to be noticed, we need to play by the rules of the practitioner as much as by the professional conventions of the academy. In short, it’s up to ‘us’, not to ‘them’.

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