Belonging in the “Big Picture”
(In)authentic Recognition of Wounded Veterans in Denmark

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ABSTRACT: What makes recognition of veterans “authentic,” and how does authentic recognition shape and establish “war veteranism” among wounded veterans? Through ethnographic fieldwork and interviews, this article explores how Danish wounded veterans experience and evaluate official recognition ceremonies. We demonstrate that recognition ceremonies alone do not establish effective recognition. Rather, for recognition to be perceived as authentic, it must be mutual, grounded in the moral originality of the recognizers, and manifested in words as well as actions. Authentic recognition, we argue, establishes a reciprocal relationship between wounded veterans and the state, which positions veterans as valuable contributors to society. Conversely, the absence of authentic recognition generates experiences of misrecognition and invisibility, leading in some cases to wounded veterans feeling “like immigrants” in their own country.

KEYWORDS: authenticity, belonging, Denmark, reciprocity, recognition, war veteranism, wounded veterans

War is inherently political, as are struggles for recognition. Treatment, compensation, and recognition of war veterans by the state play an indisputable role in informing and shaping veterans’ negotiations and experiences of citizenship. Thus, an irrefutable relationship exists between the state and its veterans (Söderström 2019). Although recognition of veterans and their contributions to their nation is considered important in most countries, it is unclear how society can ensure effective ways of politically recognizing veterans (Thompson et al. 2017). In this article, based on ethnographic fieldwork among and interviews with Danish wounded veterans, we demonstrate that in order for official recognition to be perceived by veterans as authentic and meaningful, it must place them in a reciprocal relationship with the state and position them as valued citizens.

In Denmark, the task of caring for wounded veterans poses a new challenge following an increasingly activist foreign policy over recent decades (Daugbjerg and Sørensen 2017). The status of veterans and, in particular, wounded veterans is continuously under negotiation, rendering “veterans” an exceptional and much debated category of citizens (Sørensen 2015). The first Danish veteran policy was issued in 2010, and since then, conditions for veterans have vastly improved. Today, wounded veterans are provided with significantly better resources and opportunities than other citizens, particularly in terms of access to healthcare and rehabilitative and social initiatives. Yet, paradoxically, we found that wounded veterans do not feel recognized and respected as valued contributors to Danish society. Spending time with the veterans, the first author, Eva, found herself observing, discussing, and taking part in events where ceremonial
acts of recognition were performed. She became attentive to and surprised by the contrasting perceptions of official recognition and the strong values attached to it by the veterans. The veterans themselves seemed always to be evaluating the authenticity of recognition shown to them, which made us curious to explore what was at stake in these situations.

From our conversations with Danish wounded veterans, we learned that discussions about the authenticity of political recognition ceremonies were closely linked to how these events presented veterans and placed them in relation to the state. As anthropologists have shown, military veterans often come to constitute a specific category of citizens (e.g., Van Roekel and Salvi 2019; Weisdorf and Sørensen 2019), and political and sociocultural dynamics frame veterans’ membership in states and societies (e.g., Açiksöz 2020; MacLeish 2013; Wool 2015). Nikkie Wiegink and Ralph Sprenkels (2020) propose the term “war veteranship,” emphasizing the particular citizenship struggles that pervade veterans’ positioning in postwar societies. War veteranship is shaped by political acts and narratives, and by veterans’ own actions and self-making (Wiegink et al. 2020). We extend this discussion by examining Danish veterans’ experiences of this membership. In Denmark, a veteran is someone who has been deployed on an international mission at least once, and, thus, can either have left service or still be employed by the military (Danish Parliament 2010). In this article, we emphasize the particular status of veterans who have served in foreign conflict zones or war-affected regions—specifically those who have returned from deployment with physical or mental wounds. Thus, we employ the notion of “war veteranship” as a negotiated relationship between wounded veterans and the state, and we seek to understand how processes of recognition shape and establish war veteranship. In particular, we show how Danish wounded veterans struggle to establish a sense of belonging to society and social communities.

Previous scholarship in veteran studies has suggested that effective recognition can make veterans feel socially included and valued, thus helping ease the transition from military to civilian life (Brewin, Garnett and Andrews 2011; Thompson et al. 2017). Yet, official recognition of veterans is not a straightforward matter. In the Danish context, Birgitte Refslund Sørensen’s studies show that recognition of veterans engages a multiplicity of different actors and political agendas and spurs fundamental questions of belonging and categorizations of citizenship (Jensen 2010; Sørensen 2015). Other studies have demonstrated that official acts of recognition of veterans typically serve the double purpose of recognizing veterans for their service to the nation while also influencing public perceptions of war and soldiers (Christensen 2015; Dawney 2019; Sørensen and Pedersen 2012). We see this ambiguity reflected in our ethnography, as well. We explore how ceremonies aiming to recognize veterans are sometimes perceived by wounded veterans as “false” and primarily concerned with using veterans as political instruments to appeal to voters.

While Sørensen’s main focus has been on how Danish involvement in international warfare shapes and affects society, our interest concerns the lived experiences of “being a wounded veteran” in a powerful Danish welfare state that, through services and gestures, administers forms of legal and symbolic citizenship. Through the analytical lens of authenticity, we explore how wounded veterans’ experiences of ceremonial recognition establish feelings of (un)belonging and negotiate a reciprocal relationship between veterans and the state. Thus, this article contributes to the international scholarship of war veteranship and wounded veterans as a distinct group of citizens.

In the following, we begin by introducing the Danish setting and our study, and we outline our analytical approach to recognition and belonging. We then unfold the analysis in three steps: First, we explore how wounded veterans experience some official ceremonies of recognition as inauthentic. Second, through stories of fluctuating political attention and poor handling
of veterans’ occupational injury cases, we elucidate how the veterans strive to establish reciprocity with, and belonging to, the state and how absence of “authentic” recognition can promote feelings of “invisibilization” and unbelonging. Third, we return to recognition ceremonies, addressing veterans’ performance of recognition and illustrating how ceremonies of recognition inherently entail a politics of belonging for “deserving” and “undeserving” veterans. In conclusion, we discuss how processes of recognition and experiences of authenticity play a role in the establishment of Danish war veteranism.

