**Introduction**

While ‘gun culture’ has recently become a topic of sociological interest, much of this research has been focused on the United States (Yamane 2017, Stroud 2016, Melzer 2009, Anderson and Taylor 2010), and very little is known about the ways in which societies within international contexts relate to the risks inherent in firearms handling. In this way the discipline has had difficulty in developing broader theoretical frameworks through which to better understand ‘gun culture’ more broadly understood. This article offers one locally grounded medium with which to engage this topic by focusing on gun handling, negligent mishandling, and safety within the Israel Defense Forces.

The IDF is a uniquely apt place to begin a study of Israeli ‘Gun Culture’. For one, mandatory service in the IDF is the one place where most (Jewish) Israelis receive some level weapons familiarity and training. The social meaning of firearms within the Israeli context is in many ways cultivated through this common military experience.[[1]](#endnote-1) Secondly, the legal parameters of Israeli civilian gun ownership is related to this military experience. Israel has strict civilian gun control laws. The state limits categories of people who can purchase firearms, limits the number of firearms one can purchase (usually one pistol), and also limits the amount of ammunition one can possess (usually 50 rounds). In 2018 regulations were passed that places, former officers, combat soldiers with a specific level of infantry training, and reservists above the rank of First Sergeant in a unique category that allows them to purchase and carry a personal firearm. In this way, Contemporary Israeli ‘Gun Culture’ broadly speaking develops hand in hand with military directives and service. Changes in how the IDF thinks about and treats the nature of risk surrounding firearms (mis) handling has an impact on how Israeli society relates to gun ownership more broadly.

The mishandling of weapons and munitions by military personnel have become a pressing challenge for the Israeli armed forces. Well-trained combat soldiers have been known to fall victim to the negligent or accidental discharges that result from what the army terms illegal gun “play”. Over the past twenty years Israel Defense Forces (IDF) safety personnel, alongside firearms specialists, and combat officers, have decreased by 92% -from 591 in 2003 to just 45 in 2016 - the number of negligent or accidental discharges within its ranks. This article explores the mixture of cultural, organizational, and technical interventions through which the Israel Defense Forces were able to improve their firearms safety record.

We argue that at the heart of the IDFs battle against weapons mishandling rests a view of risk management that perceives (albeit unofficially) a certain relationship between combat motivation and a general interest in firearms on the one hand, and incidents of weapons mishandling on the other. The IDF has traditionally seen negligent weapons and munitions handling as being rooted more in the natural interest young, motivated soldiers may have in the use of firearms than in individual pathology or criminality. In their long-term efforts to manage the risks posed by negligent weapons (mis)handling, the military has been forced to navigate between a strategic interest in preserving an instinctual interest in firearms among motivated conscripts and broader safety concerns.

Within this context it is unclear if the IDFs success in confronting negligent weapons handling will also function to decrease the familiarity and comfort level experienced by regular combat soldiers in their personal issued firearms. More broadly then, this article explores some of the sociological linkages between firearms safety on the one hand, and the ability of military command structures to promote effective and professional firearms handling

**Material and methods**

The Israel Defense Forces is a citizen-soldier military based on mandatory conscription. A relatively young cadre of soldiers and junior NCOs form the backbone of the army. Up until the first decade of the 21st century most of these personnel had high accessibility to small arms and ammunition and every two- or three-weeks would travel from their military base to their homes, carrying their personal arms. Currently following an army-wide change of policy, only soldiers serving within frontline combat units regularly carry their personal weapons home from their military base. This policy shift also reflects an ever growing and greater awareness on the part of military policy makers regarding the threat of unintentional firearms discharges either on military bases or in the personal homes of soldiers. This study seeks to describe the organizational and cultural modes through which the IDF attempted to limit unintentional discharges within its ranks and explores some of the implications of those techniques.

