

Veterans and violence: an exploration of pre-enlistment, military and post-service life

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Veterans and violence: an exploration of pre-enlistment, military and post-service life

Despite growing criminological interest in the many ex-service personnel mired within the UK's criminal justice system, there remains a paucity of qualitative research studies examining the (violent) veteran offender. In response, this paper mobilises the voices of veterans to explore the key life events that can shape their offending behaviour. Countering reductionist explanations of violent crime committed by ex-service personnel, we contend that veterans' violence may be rooted within personal biographies and psyches, conditioned by military experiences and represent the psychosocial consequences of the socio-economic transformations of advanced capitalism.

Introduction

There are an estimated 2.8 million military veterans residing in the UK, with a further 17,000 service personnel leaving the armed forces each year (Ministry of Justice, 2015). Whilst the vast majority of individuals transition successfully into civilian life, there is growing recognition that for some men and women re-entry poses a number of challenges (Ashcroft, 2014). Often linked directly or indirectly to their in-service experiences, the complexity of veterans' needs is illustrated by the number, variety and comorbidity of physical, mental and social conditions which inhibit adjustment. In turn, ex-service personnel are at greater risk of offending, unemployment, homelessness and suicide than their civilian counterparts, whilst they are also more likely to suffer from associated physical and mental health problems, social isolation and addiction. Most notably, the post-service criminality of veterans has

emerged to become 'a striking political agenda' that has begun to attract criminological inquiry (Murray, 2015: 56).

Whilst the number of veterans in the UK who are subject to criminal justice sanctions is disputed, official estimates suggest that former members of the armed forces represent five per cent of the prison population and five per cent of those individuals serving community sentences (Kelly, 2014). Significantly, a notable proportion of veteran offenders have been convicted for violent crime (Howard League, 2011). Studies examining violent offending by veterans are largely positivist and quantitative in nature, with surveys, clinical assessment questionnaires and military records acting as the principal means through which researchers have sought to assess the prevalence of aggressive or violent behaviour and/ or statistical relationships between risk factors and aggressive or violent behaviour. As MacManus et al.'s (2015) systematic review and meta-analysis highlights, for military personnel deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, rates of physical aggression and violence are greater amongst combat exposed veterans, whilst the intensity and frequency of exposure to combat trauma is associated with elevated rates of violence. Evidence also indicates that combat and post-deployment violence may be mediated by mental health problems, notably post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and alcohol misuse. Yet across these studies, there is scant consideration of pre and post-military factors which may lead to violent crime. Moreover, by focusing on statistical probabilities, veterans' lives are shorn of the bibliographic detail and broader socio-economic context that may elucidate their offending behaviour.

In response, this paper explores veterans' pre-enlistment life, military life and post-military life with regard to their reflections on significant life events impacting on their engagement in violent offending. The data presented in this paper originates, principally, from the life history narratives of four of fifteen veterans interviewed as part of a project exploring the impacts of ex-service personnel's life experiences and identity transformation

on their offending and substance misuse. It is supplemented by further interview data with this group that is derived from a two year evaluation focussing on the growth of personal and social capital for individual veterans. Veterans' narratives illustrate that violence has been a persistent and significant feature of their life course. In turn, their stories indicate that veterans' post-service interpersonal violence may be rooted within personal biographies and psyches, conditioned by military experiences, and represent the psychosocial consequences of socio-economic changes to the political economy of advanced capitalism. This paper advances understanding of 'violent veterans', by demonstrating that their post-service violent offending may not simply stem from combat exposure, but is the cumulative consequence of pre-military, military and post-military experiences. In responding to the 'paucity' of qualitative empirical studies on the veteran offender, this paper informs a discussion that, to date, remains mired in 'speculation and conjecture' (Treadwell, 2016: 339).