The Danish Setting and the Study

Denmark is a democratic welfare society founded on principles of solidarity and equal rights and opportunities for all. Every citizen has access to tax-financed healthcare, education, and support in case of illness, unemployment, or retirement. In turn, the welfare system strongly encourages citizens to actively contribute to society by working and paying taxes, thus institutionalizing interdependence and reciprocity between citizens and the state (O. Pedersen 2018). Steffen Jöhncke describes reciprocity in the Danish welfare state as a “mutual insurance scheme,” where “paying taxes becomes the definitive proof of one’s participation in and real contribution to the community” (Jöhncke 2011: 43). Thus, in Denmark, the financial relationship between citizen and state is a moral matter.

Since the early 1990s, Danish armed forces have been increasingly involved in international military conflicts, primarily in the Balkans, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Over the years, Danish military engagement has evolved from peacekeeping to peacemaking missions involving actual warfare (Lidegaard 2018). As an increasing number of Danish soldiers lost their lives or limbs in Iraq and Afghanistan in the first decade of the twenty-first century, military veterans have been subject to political debate and media attention. This attention fueled public and political demands for better treatment of veterans in general and wounded veterans in particular, resulting in the first veteran policy in 2010. National Flag-Flying Day in honor of Danish military personnel was established and nine new medals, including the “Wounded in Service Medal,” were introduced. Since then, conditions for veterans have improved significantly. The comprehensive political and public interest in veterans has provided the veteran field with extensive financial resources resulting in a vast number of public and private organizations offering support and community for veterans.

Eva conducted ethnographic fieldwork within three different organizations that focus on rehabilitating wounded veterans through sports and fellowship. Over a period of nearly two and a half years, from December 2019 to May 2022, she spent time on and off, usually for several days at a time, with veterans and other actors in charge of rehabilitation. By participating in activities, meetings, and conversations, she became a part of several veteran communities. Before and during fieldwork, Eva conducted 39 semi-structured, in-depth interviews focused on veterans’ experiences of “being a wounded veteran in Denmark.” She initially interviewed nine veterans with severe physical wounds in the spring of 2017. Having previously practiced clinically as a physiotherapist, she had worked closely with wounded veterans during their physical rehabilitation at a university hospital in Copenhagen and, thus, had already established a rapport with them. Later, during fieldwork, she interviewed another 23 veterans, all diagnosed with PTSD (Post-traumatic Stress Disorder) or other serious mental illnesses. Given that only a few female veterans took part in the rehabilitation organizations involved in this study, 31 of the participating veterans were male and only one female. At the time of the interviews, the veterans were between the ages of 28 and 60 years. Given that our participants constitute a rather
diverse group of physically and mentally wounded veterans with different backgrounds in military function, rank, and place and time of deployment, we had expected them to express very different experiences and viewpoints. Yet, surprisingly, the interviews and ethnographic material showed a significant level of homogeneity. Finally, Eva also interviewed seven key actors in charge of planning and carrying out veteran rehabilitation.

Most interviews were conducted in participants’ private homes, which provided an informal setting and allowed Eva to get a sense of their personal lives. The veterans were forthright and expressive, opening up to Eva about personal and intimate thoughts and feelings. Her previously established relationships of trust with the veterans enabled her to gain valuable insight into their lives and thoughts. With regard to physically wounded veterans, topics discussed were unrelated to physical rehabilitation and thus created a relationship different from the former patient–physiotherapist relation. Interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed, and all names of participants changed to secure anonymity. Careful reading and re-reading of field notes and interviews enabled us to become deeply familiarized with the data, which were organized using a thematic network model (Attride-Stirling 2001). While Eva alone conducted fieldwork and interviews, the second and third authors contributed to the analytical process and in writing the article. The second author had previously conducted research within Danish veteran rehabilitation, and the third author has a long-standing anthropological interest in questions of belonging and citizenship.

The Role of (In)authentic Recognition in Experiences of Belonging

In unfolding how war veteranship is established through performances of recognition, we turn to recognition theory. Recognition has been a main theme in identity studies, investigating the human need for recognition and the social and political conditions that enable it (e.g., Honneth 1995; Taylor 1994). Over the years, Axel Honneth, in particular, has engaged in a thorough exploration of social recognition, stressing the significance of social relationships in the making and development of an individual’s identity (Honneth 1995). Focusing on personal and social struggles for recognition, Honneth theorizes three different forms of interaction: love, rights, and solidarity (1995: 95–130). Each form corresponds to a distinct aspect of self-relation. “Love” primarily emanates from intimate personal connections and cultivates self-assurance. “Rights” engender self-respect and pertain to the perception of individuals as legal, equal, and valued members of a social collective. Lastly, “solidarity” revolves around the development of self-esteem through experiences of being recognized for one’s unique qualities, abilities, and contributions. While all three forms of recognition are essential in the positive self-formation of individuals, we posit that the dimensions of “rights” and “solidarity” are particularly relevant to the empirical context of wounded veterans’ experiences of recognition in encounters with politicians, official authorities, and fellow Danish citizens.