This study is grounded in the collected knowledge and past research endeavors of **Anonymous** **Author X and Anonymous Author Y** who both served as officers in the safety department of the IDF’s Land Forces Division. The data was supplemented by qualitative ethnographic experiences of **Anonymous Author Z**, within various IDF infantry combat units, as well as by semi structured interviews with various IDF safety and firearms experts. The data represents the secondary analysis of military accidents involving firearms and munitions that the IDF classified under the category of “play”. The data was accumulated over a 20-year period and represent two distinct periods of analysis. All social scientific research was conducted in accordance with all IDF ethical guidelines and under the authority of the IDFs Social Scientific Research Division. The initial and main data set is based on an extensive research project the Israeli military contracted in 1999. This research covers all known instances of accidents with firearms and munitions leading to physical injury reported to the IDF Safety Department between the years 1990 and 1999. Here, a total of 242 injurious incidents were reported, including 116 (48%) accidents which were inflicted by small arms and 126 (52%) by munitions. The second data set is based on the collection of incidents resulting from “play” with firearms or munitions between the years 2010-2017. This second data set is admittedly more limited than the first in two respects. For one, it is based on a straightforward survey as opposed to the more in-depth military analysis represented in the first cohort. Secondly, and more substantially, while the first data set primarily refers to ‘injuries’, the second data set refers only to the negligent discharges of firearms and munitions. This discrepancy is mainly due to the IDFs success in improving its safety profile with regards to weapons handling. During those years, the number of injuries was almost negligible, with nearly no reported deaths. To understand the efforts leading up to and employed within this second period it is necessary to first reflect on the descriptive statistics of the first period of research.

Results

**The 1990-1999 Cohort**

The following table (1) presents the characteristics of casualties resulting from what the IDF terms as “playing” with both firearms and munitions. This spectrum of injuries is interesting for three reasons.

Table 1.

PSM accidents reported from 1990-1999 – A comparison of type and severity of injuries

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Severity | Small Arms  N=116 | Munitions  N=126 |
| Killed | 18 (16%) | 2 (2%) |
| Severe | 5 (4%) | 2 (2%) |
| Medium | 27 (23%) | 17 (13%) |
| Light | 36 (31%) | 52 (41%) |
| Superficial | 30 (26%) | 53 (42%) |

Firstly, over a 10 year period, 20 soldiers were killed – out of a total of 242 injuries – from actions classified as “play” with either firearms or munitions. Of those 18% occurred with firearms, and 2% with munitions. It is noteworthy that while the number of incidents is quite similar in both groups, their lethality is quite different. While fforty-three percent of recorded serious incidents (to include both death, and severe and moderate wounds) occurred using small arms, only 17% of serious injuries (to include both death and moderate wounds) occurred with munitions. The number of casualties in each group are also different. Most incidents from munitions involved multiple casualties, while the many more incidents from firearms tend to involve only one casualty. Thus as the number of casualties rose within the category of munitions, their total prevalence ultimately decreased.

Secondly over a ten-year period there were only 30 reported instances of superficial injuries resulting from small arms “play” (26%), as opposed to 53 reported injuries resulting from munitions (42%). The relatively low number of superficial injuries probably highlights a certain reporting bias. Soldiers and commanders are less likely to report very light injuries that do not include hospitalization. It is also much easier to discreetly ‘paper over’ such incidents within the limited organizational confines of small units. By contrast it is much more difficult to hide even superficial injuries resulting from larger accidents with munitions.

Thirdly, the small arms incidents that result in death (16%) were four times greater than those incidents that resulted in severe injuries (4%). Yet there the number of soldiers killed and severely wounded through munitions was constant. In IDF experience this discrepancy can be explained by the physical ergonomics of weapons ‘play’. In most instances of weapons mishandling which include stripping, cleaning (where the individual is invariably sitting on a chair or cot) and dry firing, a soldier is holding the barrel of a rifle upwards towards the torso of an individual’s body. In this way any discharged bullet from close range was more likely to produce fatal results. By contrast, self-inflicted small arms injuries are significantly less lethal than ‘other – inflicted’ injuries (Table 2). A self-inflicted wound that is the result of weapons mishandling, or ‘play’, is more likely to impact the lower peripheral extremities. With regards specifically to firearms injuries, whether ‘self-inflicted’ or ‘other-inflicted’, discharges naturally occurred when a soldier believed that his weapon was unloaded and/or decocked. As one IDF debriefing report noted,

Three soldiers who were guarding a settlement were in their room…Corporal K was playing with the personal weapon of the deceased and shot one bullet towards his face without noticing that the magazine was in the weapon…. (Author 2001: 30).