Masculinities and violence

In order to further our understanding of why veterans commit violent crime we harness the growing body of empirical research and theory (see, for example, Winlow and Hall, 2006, 2009; Treadwell and Garland, 2011; Ellis, 2016) that has explored why some men engage in violence. Criminological interpretations of masculinity and violence have transitioned from biological rationalisations toward social constructionist and, most recently, psychosocial explanations (Ellis, 2016). Early socio-structural accounts of masculinity and violence have highlighted their diverse, fluid and multi-dimensional nature (Whitehead, 2002), which is contingent on the specific social, historical, cultural and institutional formations in which they take place. By synthesising the work of West and Zimmerman (1987) and Connell (1987, 1995), Messerschmidt's (1993) theory of structured action suggests that (violent) crime

presents a means through which men can convey their masculinity. Situating masculinity at the intersection of various hierarchies of power, social stratification and identity formation, Messerschmidt emphasises the dialectic relationship between human agency and social structure. Under such theorising, violent crime represents an avenue through which marginalised males can eschew their socio-economic status and accomplish or project masculinity. Moreover, hegemonic masculinity, which 'emphasises...authority, control, competitive individualism, independence, aggressiveness and the capacity for violence', is more likely to occur in hyper-masculine environments such as the military (Ibid: 82). Yet Messerschmidt's theorizing has been criticised for being deterministic, tautological, unitary and reductionist (Jefferson 1997; Hood-Williams, 2001).

In response to the limitations of structured action theories, Jefferson (1997) has sought to enhance understanding of the complex relationship that exists between masculinities and violence, through the development of an analytical approach that foregrounds psyches. Primacy is given to men's subjectivities, as well as the unconscious processes that drive their responses to idealised hegemonic masculine identities. By mobilising a conception of 'discourse', Jefferson unites psychic and social processes, in order to explain why some men accomplish masculinity through violence. Such violence represents a 'primitive defence' (Ellis, 2016: 34) against the anxiety and powerlessness that are the product of individual life histories and psychic formations. This work points toward a complex psychic dynamic that underpins why 'men can consciously and unconsciously invest in discourse that condones their violence' (Silvestri and Crowther-Dowey, 2008: 67). Gadd (2002) has harnessed Jefferson's theorizing, in his examination of men's violence against female partners, illustrating how the persistence of violent behavioural patterns among some men stem from an effort to alleviate the insecurities that are the product of childhood trauma,

which occurs in isolation from or conjunction with a masculine performance rooted in power and control.

Interpreting violent masculinities through a synthesis of individual life histories, psychic formations and socio-structural conditions has underpinned a growing body of criminological inquiry (Winlow and Hall, 2006, 2009; Gadd and Jefferson, 2007; Treadwell and Garland, 2011). For example, Winlow and Hall (2006) have sought to situate violent subjectivities within the fabric of a political economy that imbues increasingly atomised consumer citizens with feelings of anxiety, insecurity and alienation. The socio-economic transformations wrought by the onset of advanced capitalism – and the structural marginalisation it engenders – is implicated in young working class males' feelings of humiliation and shame which manifest in the perpetration of violence against others. Thus, as Treadwell and Garland (2011: 624) pertinently note, in order to better comprehend the violent crime-masculinities connection, studies must endeavour to explore the 'longer historical trajectories and socio-economic, political and cultural forces that shape such masculinities.'

This paper situates veterans' narratives within a psychosocial analytic framework, fusing individual psychology with socio-structural factors that shape behaviour. Mindful of the limits of both socio-structural and psycho-analytic accounts of violence perpetrated by men, this paper seeks to unpick the 'relationships between our values and practices, our current conditions of existence and the individual's motivation to commit [violent] crime' (Hall, Winlow and Ancrum, 2008: 5). Employing a life course perspective (Gadd and Jefferson, 2007a, 2007b), proceeding analysis examines the life stages and transitions of veterans, in order to identify how key life events may shape their engagement in violent behaviour. By exploring the complex intersections between individual psychology, subjective interpretation, and the structural and historical contexts in which individuals are situated, we

develop a chronological and interpretive understanding of why some veterans engage in post-service violent crime.

Narrative Criminology

In this paper we draw upon veterans' narratives or stories in order to theorise the etiology of their post-service violent crimes. Narratives represent a mode of discourse which connects one event to another in temporal and causal patterns. For Presser (2009, 2016) and Sandberg (2016), temporality, causality and moral meaning are key features of narrative, underpinning the emplotment of events or acts in the life of one or more individuals. Contemporary social theories of narrative advance three principal notions (Presser, 2012): First, that stories of the self are vehicles for identity; second, that storied identities shape action, and: third, that stories are cultural products. In its application and extension of these ideas, narrative criminology 'seeks to explain crime and other harmful action as a function of the stories that actors and bystanders tell about themselves.' (Presser, 2012: 5).