Our observation that wounded veterans experience a strong feeling of not being valued as members who contribute to the social collective (Honneth’s second and third form of recognition) directed our attention to Paul Ricoeur’s very basic question: “When . . . does a subject deem him- or herself to be truly recognized?” (2005: 217). In answering this question, we unfold how recognition comes to be experienced as authentic (or inauthentic). The term “authentic” is commonly used to convey the idea of being “original” or “faithful to an original” in the sense of being “true to what someone (or something) really is” (Guignon 2008: 277). Yet, the notion of authenticity is multifaceted (Fillitz and Saris 2012), and there is no “unitary, fixed, and all-embracing anthropological definition of authenticity” (Theodossopoulos 2013: 340). In the following, we
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rely on Charles Taylor’s positioning of authenticity as “an original way of being [human]” (1994: 31). According to Taylor, authenticity is deeply intertwined with the individual’s fundamental moral self, which emerges through an ongoing process of self-reflection, self-understanding, and interaction with others (Taylor 1994). To be authentic, the individual must act and speak in accordance with their “original moral self.” We demonstrate how, in the specific context of recognition ceremonies for wounded veterans, an ongoing assessment of these events takes place during which the veterans consider whether those who recognize them express authenticity in the sense of showing their original, moral self. Moreover, we show that when veterans do not experience the act of recognition as reflecting an original sense of self, they feel misrecognized and falsely represented as valuable citizens contributing to society.

In investigating veterans’ experiences of misrecognition in occupational injury cases, we take an interest in structures that enable recognition, or what Judith Butler calls “the conditions of apprehension” preceding recognition. She argues that for a life to be recognized, it must be apprehended as recognizable (2009: 6). When recognition is hindered, it can lead to different kinds of “invisibilization” (Petherbridge 2019). Honneth (2001), too, points to social invisibility as a form of misrecognition, stemming from experiences of being disrespected through (obvious or more subtle) acts of ignorance. Being “socially visible” and, as such, recognizable, implies being accorded social approval and validity by others (2001: 119). While these philosophical scholars focus on recognizability to uncover the structural dynamics determining an individual’s opportunities in life and identity, our first-person ethnography highlights that experiencing acts of political recognition as authentic also actualizes experiences of belonging and unbelonging.

In anthropology, belonging is approached as simultaneously experience and politics (Zenk 2021). As “experience,” belonging unfolds in everyday efforts to “fit in” and become accepted as a member of a social or cultural community. As “politics,” belonging is expressed in political power structures that control forms of sociospatial inclusion and exclusion (Antonsich 2010, Yuval-Davis 2011). Taking an interest in the interrelationship between experience and politics in modern territorial nation-states, anthropological studies have focused on bio-political subjects at the margins of belonging (e.g., Gammeltoft 2014; Hertzfeld 2021; Svendsen 2022). Our case diverts from this focus in that the citizenship of Danish wounded veterans is indisputable; in fact, their rights to various social benefits exceed those of other citizens, and ceremonial acts of recognition aim to express veterans’ central position in Denmark as a warring nation. But how do recognition ceremonies embody politics of belonging and shape veterans’ experiences of recognition and misrecognition? In answering this question, we show that authentic recognition rearticulates reciprocal relationships between veterans and the state, which become crucial to veterans’ experiences of fitting in. By unraveling veterans’ intertwined experiences of misrecognition and unbelonging, we show how dynamics of reciprocity are embodied by and in acts of recognition.

Building on Sørensen’s notion of the relationship between recognition and belonging in a veteran context, we bring these two concepts into conversation with one another and with the notion of authenticity. In doing this, we highlight the sentiments of fitting in, and the relationships between individual and collectivity which are actualized, negotiated, and shaped in conditioning and practicing recognition. Through these insights, we elucidate the complexities of war veteranship and the forms and forces shaping its meaning in postwar societies.

**Evaluation of Authenticity**

The national Flag-Flying Day for Denmark’s deployed personnel takes place every year on 5 September. As the largest and most widespread event of political recognition of Danish veter-

ans, “Flag Day,” as the veterans call it, is celebrated with ceremonies and speeches in nearly all Danish municipalities. To our surprise, the wounded veterans we met did not think much of Flag-Flying Day. Rather, the veterans we interviewed who attended the event expressed that they do so almost exclusively to meet up and socialize with fellow veterans. When asked how he feels about Flag-Flying Day, Alex bluntly stated: “It’s a shitty day!” Thomas put it more colorfully: “I think it’s too easy. That they’re saying: ‘On this specific day we’ll make things a bit festive! [You can] go down to City Hall and then you get to, um . . . stick your fingers into a bowl of candy, and then you can have a soda or a beer, and then we say thank you.’”

Honneth (2007: 323) claims that “we live in a culture of affirmation in which publicly displayed recognition often bears the marks of mere rhetoric.” Several of the veterans support this notion, referring to the political attention they receive on Flag-Flying Day as “false.” When asked if this is his experience too, Thomas replies: “Yes, there’s no doubt about that.” According to him, attending Flag-Flying Day and honoring military personnel is just a mandatory task that politicians can cross off their list and be done with once a year. Consequently, it makes him feel misrecognized in Honneth’s sense of not being valued as a citizen who contributes in significant ways to society. Generally, the veterans expressed mistrust toward the authenticity of the political interest in veterans on Flag-Flying Day. Kenneth says: “As a veteran you feel like, ‘hey, I can get votes out of this. I’ll [the politician] put myself next to this guy [a veteran].’ It’s . . . well, to me, it’s all pro forma for the politicians. That they use the day actively to . . . present themselves.” Like Thomas, Kenneth does not perceive the political recognition of veterans as sincere; on the contrary, it seems almost offensive to the veterans, making them feel like pawns in a chess game and forcing them into an unwanted form of war veteranship. Thus, by attending Flag-Flying Day arrangements, they experience a feeling of involuntarily becoming frontline figures in political agendas, which, paradoxically, aim at recognizing politicians rather than veterans.