Table 3.

### Injuries reported from 1990-1999 – Type of equipment

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Small Arms  N=116 | | | Munitions  N=126 |
| Personal arms 86 (74%) | |  | “Light” grenades (Shock, Gas) 48 (38%) | |
| Semi-automatic pistols 29 (25%) | |  | Small arms munitions 19 (15%) | |
| Machine-gun 1 (1%) | |  | Detonators 15 (12%) | |
|  |  | | “Heavy” munitions (Grenade, Shells) 20 (16%) | |
|  |  | | Pyrotechnics (Illumination & Firecrackers) 17 (13%) | |
|  |  | | Fragments & unexploded 7 (6%) | |

Most firearms injuries reported were the result of mishandling military rifles, which is the most prevalent weapon in the IDF (Table 2). Pistols which were at the time required to be carried by all uniformed commissioned and non-commissioned officers (Lantzman 2013) represent a quarter of all total firearm injuries. By contrast 84% of injuries from armaments were the result of soldiers mishandling of what they perceived to be less than lethal forms of armaments

This difference might also be related to the context through which IDF soldiers found themselves in possession of different forms of munitions. It was found that 84% of these injuries were the result of soldiers picking up and fiddling with munitions that are less than lethal such as stun (flash-bang) grenades or gas grenades. In this way, soldiers, usually during periods of training, and out of a sense of either boredom or curiosity, would begin to “play” or experiment with fallen munitions that they believed posed a lesser degree of danger. As an incident inquest from the late 90’s reported,

The exercise started in the night and continued into the ensuing day. In the morning corporal R found a small metallic object with a red tip point… he had shown the object to his comrades, corporals C and D, who in turn inspected it and passed it between themselves … about five minutes later the object exploded, cutting off some of his fingers and causing a light wound to his eyes …” (Author, 2001: 29).

Following these incidents in the late 90’s, IDF safety and weapons experts (personal knowledge) believed that three underlying factors contributed to unintentional weapons discharges and weapons “play”. These were: curiosity, lack of weapons skills or professional experience, and a mistaken belief that the weapon or munitions were ‘safe’. They also noted how many of these discharges and injuries occurred during group activities. Most of the incidents were not characterized by lone soldiers fiddling with weapons or munitions, but rather occurred within a social matrix. For instance, individuals would aim or ‘play’ at fast drawing their weapons on each other. In that kind of social context where weapons are being handed from individual to individual, it is extremely easy to lose track of the condition of any one weapon. As one safety inquest from the late 90s made clear,

Corporal F shot himself while playing with his friend’s weapon, Corporal T…. [Both] Corporal F and Corporal T exchanged between them different kinds of pistols (Author, 2001: 31)

Noteworthy however is what was not factored into the list. As mentioned, the IDF fell short of attributing criminal intent or pathological deviancy to injurious incidents. In this way the IDF seemed to have unofficially identified a certain relationship between the interest young soldiers may naturally express in weapons, and the unauthorized handling of weapons. By falling short of labelling these activities as ‘criminal’ or ‘pathological’, the military seems to be carefully trying to balance the need to end firearms mishandling, while preserving an interest and excitement in firearms on the part of their recruits.

**Early Interventions – Firearms Clearing**

While the above data refers to injuries resulting from the unintentional discharge of firearms, the IDF was likewise concerned with the overall number of unintentional discharges within the military. Internal army research noted how most of these discharges occurred during the administrative handling of firearms during routine operational duties (Zinger and Melamed 2005). As Lt. Col. (res) Mikey Hartman the former head of the IDF marksmanship department during those years noted in a recent interview,

I was really displeased with the overall number of unintentional discharges. It was far too high, and most of them occurred while soldiers were clearing their weapons.

That is to say, soldiers were more apt to unintentionally discharge a bullet during the very act of ensuring that the chamber of the firearm is itself cleared of ammunition. This kind of unintentional discharge was related to the distinct and unique way the IDF taught its soldiers how to clear a rifle during that period.