As Sandberg, Tutenges and Copes (2015) identify, stories of crime are of significant value to criminologists, as they enable us to examine events that we are rarely able to directly observe. Such stories not only work to connect past experiences, aspirations and behaviour but can also shape future action (Presser, 2009; Tutenges and Sandberg, 2013). A constitutive view of narrative posits that stories are part of life itself, 'a vehicle of self-understanding and as such an instigator to action.' (Presser, 2009: 191). Stories may, therefore, be understood to be criminogenic as they can motivate and inhibit crime and harm (Sandberg, 2016). By examining the problem of crime through a narrative lens, we are able to focus analysis on the identity work of veterans, and how the stories they tell enable them to express masculinity

and account for their post-service violence. We align ourselves with criminological studies that recognise that:

[S]tories are fragmented and plurivocal attempts at understanding events and circumstances people experience. They reflect not only a narrative repertoire of a particular social context but also the creative agency of the storyteller. By studying stories, we can thus access the manifold life world of participants and explore the various stories by which they live. (Sandberg, Tutenges and Copes, 2015: 1171)

Such a perspective recognises that each story is unique, shaped as it is by the format of the narrative, the audience and the narrator who draws selectively on their lived experience. Nevertheless, such stories provide ‘valuable insights into the links between structural conditions, cultural influences and individual behaviour’ (Brookman, Copes, and Hochstetler (2011: 398). Violent veterans, such as the individuals we spoke to, represent 'marginalised tellers' (Presser 2016: 142) who remain on the periphery of debates regarding ex-military personnel's post-service crime (Murray, 2015). This is certainly problematic, given that veterans' stories are antecedents to violent offending (Presser, 2009). In turn, if we are to better understand the violent crime of veterans, we must seek to examine the narratives they live by.

Method

The paper is based on the life history narratives of four of fifteen veterans drawn from a group of ex-service personnel accessing a treatment and support service in the north of England, which the research team were evaluating. Interviewees for this study were self-

selecting and although the group is small and not statistically or randomly selected, the narratives presented in this paper provide unique insight into why some veterans may perpetrate violence against others. The veterans interviewed for this study were aged between 44 and 60, and had served in the military throughout the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s. The veterans had served in the army, navy or Airforce, enlisting between the ages of 15 and 20. Total military service ranged from 3 to 30 years, with veterans leaving for a variety of reasons including time served, dishonourable discharge, medical discharge and paid voluntary release. Eleven of veterans had seen active service, some multiple times, in Ireland, the Falklands and the Gulf.

For the purpose of expediency and word length, this paper focuses on the stories of William, Frank, Robert and Sean. Nevertheless, the narratives presented here are, in our opinion, representative of the veterans interviewed in this study. Our interviewees are united by a number of commonalities; namely, that they have experienced military conflict, and have suffered or are suffering from substance misuse, mental health or social isolation issues. Individual biographies also illustrate that violent victimisation and perpetration, alongside criminal justice contact, has featured sporadically across all interviewees' life course. But despite the vagaries of our interviewees, the narratives detailed below offer a valuable contribution to attempts to elucidate the violent masculine subjectivities of veterans.

The interviews were conducted between August 2015 and November 2016 and took place in private rooms located at veteran support facilities across the north of England. Interviews lasted between 1.5 and 3.5 hours and were conducted by the authors of this paper. Veterans were encouraged to generate life history narratives that reflect on significant life events impacting on their offending and substance misuse. We adhered to a general interview guide that asked veterans to consider their pre-enlistment, military and post-service lives, but they were able to develop their own stories with minimal interruption from the interviewer.

Nevertheless, we did follow up themes that emerged during the course of the interviews and, whilst veterans spoke freely, we did, on occasion, interject, in order to clarify a point or elicit further reflection on a specific event.