The feeling of being “used” is even more prominent among physically wounded veterans whose distinctly visible injuries attract massive attention on Flag-Flying Day. Kevin, who lost both legs in Afghanistan, says: “You sort of try to stay in the background, right? But that’s just a bit hard because people—they spot you and then they just want to know everything.” Uncomfortable with the feeling of being unwillingly exposed, he prefers not to attend Flag-Flying Day. Like Kevin, several of the other visibly wounded veterans experienced feeling put on display on Flag-Flying Day and at other big events. The veterans’ stories clearly exhibit how flag-flying days—which aim at publicly placing veterans at the center of the welfare state—are, to the veterans, an experience of being used as human “instruments” to promote the agendas of others, such as advancing political careers. In her work on physically wounded US veterans, Zoë Wool (2015: 110) distinguishes between “an encounter with an actual soldier and with the figure of the soldier and his generic heroism.” We posit that politicians on Flag-Flying Day are recognizing “the figure of the veteran” rather than the actual veteran. Furthermore, the roles are reversed so that, rather than being recognized, the veterans end up feeling that they are recognizing politicians, as we learned from Kenneth. Drawing on Butler (2009: 6), we might see Flag-Flying Day as an event that aims to establish war veteranship by framing all veterans as recognizable but ends up creating feelings of misrecognition and invisibility. Thus, the speeches that should enhance the veterans’ sense of belonging and, from a Honnethian perspective, cultivate self-esteem, achieve the opposite effect.

While Flag-Flying Day is a large-scale national event aimed at recognizing all Danish veterans, various other events of recognition, such as medal ceremonies and homecoming parades, often take place in military contexts. Allan recalled the time he received the Wounded in Service Medal some years ago. At the medal ceremony, which was held at his previous place of employment, he recalled looking around at the crowd, thinking that the whole situation was pathetic.
Then “some fancy minister with a political science degree” gave a speech before handing out the medal. Allan had thought to himself that this person had no business talking about his experiences in war: “You don’t know anything about it, you haven’t been there,” he reflected. Eventually, his former chief from the Navy showed up, having driven four hours to come and watch Allan receive the medal. The presence of the Navy chief completely changed Allan’s feelings: “I couldn’t control myself. I cried and cried and cried. Because I just thought, did someone really, I mean the chief of the Navy, did he really drive all the way here just to say ‘Thank you’ to me?!” Allan does not question his former chief’s motives. Because he sees the chief’s act as reflecting his “original way of being [human]” (Taylor 1994: 31), Allan considers the chief’s recognition and the ceremony as authentic, thus creating an experience of “mutual recognition” (Ricoeur 2005). While the politician had perhaps also driven a significant distance to speak at the ceremony, to Allan, this did not really count. Authentic recognition cannot be “just a job”; it must be founded in a different kind of relationship. We suggest that in Allan’s case, this relationship and, in turn, his recognition of the chief’s authenticity, is connected to their shared experiences of being “flesh-witnesses” of war—bodily experiences that can only be understood by those who have lived them (Harari 2009).

The significance of mutual recognition became even more evident to Eva when she attended another medal ceremony at the Svanemøllen Barracks in Copenhagen. On a sunny day in early June 2021, members of the Danish Invictus team were receiving medals for participating in the Invictus Games, which is an international multisport event for wounded, injured, and sick military service personnel. In addition, five of the participants were also being awarded the Wounded in Service Medal. The Danish Crown Prince would be handing out the medals. A large crowd was gathered on a green field, surrounded by tall trees and flowering shrubs, in front of a stone building where tables had been set up. On a table in the front was a row of boxes containing shiny new medals. The veterans from the Invictus team, easily recognizable in their red sports suits, were all present with their families and friends who had dressed up for the occasion. The entire Invictus management team and trainers were there too, along with several high-ranking officers wearing full dress uniforms with medals and ribbons. People were standing or sitting in groups, chatting. Some made their way to the medal table, respectfully looking at the medals and taking pictures. The air was filled with excited tension, and Eva sensed clearly that this was an important day. The Minister of Defense had just arrived and walked around greeting people, paying particular attention to the veterans. Everyone was waiting for the Crown Prince to arrive so that the ceremony could begin.

Eva was standing next to Peter, one of the veterans who would be receiving the Wounded in Service Medal that day. He seemed nervous and proud at the same time and told her that he had hardly slept the previous night due to the excitement. While they were talking, several people passed by, congratulating Peter and saying things like: “We know it’s the medal that no one really wants” (because no one wants to be a wounded veteran). Peter, almost defiantly, answered: “Well, I do want it. ” He turned to Eva and said: “I know many don’t want it. But to me it represents how far I’ve come, that I’ve overcome my illness.” From her interview with him in his home six months before, she knew that he had struggled with PTSD symptoms for many years. When he finally got his diagnosis, he told her, tears had been streaming down his face from the relief of finally having “proof” that he really was ill and that his illness was caused by his military deployment. Right before the medal ceremony, the Minister of Defense gave a heartfelt speech, emphasizing the veterans’ immense contribution to Danish society: “You deserve our greatest recognition and respect . . . . Thank you for what you can do, and thank you for all that you contribute to our country.” She ended her speech and the Crown Prince handed out Wounded in Service Medals to the five medal recipients who were standing side by side, arms crossed behind
their backs military style, looking a bit shy but also proud. He spoke a few words to every recipient while pinning the medal to their shirts. The atmosphere was almost solemn and when Eva looked around at the crowd; many were visibly moved.

While attending the Invictus medal ceremony, Eva strongly sensed that the veterans experienced acts of recognition on this particular occasion as genuine. On other occasions, the veterans had not hidden their discontent if, for instance, they disliked a politician’s speech, subtly rolling their eyes or criticizing him or her afterward. This was different. Like Allan, Peter was deeply moved by the recognition he received because it felt genuine to him. The people attending the Invictus ceremony were all there because they had some form of relationship with him and the other Invictus participants, and the speeches related to them personally. The Minister of Defense had previously attended some of the team’s training sessions and seemed to show a genuine interest in talking to the veterans. The Danish Crown Prince, having an impressive military background himself, has always expressed a great interest in veterans’ affairs. He is held in high regard by the veterans and when he attends a medal ceremony, they do not question his motives. Although both the Minister of Defense and the Crown Prince attend the Invictus Games ceremony as part of their jobs, they manage to establish an emotional resonance with the veterans. Thus, as in the case of Allan, the authenticity of recognition is not necessarily related to words but to who is speaking them and how. Speakers demonstrate authenticity by effectively conveying the impression that their words and actions are consistent with their “original moral self.” Thus, although the speakers at both Flag-Flying Day and the Invictus ceremony recognize and praise veterans for their contributions to Denmark in ways that align with Honneth’s third form of recognition, the outcome in terms of making veterans feel recognized are quite different. The Invictus medal ceremony is perceived by the veterans as an act of authentic recognition that provides access to a dignified war veteranship, which positions the veterans as valued members of a societal community including both military and civilian institutions and actors. By contrast, the wounded veterans perceive Flag-Flying Day as misguided, inauthentic, and lacking the aspect of shared experiences, thereby constituting a form of war veteranship that forces the veterans to serve political interests.