In the 1990s - while the Galil rifle was in service with the armored and artillery corps, and the Uzi was still in use in some rear non-combat units - the M-16 A1 rifle platform served as the primary IDF small arms weapon in all infantry units. When clearing the M-16 A1 rifle the IDF instructed its soldiers to, point the weapon upwards at a 60 degree angle, remove the magazine from the rifle, pull back sharply twice on the charging handle, holding back the handle on the last pull. The soldier was then to inspect the open chamber both physically and visually for a lodged bullet. Following this, the soldier was then instructed to release the charging handle, open the safety catch, and to depress the trigger. Following the (hoped for) click, the soldier was then to pull back and release the charging handle a final time, re-cocking the hammer of the rifle, and finally reengage the safety. At the summation of this procedure the rifle was considered “cleared”. The problem however emerged in the depressing of the trigger. In the context of long-term operational duties, or in the boredom of barracks life, soldiers would often forget, or otherwise fail, to remove the magazine from the rifle. Instead of removing ammunition from the rifle, this would cause a live bullet to enter the chamber. If this went unnoticed (as it often did), instead of hearing a click upon depressing the trigger, a soldier would in actuality discharge the weapon.

Soldiers on operational duty, as well as while performing routine guarding tasks on base, would perform this clearing operation multiple times a day (Zinger and Melamed 2005). This may include when the soldier awakens in the morning, upon commencing their operational or guarding task, when they return from that task, every time they exit and enter a base, and certainly after every time they insert a bullet into the chamber of their rifle as part of their operational duties. While this reputation (perhaps as much as 20 times a day) increased the confidence a soldier had in the condition of his weapon, it also exponentially increased the number of (fatal) errors that could precipitate the unintended discharge of the weapon. For IDF planners in the safety and marksmanship departments the excessive administrative handling of firearms could be directly correlated to the amount of unintentional discharges throughout the military. As Lt. Col. Hartman noted, “the only time, the only time, you should be taking off the safety and touching the trigger is when you are ready to fire the gun”.

As **anonymous authors X and Y** can attest, beginning in the Mid-2000’s the IDF began to trial a number of techniques to curb the amount of excessive handling of the firearm and the attendant unintended discharges that go along with that handling. This was a period, of constant research, social experimentation, and a good deal of trial and error. The first intervention instituted in 2007 ordered soldiers to keep their magazine in the rifle the entire day (without a round in the chamber), and just remove the magazine and then clear the weapon only once a day. Based on internal preliminary research from an earlier pilot study (Zinger and Melamed 2005), IDF safety and marksmanship personnel believed this change would have two effects. For one, this new procedure would decrease the amount of clearings an average soldier performs from 20 times a day, to only once a day. A decrease in opportunities for error it was believed, would ultimately reduce the number of actual errors that lead to discharges. Secondly as a magazine would always be in the rifle, it was believed that soldiers would become more aware of the condition of their rifles, and thus be more cautious in handling them. This second variable entailed its own kinds of cultural connotations. As Singer and Melamed noted (2005: 4), similar research projects on factory workers found that incidence of negligent handling of heavy machinery would decrease as more trust was placed in the average laborer (Erev et al. 1995). In this instance, the change in how a rifle magazine was carried was meant not just to improve the safety profile of weapons use but also to positively impact the trust that exists between commanders and subordinates. Overall throughout the course of a year, this intervention led to a 79% reduction in unintended discharges, from 359 in 2007 to 76 in 2008.

The second intervention likewise focused on the organizational culture and learned behaviors of weapons clearing and handling. In this method the weapons user was entirely forbidden from disengaging the safety catch and depressing the trigger. When clearing a weapon, a soldier was now instructed to point the weapon upwards at a 60 degree angle, ensure the safety catch was engaged, and pull back briskly on the charging handle three times. The objective of this procedure was to ensure that if a magazine was still in a rifle, a soldier would clearly see the bullets being extracted from the weapon and would promptly address the safety hazard. As Lt. Col. Mikey Hartman noted, “The first pull back was to ensure that there was no round in the chamber, the second was to ensure extraction, and the third a safety precaution”. Practically speaking this method simply gave soldiers ample opportunities to notice rounds ejecting from the rifle, and ultimately reduced weapons discharges by a further 45% from 76 in 2008 to 43 in 2009 (45%).

A third intervention contributing to this overall reduction in unintended weapons discharges was an educational push towards more directly involving lower command leadership in weapons handling and safety. Leadership, and specifically the trust that enlisted personnel express in their commissioned and non-commissioned officers have been seen to be positively related to the overall safety climate within individual IDF units (Luria 2010, Zohar and Luria 2010, 2005). The IDF – like many militaries – is a command-centric organization. Within the IDF however leadership is not so much grounded in formal written doctrine, as it is rather mimetically based. That is to say subordinates mimic the actions of their superiors. The Hebrew term for this kind of deep involvement is “Lehitasek” (to involve oneself) and refers to the close interest commanders are supposed to take at all levels in weapons safety. The prevention of unintended discharges and injuries from those discharges was thought to be an organizational effort intimately tied to the daily actions of commanders and officers in all levels of leadership. This is particularly true however at the local company or platoon level. What the junior commanders at this level do regarding weapons safety is imitated by their soldiers. The same is true for the personal involvement of commanders in issues of gun safety. The personal interest senior commanders express in weapons safety, and the measures they put in place, is seen as trickling down through the ranks, to influence the personal actions of enlisted recruits.

Alongside an emphasis on mimetic top-down leadership, the IDF’s focus on individual firearms safety, coincides with a broader post-heroic tendency to avoid other forms of risk both in operational activities as well as in training (Authors 2020, 2018). Thus, for example in the 2000’s the IDF changed its live fire exercises to forbid firing small arms from the rear during a team advance (IDF Field Safety Manual. 2016). For better or for worse, soldiers no longer have the experience of feeling the small shockwaves of bullets passing them. Likewise the IDF now includes (sometimes external) safety investigations into most operational and training accidents. Results are published and are used in inculcating a deeper awareness for safety throughout the ranks. This collection of cultural changes regarding safety results in a much more controlled environment both in IDF training facilities and compounds as well as during operational activities.

**Mechanical Intervention**

Beyond these interventions, in a further effort to reduce unintentional discharges, in 2014, the IDF mandated the use of what they termed the “Mak Porek” in all rifles being used by service personnel. The Mak Porek is an ejecting chamber flag used to ensure, both to the rifle user and to observers that one’s weapon is clear of any live rounds. It consists of a bright orange round coned piece of plastic that is place into the chamber of a rifle. On the side of the small device a piece of orange plastic juts out from the chamber, and is meant to be visible to all observers. The back of the device is fitted with a metal “casing” that simulates the dimensions of the 5.56 caliber bullet used in the M-16 and Tavor rifle platforms. A rifle bolt is meant to latch onto the simulated casing, as the bolt is drawn back the Mak Porek is supposed to be ejected just like a genuine bullet.

This new technological direction made the state of the rifle (loaded or unloaded) visible and obviated (almost) entirely the need to actively clear one’s weapon. Some soldiers have questioned the mechanical efficiency and durability of this device. As one military developer of the Mak Porek noted in a recent interview, the device exposes the inner the chamber of the rifle and its inner workings to the dust and grime of the field. If the chamber is not cared for properly, or it the bolt is not closed with enough force over the casing, the mak porek may not be ejected in an efficient manner in a time of need. Another marksmanship instructor noted during a recent IDF training session, how closing the bolt with enough force over the hardened metal alloy resembling a bullet casing, will over time actually weaken the ejector pin causing malfunctions. Some older reservists have colloquially termed the device the “Drek Porek”, or the “Mak Drek” (Drek – the Yiddish term meaning, Shit).

The reservations with which some more experienced soldiers (and even some developers of the device) have expressed over the mak porek seem to also be focused, on the meaning the device might have for both unit training and the learned familiarity an individual soldier develops with his weapon. Although the previous interventions were mainly social, cultural, or organizational in nature, this intervention sidesteps the social character of gun safety and directly impacts the function of the weapon itself. Far from focusing on the learned techniques of handling a weapon, or on the pedagogical structures of gun safety, this mechanical device functions as a physical intervention between the combatant and the weapon. While the IDF might have earlier been concerned with decreasing the number of times soldiers administratively handle their firearm, this device obviates a need to “handle” the weapon at all. In so doing, it also decreases the need for any given soldier to be personally aware of the condition of his firearm, so long as the mak porek is visible within the chamber of the rifle, the weapon must be considered clear.