**Precarious Belonging**

Above, we demonstrated how war veteranship is established in different ways through flag-flying days and medal ceremonies. At the same time, war veteranship is also constituted by official authorities’ handling of veterans’ occupational injury and pension cases. In Denmark, obtaining official membership in the “wounded veteran” category (as in, wounded as a result of deployment) requires approval from the National Board of Industrial Injuries. Unlike their mentally wounded colleagues, physically wounded veterans face fewer issues in getting their occupational injury cases approved and being paid damages. Legitimacy inherently lies in the visibly injured body and so is unquestioningly ascribed to the physically wounded; whereas mentally wounded veterans have to campaign, often over several years, for this same legitimacy. To them, emphasizing their extraordinary position as representatives of the state becomes essential in their struggle for recognition. Thomas says: “It’s about someone taking ... taking ... sort of wanting to take responsibility for deploying me and that I was wounded. . . . They don’t have to salute me and say ‘Thank you for getting wounded.’ I just want help getting on with my life so that I can have a bearable existence. That’s recognition: that someone takes responsibility for deploying people.” Explicitly defining recognition as society “taking responsibility” for wounded veterans, Thomas reiterates what many veteran studies show: that veterans make claims on the
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state and expect to be recompensed for their service (e.g., Bryers-Brown and Trundle 2017; Wiegink 2019; Wool 2015). As a citizen of the welfare state, state-citizen reciprocity is ingrained in Thomas from birth. To him and to other wounded veterans, the responsibility of the state is closely attached to the administration of occupational injury cases and case administrators’ treatment of veterans. In our conversations and encounters with the veterans, these matters were omnipresent, playing an essential role in their understanding of being (mis)recognized. Honneth states that “subjects perceive institutional procedures as social injustice when they see aspects of their personality being disrespected” (Fraser and Honneth 2003: 132). Alex, like many of the other veterans, felt mistrusted and disrespected by municipal caseworkers and the National Board of Industrial Injuries. He has experienced firsthand how exhausting it can be to constantly “fight the system and get them to acknowledge that I’m sick and need help, and not be hunted like some wild animal,” as he puts it. His story typifies veterans’ experiences of being treated unfairly by having to continuously stand up for themselves and retell their stories to justify their claims.

Kenneth straightforwardly states: “I need recognition to be demonstrated in the form of better handling of our occupational injury cases.” Having struggled with case administrators for seven years, he continues: “It’s not about the money. It’s about being treated decently.” While wounded veterans—as citizens of the Danish welfare society—can expect to maintain a basic standard of living from social security benefits, they can significantly increase their living situation with an approved occupational injury case. Yet, in our conversations, the veterans did not focus on financial compensation but emphasized the importance of being treated with dignity. We see their emphasis on decency as an expression of their struggle for worth in the eyes of the state.

While the veterans emphasize that their need for recognition is not about money, we cannot ignore how recognition of veterans is inextricably attached to finance—not the veterans’ personal finances as such, but the ways in which political—and thus economic—support for veterans’ causes depends on societal awareness. Despite their dismissal of the political recognition they are shown on Flag-Flying Day, veterans do, paradoxically, depend on it. Political attention raises the public profile of veterans and brings financial resources to the field of veteran care, enabling rehabilitation and re-socialization of physically and mentally wounded veterans. Thus, the financial side of veteran recognition simultaneously underlines their position as “super citizen beneficiaries” deserving of special care and financial compensation (Lutz 2001: 230) and provides resources for them to live on. Nearly all aspects of veteran care—physical rehabilitation and advanced prosthetic devices, psychological treatment, administration of occupational injury cases, or rehabilitative initiatives helping veterans to live a better life—largely rely on political focus and goodwill. This public attention constitutes a fundamental condition for veterans’ existence, not just in a material sense but in the sense of Honneth’s second form of recognition, which positions them as equal and valued members of the social collective. Thus, wounded veterans are left vulnerable to the shifting nature of the political focus. Thomas says:

There’s just not much focus on veterans when we’re not at war. That’s what’s so scary, I think. That . . . there has to be dead bodies on the table. Then, it pops up again with the veteran policy and the veterans: “How’s it going with the veterans?” . . . . But when we have a period without death and destruction and war, well then, you don’t really get any votes for talking about veterans . . . . You sort of get the feeling that you’re forgotten, um . . . Or, I can only speak for myself, but I sort of get the feeling that we’re the forgotten ones . . . .

The articulation of being “the forgotten ones” reflects Thomas’s experience of becoming invisible. As Honneth states, this experience “of being made to disappear . . . evidently involves not a
physical non-presence, but rather non-existence in a social sense” (Honneth 2001: 111). Equating his experience of being forgotten with the absence of political attention, Thomas’s story lucidly emphasizes the precariousness of wounded veterans and exhibits the uncertainties of war veteranism. He experiences that the feeling of being valuable to society can never be taken for granted, but resides in a continuous and ever uncertain process of self-establishment, consistently dependent on which way the political wind blows. Peter, who was deployed to the Balkans in the 1990s and experienced firsthand the absence of help and recognition back then, unequivocally underlines the shifting valuation of veterans when he says: “I know it’s not okay to say out loud, but I’m freaking happy people started coming home from Iraq and Afghanistan in body bags.” Thomas says:

We often talk about our immigrants, how they keep together in those little enclaves in ghettos and such. But that’s how it’s going to end with the veterans too. We do the same. We find our own little enclaves in the veteran homes or other small groups like that, because you don’t feel part of . . . the big picture. It’s the same with the immigrants—they probably don’t feel part of the big picture either.