The following graph presents information about the number of unintentional weapon discharges.

2008 – Avoid the trigger

2007 – Reduce the number of clearings

2014 – Mak Porek

One can see that the number of unintentional discharges decreased by 92% between 2003-2009. Interestingly the data also calls into question the specific efficacy of the Mak Porek. While there were 43 unintended discharges in 2009, in 2015 one year after the introduction of the mak porek, that number actually went up slightly to 48, and remained relatively stable until 2017.

Discussion

**Firearms Handling and its Discontents within the Social Sciences**

The issue of risk management and firearms safety has only recently been taken up by social scientists. While scholars have been acutely interested in the social implication of weapons carry within specific civilian settings (Jang, Dierenfeldt, and Lee 2014), the impact on subjective feelings of security (Schildkraut et al. 2018) and risk perception (Wallace 2018), the exact modalities of weapons handling and safety – specifically within military contexts - have generally been elided by the social scientific literature.

Social scientists have begun to express keen interest in the prevalence of firearms injuries in international contexts and have attempted to categorize the differing aspects of the phenomena. In a recent analysis of firearms deaths in Sweden between 1983 and 2012 for example, (Junuzovic 2018, Junuzovic et al. 2019) looked at 43 cases of non-intentional fatal accidents, of which they found 30% were related to “playing with firearms” (13/43) and 21% to “other improper weapon handling” (9/43) (Ibid. 2018, 30). On the more military side, A UK research (Stansfield and Rushforth 2009) found that that about 47% (20/43) of all injuries due to weapon discharge in the UK armed forces during a six-year follow-up resulted from “Unknown” Unintentional Discharge (2009, 21). Likewise, a full 20% (234/1115) of all unintentional discharges were the result of unknown circumstances. That number rises to 25% (281/1115) when incorporating discharges during administrative handling of firearms that include function tests and chamber clearings. While it is impossible to pinpoint the contexts behind the number of unknown injuries and total number of discharges, it seems likely that these can be traced to various social or organizational factors. Likewise looking at civilian firearms injuries and deaths within the United States between 2003-2006, Hemenway, Barber and Miller (2010, 1186) found that 38.5 % (140/363) occurred as a result of firearms “play”, this number rises to 49% when including the administrative functions of cleaning and loading a firearm (179/363) (Hemenway, Barber, and Miller 2010).

While the uunintentional discharge of firearms is usually reported in the literature as being a major factor behind firearms injuries and deaths (Monárrez-Espino et al. 2017), a close analysis of the human errors that precipitate these events has seldom been undertaken. One reason behind this lack of social scientific interest in one of the basic risks inherent in military life, is the closed nature of the military system itself. Militaries (specifically the IDF) are reluctant to allow outside researchers access to their various units (Authors 2021). Firearms accidents in particular are a uniquely sensitive issue which usually involve law enforcement, judicial, and other disciplinary procedures, that both regular soldiers and their commanders are disinclined to discuss. The reluctance of participants themselves to discuss negligent, accidental, or other forms of firearms mishaps means that researchers - both civilian and uniformed – must often rely on forensic forms of accident analysis (Stack and Wasserman 2008). Thus, for example the medical sciences have shown a keen interest both in the rate of mortality associated with firearms ownership (Pallin et al. 2019, Wintemute et al. 1999) as well as in the type of injuries that result from differing forms of negligent firearms discharges (Kopchinski and Lein 2001, Loder and Farren 2014, DiScala and Sege 2004, Costa et al. 2017).

This kind of empirical evidence has usually led scholars towards a focus on macro level preventions with a specific focus on the reduction of the accessibility to firearms and enhancing awareness of the leadership role in preventing mishaps (Dowd, Knapp, and Fitzmaurice 1994, Kopchinski and Lein 2001, Stansfield and Rushforth 2009). While these kinds of top-down studies may ultimately show some correlation between firearms availability, and incidents of mortality and death (Lester 1993, Anglemyer, Horvath, and Rutherford 2014), they tend to elide the social and organizational factors that inhabit the mishandling of firearms. That is to say, at the heart of every unintentional discharge rest a succession of human errors that involve the functional interaction between groups of individuals and a series of organizational, social, and legal safety standards. It is this convergence between the individual, society, firearms that have been so poorly understood within contemporary sociology.

**‘Firearms Play’: A Rite of Passage or a Pathology?**

The limited research on firearms mishandling has tended to classify such activities as either representing some pathologically deviant qualities within the individual, or as a kind of social rite of passage. In this way, Ditunno and McCauly (1985) and Zuckerman (1994) see the interest and active participation in gun related activities (and gun related injuries) as being psychologically related to what they term as ‘sense seeking’ (Ditunno, McCauley, and Marquette 1985, Zuckerman 1994), or the “the need for varied, novel, and complex sensations and experiences and the willingness to take physical and social risks for the sake of such experiences” (Zuckerman 2014). Psychological factors were also noted by IDF research who explored the correlations between the unauthorized use of firearms and various forms of operational stress to include both boredom, as well as a fear for one’s life and safety. Similarly, it was found that psychologically identified a class of risk taker who would be more likely to participate unsafe and unauthorized gun handling (Authors 2013, Author 2004).

By contrast, anthropologists have tended to place the mishandling of firearms within a social or cultural context. Rites of passage, or rituals that lead individuals through transformational experience, feature prominently here. Winslow (1999: 451) for example found that unauthorized gun handling, alongside alcohol abuse, were featured in certain informal airborne initiation rituals (Winslow 1999). Ben Ari and Sion (2005) have noted how humorous jokes around the topic of carrying firearms serve to strengthen the “social and organizational life” (Ben-Ari and Sion 2005) of Israeli reserve soldiers. Both models - the psychological pathology, as well as the rite of passage - intuit some level of either individual or social deviancy in the act of firearms mishandling. This perspective however tends to elide both the organizational context of firearms use within the military, as well as the ways in which the military thinks about the lethal relationship between arms and men.

Until very recently the Israeli military classified most instances of firearms mishandling as “weapons play” (mischak b’neshek – Hebrew). Nearly unique to the IDF, the concept of weapons “play”, is a category through which the Israeli military has traditionally interpreted the social and cultural factors that contribute to unintended firearms discharges. The IDF has traditionally divided weapons mishandling into two separate categories; ‘criminal’ mishandling, and ‘playful’ mishandling (Authors 2001). While the former involves violent intent (to include murder) as well as many instances of suicide, the latter ‘playful’ mishandling is not seen as including any unique intent to commit violence on oneself or others. Moreover, as the IDF’s own research into the phenomenon conducted in the mid 90s uncovered, many instances of weapons “play” were committed by motivated, highly trained soldiers who were in actuality in the process of either cleaning their weapons, or were conducting some form of unauthorized training procedures with their personal firearms (Lazar and Rosen 1995, Authors 2001)

The category of firearms ‘play’ denies any criminal or even pathological connotations to firearms mishandling. Resting between the lines of this semantic choice is a certain amount of reluctance on the part of the IDF Command to mark motivated individuals curious about weapons as deviants or criminals. Within the IDF “weapons play” has come to also denote unnecessary or authorized administrative gun handling, to include (but not limited to) opening the action, stripping, or cleaning the weapon (Authors 2001). Within IDF circles “weapons play” to include unauthorized administrative handling of firearms is a distinctly social phenomenon. It is an activity that is inspired, instigated, and performed within social contexts. In military settings these contexts are influenced by the structural parameters of the military organization and the technical means through which it handles firearms. In this sense interventions specifically designed to effect the social and organizational aspects of weapons play have been found to be uniquely effective in decreasing the number of negligent or accidental discharges in the IDF.