With the “big picture,” Thomas refers to a greater social collective including both state institutions and fellow citizens, and thus he, like most of his peers, does not make a distinction between state and civil society. His yearning to belong demonstrates how emotional attachment goes hand in hand with politics of belonging. Comparing veterans to immigrants, Thomas illuminates how the absence of (authentic) recognition generates feelings of unbelonging. His story unambiguously shows that this experience of belonging to the societal collective is not accomplished by acknowledging veterans’ sacrifices and proclaiming them national heroes on Flag Day. Paradoxically, due to its lack of authenticity in the eyes of the veterans, this political recognition, which rhetorically presents wounded veterans as deserving and valued citizens, not only makes them feel misrecognized and alienated, but marginalizes them from the citizenship they were born with. They become “immigrants” whose belonging is contested and who harbor feelings of not fitting in. In Denmark, the subject of immigrants has been heavily problematized. Questions of state responsibility for immigrants and immigrants’ perceived lack of contribution to the welfare society are continuously at the center of public debate, situating immigrants at the margins of societal belonging (Svendsen 2022). Thomas makes a clear distinction between two citizen categories: those who are recognized and valued as contributors to overcoming societal challenges, and those who are marginalized and seen as constituting a societal challenge.

Another position that the veterans identify with is that of “national hero.” In interviews, several of the veterans stress the special service they have provided, like Alex, who, pointing a finger at himself, forcefully states: “Who has fought for your [civilians’] freedom? One of them is sitting right here!” The politically framed role of national hero, and the fluctuating attention that informs it, becomes pivotal in the veterans’ endeavor to establish a meaningful life as wounded veterans. Drawing on her fieldwork experiences among US veterans, Wool writes: “The world and one’s fleshy presence in it are marked by instabilities wrought by the incommensurability of being publicly bound to war while moving toward an anonymous American good life to come” (2015: 189). In the Danish context, while political recognition provides veterans with opportunities and financial resources, it also maintains their experience of being unwillingly positioned as symbols of the state and instruments for political motives. To the veterans, the wounded veteran body (and mind, once it is formally diagnosed and “approved”) becomes a form of national sacrifice, which establishes a reciprocal relationship between wounded veterans and the state (Açıksöz 2020)—a relationship where the identity of extraordinary national contributors is inextricably intertwined with wounded veterans’ financial potentialities. Less
explicitly than Alex, Jack says: “If you tell someone that you’ve been deployed and served for Denmark, but now you’re home and you’re not doing so well, you’re met with: ‘But you chose the job. It’s your own fault.’” Stating that he has “served for Denmark,” Jack implicitly establishes an expectation of reciprocity: having made a contribution, he should be compensated when he is “not doing so well.” Paradoxically, other veterans reject being called “extraordinary.” Unlike Jack, they explicitly articulate their service as “just a job” that they knowingly chose to do. “I’m just someone who did his job,” Anders says. Tim, who lost a leg in Afghanistan, matter-of-factly supports this notion: “I didn’t get wounded for my country. I got an occupational injury, doing a job that I was bloody good at, a job that I really liked.”

So, how are we to make sense of these contradictory accounts? Why do these veterans alternate between positioning themselves as extraordinary and deserving of special treatment (“we have been deployed by the state”) in some contexts, and in others, as ordinary citizens (“we just did our job”)? In our reading, what unites these two positions is an emphasis on contribution to the societal community, contributing either by making an extraordinary effort or simply by having a job. Thus, we may see both positions as an effort to belong in the “big picture” by continuously placing themselves in a reciprocal relationship with the state. Interestingly, we see that despite their unease at being used as instruments of political agendas, some veterans willingly take this position when drawing on their role as deployed by the state in an attempt to establish reciprocity. In doing this, they draw on a long-standing political discourse of soldiers as national heroes fighting for freedom and democracy (Christensen 2015), inconsistent with contemporary research demonstrating that Danish soldiers’ motivation for deployment is predominantly driven by a personal desire for “real” combat and existential self-development (T. Pedersen 2017). Thus, the war veteranship that the veterans seek to establish exhibits an understanding of belonging as equated with contribution, while showing the complexities of establishing oneself as a worthy contributor.

In the first section on ceremonies, we showed the importance of tribute speeches from persons who showed “their true self.” In turn, this section has documented another aspect of Honneth’s work: “that recognition may not consist in mere words or symbolic expressions, but must be accompanied by actions that confirm these promises (Honneth 2007: 345).” Tribute speeches and “Thank you for your service” are insufficient to meet veterans’ demand for recognition. Recognition of war veteranship must be manifested in tangible practices like efficient administration of occupational injury cases and effective municipal case handling. While making speeches in honor of veterans, politicians simultaneously hold the purse strings that control wounded veterans’ ability to move on with their lives. If the two forms of recognition are mutually inconsistent and the reciprocal relationship is not manifested in action—as experienced by Alex, Thomas, and Kenneth—it is perceived by the veterans as disrespectful and invisibilizing. Authenticity is lost, and what should be a space of recognition and belonging instead becomes the opposite: a space of misrecognition and unbelonging.

Given that finances play a pivotal role in wounded veterans’ perception of recognition, we may ask how some events of recognition—like the medal ceremonies for Allan and the Invictus team—can be experienced as authentic and meaningful despite some of the veterans involved simultaneously having to struggle to get their occupational injury cases approved and to be treated “decently”? These different aspects of recognition are not easily disentangled. From spending time with the veterans, we learned that although medals and words of honor hold symbolic value that remain meaningful for some time, these cannot ameliorate wounded veterans’ fundamental experiences of misrecognition by the state. When recognition is manifested through an approved occupational injury case, however, it secures one’s status as legitimately wounded in service and has financial value in the long run. Yet, although an approved occupa-
tional injury case enables the awarding of the Wounded in Service Medal, this does not necessarily mean that the medal ceremony itself is perceived as authentic, as we saw at the beginning of Allan's story. On the contrary, some veterans opt out of participating in a ceremony because they do not feel that it is related to them, personally. Essentially, the veterans' ever-present evaluation of the authenticity of recognition, which we uncovered earlier in the analysis, can be understood in terms of mutual recognition: only when veterans recognize the recognition (and the recognizers) do they experience it as authentic. Only then can reciprocity—positioning the veterans in a reciprocal relationship with the state—come into being and generate experiences of belonging.