By ultimately locating the solution to unintended firearms discharges within the mechanics of the weapon itself the IDF has in essence reimagined the issue of gun safety from social and organizational phenomena to a technical one. If gun safety was once a social problem with social consequences (some that might even promote battlefield expertise), it is now a much more straightforward matter of blocking and flagging a rifle chamber. This mechanical shift introduces a tension into military units wherein a legitimate concern for ‘safety’ around weaponry runs up against the need to ensure the personal familiarity, interest, and expertise with a weapon.

While the long-term impact of these collected social, cultural, and mechanical interventions has yet to be determined, in the short term they indeed seem to have decreased the incidents of unintended firearms discharges and injuries. Between 2010-2017 investigative reports of the IDF Safety Department revealed only two deaths resulting from both small arms and munitions. This factors into a 91% reduction in the amount of fatal firearm and munitions accidents. In addition, similar results could be tracked concerning the overall number of unintended weapons discharges. In 2003 it was reported that 591 small arms were unintentionally discharged as compared to only 45 in 2016. This represents a 92% reduction.

Moreover, during this period, Israel faced a longstanding domestic terror threat which resulted in a significant increase in the number of arms circulating in the civilian sector and within civilian environments. Nevertheless, the number of unintentional firearms discharges remained (and continues to remain) low. When such accidents were reported in Israel, they occurred primarily private security companies who hire armed security personnel.

**Conclusion and Future Work**

While the sociological interest in gun culture has begun to take on steam with a focus on what David Yamane has termed “Gun Culture 2.0 [or]…the culture of armed citizenship” (Yamane 2017), very little research has taken an international look at the cultural conditioned practicalities of firearms handling, and to the social contexts through which meaning emerges out of those practicalities. Gun safety and combat motivation are two phenomena whose culturally constructed meanings emerge alongside developing institutional relationships to firearms. While social scientific scholarship within the United States has tended to highlight both political tensions and concerns over criminality in their focus on ‘Gun Culture’ within Israel’s military context, a similar focus brings to the fore different kinds of social dilemmas. The issue of firearms mishandling, and the IDFs various efforts to combat the phenomenon offers one window into the development of unique cultures around guns and their use.

Safety experts have long expressed an interest in the mishandling of firearms and munitions, yet the distinct social and cultural characteristics of firearms safety and mishandling have only rarely been analytically categorized (Hemenway, Barber, and Miller 2010, Junuzovic et al. 2019). Within the IDF an uneasy and unofficial tension has traditionally existed between preserving an excitement around weapons handling on the one hand, and gun safety on the other. In this way, the army has traditionally viewed these firearms accidents in the context of "play" as opposed to pathology, because they unofficially recognized a certain relationship between an interest and excitement around guns (alongside all the inherent risks involved) and preserving a necessary warrior ethos. With these considerations in mind, the IDF chose to confront the phenomenon of unintentional firearms discharges by launching a comprehensive strategy that included; reframing safety procedures, institutional awareness, extensive research projects, and finally mechanical intervention. In this sense mechanical solutons and alongside organizational social and cultural factors were key in the reducing the number of negligent hazardous incidents with small arms and munitions.

The IDF has recently begun to question the longstanding relationship it has tended to draw (if only through implication) between an interest and excitement around firearms on the one hand, to their unauthorized “play” on the other. Moreover, while their many interventions have indeed succeeded in drastically lowering the number of negligent firearms accidents and injuries, it is still unclear what effect this decrease will have on the combat motivation, and warrior ethos of IDF combatants. The experience of combat and the ‘warrior ethos’ (Authors 2020) is predicated on the familiarity, professionalism and overall relationship a regular soldiers has with his or her weapon (Ben-Ari 2017, Authors 2013). Future research will be called upon to better elucidate how a shift towards criminality, alongside a push to modify the relationship between a soldier and the workings of his or her weapon will influence their professional ability and motivational desire to use that weapon in a true moment of need.

Note: On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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1. Importantly, this phenomenon is not entirely unique to Israel. In the United States trends in gun manufacturing and sales are not just related to local, state, and federal gun laws, but also to the kinds of weapons that are popular in local, state, and federal law enforcement and military agencies. For a broader discussion of the relationship between civilian and military gun culture (Barrett 2012) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)