Valuable Contributor or “Rotten Apple”?

By attending and talking to wounded veterans about recognition ceremonies, we learned that not only were veterans assessing recognizers’ authenticity, but veterans’ position as valued contributors to the state and society was also at stake. To explore this, we return to the Invictus medal ceremony. After the ceremony, Eva noticed that one of the veterans, Christian, was moving around restlessly, looking emotional. She asked him what was wrong, and he replied that the ceremony made him sad. He was on the verge of crying. She already knew what this was about. A few months earlier, she had interviewed Christian in his home. He told her that he could not be awarded the Wounded in Service Medal because the National Board of Industrial Injuries refused to approve his case even though two medical specialists had diagnosed him with PTSD. Fighting hard to hold back his tears, he said: “Many people say that this is the medal that no one wants. But when you’ve fought as hard for it as I have, and I’m most likely not going to get it no matter how much . . . Then it actually means a lot. And 4 June [the day of the medal ceremony] is going to be a hard day. It’s the military’s way of saying: ‘You don’t have PTSD.’ Indirectly, right?”

Although Christian received a medal for participating in the Invictus Games, this recognition of being specially selected as one of the few chosen Danish Invictus Games participants was cancelled out by the simultaneous misrecognition he experienced when he was excluded from getting the Wounded in Service Medal. In this way, Christian's experience of not being officially recognized as a wounded veteran demonstrates that while the medal ceremony for the Wounded in Service represents a space of recognition of wounded veterans' contributions to Denmark, it is simultaneously a space of exclusion. By recognizing wounded veterans' ultimate “duty” of sacrificing themselves—or at least their mental health—for their country, the ceremony politically establishes their membership in a category of particularly valuable citizens, thus expressing a politics of belonging which grants specific veterans, who have made an invaluable contribution, membership in this category. By not receiving the medal, however, Christian is left in a space of unbelonging: to the state as a valued contributor, to the military as an active soldier, and to the veteran community as a legitimately wounded veteran. To him, “the medal that no one wants” is a physical symbol of society taking responsibility for his illness and acknowledging his status as wounded in service. His inability to contribute to society in the present, and possibly in the future, due to his ongoing struggles with PTSD, further intensifies his desire for being recognized for his past contributions. Thus, to Peter and Christian, who are both diagnosed with PTSD, the medal becomes in opposite ways “a medium through which belonging is actively realized, sensorially perceived, and mnemonically lived” (Mattes et al. 2019: 303) and a manifestation of the simultaneous making and unmaking of the war veteranship of wounded veterans. Not being officially recognized as wounded puts Christian's position as a wounded veteran at stake. Specifically aiming at recognizing a limited group of veterans, the ceremony renders
invisible those who, like Christian, are not recognized as wounded in service. Thus, even when recognition is deemed authentic, it sometimes entails an element of exclusion.

As a result of his discontent with the political recognition of veterans and with existing rehabilitative initiatives, Daniel, who was physically wounded during deployment to Afghanistan, has started his own association, the Veteran Community (Veteranfællesskabet), for wounded veterans and their families. The association is privately funded and therefore independent of public demands, unlike most other veteran rehabilitative initiatives that typically rely mainly on public funding. The association does, however, strongly rely on private sponsors. As leader of the Veteran Community, Daniel has a firm idea of what values the association should represent and, in particular, the image of themselves they wish to present, not least to their sponsors. “We want to show that wounded veterans are resourceful,” he says, pointing out that there are very specific criteria for who can join the society: “I want to include those who . . . who want to do things themselves, who want to contribute. So what I’m saying is that I’m very selective when it comes to who I accept. Partly because if you get a rotten apple . . . then it can ruin a lot of things.” Asked what he means by “rotten apple,” he replies:

Um, it could be someone who . . . complains all the time. Someone who wants to get things without contributing. And who is demanding . . . . And then I notice if you’re a person who complains on social media. I mean, we see a big group of wounded veterans, on social media, who—where writing negative things is their whole life. I don’t think that in any way contributes to veteran rehabilitation work or the image of veterans . . . . And if you’re that type, then I don’t think you fit in. You might fit into other communities, but you don’t fit into the community that I’ve started.

Daniel explicitly articulates the reciprocal “economy,” which is also, yet more implicitly, present in the stories told by Alex, Jack and Thomas, a “quid pro quo” economy where human value is established through contribution. He endorses a kind of war veteranship that grants wounded veterans membership if their actions prove them to be “resourceful” contributors. Daniel’s rationale elucidates the exclusionary practice implied in this reciprocal relationship: those who do not behave or contribute in the right way cannot belong to the community. Veterans who do not “fit in” are rendered invisible, illustrating what Butler in an interview with Rasmus Willig (2012: 141) refers to as “the schemes of recognition that establish who will and will not be recognizable.” Thus, in this politics of belonging, a process of valuation is at play yet again, this time among the veterans themselves.

Conducting participant observation with the Veteran Community, Eva noted that they practiced their own particular form of recognition, strongly inspired by what they termed the “American way” of recognizing veterans. One episode in particular made an impression on her. On a warm summer evening, she was invited to a garden party in honor of the Veteran Community, hosted by one of their sponsors. She was surprised to find that what she had expected to be an informal barbeque dinner was in fact a formal event attended by several high-ranking people from the business and political scene. A select group of wounded veterans from the society had been invited too, and Daniel told her that he had only invited those who “know how to dress and behave themselves for an event like this.” Finding herself sitting down for dinner at a table formally laid with white tablecloths, flowers, and place cards, she observed the following situation: A prominent female right-wing politician gave a welcome speech standing next to the “White Table” (inspired by the American tradition of setting up a special table at military dining events to honor those who have served in the armed forces and especially those who did not return from war). “Thank you for all that you have done, so we can be free,” she said, her eyes filling with tears while she continued honoring Daniel and the other veterans in the society for their
sacrifice and extraordinary service for Denmark. Ending her speech, she raised her glass and said, “Let’s all rise and take a moment of silence for those who have fallen.” While they all stood there, silent, the first author glanced around at her table. Next to her were the parents of a fallen soldier, clearly moved by the situation. At her other side was a well-known male politician, also with tears in his eyes. The atmosphere was brimming with respect and honor, yet at the same time, it felt almost overly solemn to her. She was not expecting this highly emotional ceremony of recognition. As they sat down again, her dinner partner, the male politician, turned to her and said, referring to the speaker: “She doesn’t have to be here. She doesn’t have any official duties. That’s how you can tell if a politician really has her heart in it.”

What sets the Veteran Community ceremony apart from our earlier examples is that here the veterans assume control of the recognition event by carefully selecting both their recognizers and the audience, ensuring that these individuals align with their perception of effective recognition. With credible words and tears in their eyes, the politicians in this case manage to establish emotional resonance with the veterans, thus demonstrating an authenticity that Flag-Flying Day speakers do not. Being supported by national politicians, this “private” recognition event emphasizes veterans’ belonging to the state as well as the veteran community. The politicians are perceived to have no hidden agenda and, consequently, the veterans do not feel reduced to political instruments. In this context, they establish their own kind of war veteranship.

Meanwhile, the Veteran Community ceremony is not just another example of authentic recognition. It also demonstrates that even when veterans establish their own practices of recognition there is a boundary of exclusion (Yuval-Davis 2011); not all can be included. Here we see that the veterans’ own organized event expresses a politics of belonging shaped by traditional military values, and presents the “deserving” veteran as one who contributes and does not complain. Thus, the figure of “valued contributor” is not just something the veterans strive to be in the eyes of others, but it is also used by the veteran collective as a means of exclusion. Wounded veterans want to belong in the “big picture.” This picture, we argue, encompasses a connection not only to the broader societal collective but also to the more local veteran community. It is not an “either-or” scenario but rather reveals the fluidity of the boundaries between these imagined communities. Paradoxically, the initiatives that aim to establish veterans’ belonging to either community are inherently exclusionary.

**Conclusion**

In this article, following Ricoeur, we asked when an individual considers him- or herself to be truly recognized. Unpacking the complexities embedded in wounded veterans’ perception and continuous evaluation of ceremonies of recognition, we highlight the pivotal role of authenticity. To the veterans, recognition ceremonies in themselves do not establish recognition—rather, for recognition ceremonies to provide wounded veterans with the experience of feeling recognized, it must be perceived as authentic. We demonstrate that this authenticity is firmly rooted in the recognizers’ moral originality and ability to establish mutuality and emotional resonance with the veterans, either through shared experiences of “flesh witnessing” or through credible tears and words of emotion. But, importantly, for recognition to be perceived by veterans as both authentic and meaningful, veterans must recognize the position from which recognition is performed, and politicians must recognize veterans not just through words but through (financial) action. Crucially, this kind of recognition positions wounded veterans as valuable contributors to the welfare state and society. In the Danish case, authentic recognition makes veterans feel like they are part of a greater societal collective, or, as Thomas says, as “part of
the big picture.” We see this, too, in the veterans’ own organization of ceremonial recognition, which aims at establishing their position as deserving and valuable citizens. Our ethnography uncovers wounded veterans’ continuous efforts to navigate different frames of war veteranship and position themselves in relation to the state and social collectivity. Thus, it exposes the precariousness of wounded veterans’ belonging within Danish welfare society, and highlights the importance of understanding practices and dynamics of recognition that both symbolically and financially shape war veteranship.

While Butler (2009) directs attention to the structural conditions and processes, which enable recognition, we point to the way these processes also create experiences of not feeling recognized. Thus, where Butler focuses on the very possibility of recognizing and presumes that political recognition enables experiences of recognition, we elucidate the role of authenticity in these dynamics. To the Danish veterans, absence of authenticity turns recognition into an experience of being made invisible and used as instruments for political agendas. We show that when wounded veterans do not feel authentically recognized, they lose a sense of belonging, leading, for instance, to feeling “like an immigrant” and “hunted like an animal.” Veterans must continuously negotiate their legitimacy as wounded veterans, a legitimacy that is closely attached to their status as contributors who belong to society. Thus, despite recognition ceremonies often aiming to establish reciprocity between veterans and the state and position veterans as particularly valuable citizens, they sometimes end up excluding wounded veterans from that “desirable” citizen relation. While this inadvertent exclusion can be caused by politicians and other authorities not officially recognizing veterans as legitimately wounded, it can also be—unintentionally—brought about by the veteran community itself, setting boundaries around which kind of wounded veterans are “deserving” of being part of the community.

It is thought provoking that even in a highly inclusive welfare society, citizens can feel marginalized and excluded—especially citizens who are publicly presented as exceptional and particularly valuable for their contribution to society. Thus, our analysis begs the question of whether Danish wounded veterans will ever come to feel genuinely and adequately recognized by the state, even if their occupational injury cases are swiftly approved. How can politicians recognize veterans without making them feel misrecognized and used? We do not have an answer to these questions and, paradoxically, neither did the veterans themselves when we asked them directly. This absence of answers underlines that “recognition is a complicated, unstable exercise” (MacLeish 2013: 179). It highlights that recognition, as a reciprocal process providing veterans with a sense of belonging to the state, is an ongoing project that can never be fully accomplished but must be continuously negotiated and established.

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