The data was analysed using a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), which is well suited to exploratory qualitative research. By employing a 'set of inductive steps' we were able to progress 'from studying concrete realities to rendering a conceptual understanding of them' (Charmaz, 2002: 675). Preliminary readings of the interviews, which took place prior to coding, allowed us to become familiar with the narratives and gain a holistic understanding of the veterans' lives. This was followed by line-by-line coding which resulted in the identification of a large number of initial categories and subcategory codes. In accordance with their semantic meaning, codes were then sorted and assigned to a specific theme. Throughout this process, we met regularly to share and challenge our ideas and analytic claims, discuss the emerging codes and categories, and ensure that they were grounded in data from across the veterans' narratives. Memos were also regularly exchanged. Through the selective coding of data, initial categories derived from the narratives were reduced into a smaller number of categories and groups of relational statements. In turn, we identified a number of thematic patterns that shape proceeding discussion of veterans, masculinities and violent crime. First, physical conflict in veterans' formative years instils an understanding of the interactional utility of violence, whilst also acting as a motivational force in confrontations in later life; second, military culture reinforces an appreciation of violence, normalising and valorising masculine identities and aggressive intent; and, third, the transition from military to civilian life and the isolation, insecurity and anxiety it engenders can precipitate violent outbursts. It is these themes which structure the results section below.

Veteran narratives

Pre-enlistment experiences

Growing up in the industrial heartlands of the north, the pre-enlistment narratives of our interviewees focus on the micro-institutions of family, school and work, wherein masculine identities and violent subjectivities are forged. Collectively, veterans' narratives place great weight on the violent encounters that took place within this cultural milieu and which are brought to bear in future confrontations. For example, Frank recounts 'a brilliant childhood' that involved travelling with his father, holidays to Butlins and watching the local rugby team. Yet for Frank, the happy home life is juxtaposed with his school experience in which he was regularly bullied by:

[O]ne individual and his four cronies. I used to get kicked to shit. Every metalwork and woodwork lesson we used to go up to where [the] bus station is now and that's when I'd get a good panning. Oh I knew it was gonna come. It was inevitable I was gonna get that kicking.

The bullying and violent behaviour directed towards Frank is commonplace in school environments, acting as a means through which individuals can demonstrate strength and domination, claim status within their peer group, and instil social order. In early childhood, boys are often taught to toughen their psychosomatic position in preparation for the conflicts and hardships of later life (Hall, 1997). Robert, who tells of a strict, but happy Catholic upbringing, notes that 'coming from a big family you learned to stand up for yourself y'know. I mean somebody outside the family gave you a kicking, that was wrong, but your brother gave you a kicking it was his right by birth'. For, Robert, retaining dignity in violent encounters and 'not meekly submit[ting] to the violent will of others' (Winlow, 2014: 33) was reinforced by his immediate and extended family, and realised in early physical encounters:

I was a big magnet for the bullies, but unfortunately for them I was used to taking a good kicking. I was quite adverse to coming away with two black eyes and a bloody nose and being on the losing end. But I can always remember my dad saying: "Get the first one in and no matter what you've got that smugness. Deep inside your heart no matter how much they hurt you, I hurt you first". And it always stuck with me. So, after a few encounters, the big blokes that could rip me apart like a Rottweiler realised I was a Terrier and tended to leave me alone and give me a little bit of respect.

In contrast to the positive accounts of family home life elicited from Frank and Robert, Sean and William outline childhoods characterised by conflict and insecurity. The perceived variation in love, attention and support was a recurring theme of Sean's account of his pre-enlistment life:

I am not being biased, I am not being selfish, but I class myself as the runt of the litter. Basically, my eldest brother got the best of everything. I had his hand me downs. My sister and my younger brother had everything my mother and father could offer them. Whereas I made my own way in life.

Whilst Sean recounts the violence meted out by a father who 'didn't just punch you once he would punch you black and blue. He didn't hold nothing back', his narrative lingers much more on the controlling and violent behaviour of his brother:

When I was going to school he wouldn't let nobody touch me. Yet when we got home he beat me up. This is where I couldn't understand it. He was my big protector and yet he would beat me up while I was a child.

The violence and domination that shaped Sean's childhood interactions with his brother continued into his adolescence and was employed as a means through which his brother could extract money from him:

His [(Sean's brother's)] regular haunt was to go to Blackpool with his friends and he wouldn't have enough money so he would beat me up. If I worked overtime: "Where's our [Sean]?", "He's working overtime". So he knew how much I had, if I had more than a pound, and he'd beat me up and take it off me.

Like Sean, a series of traumatic events litter William's account of his pre-enlistment life. At the forefront of William's narrative is the physical and psychological torment visited on him by his step-father:

I didn't have that father figure that said: "You're out of order" and discipline me. He just wanted to knock the shit out of me. He broke my jaw and my cheek bone and I was only about twelve. Me mam is in a position where she couldn't [stop it] because she was frightened of what the consequences would be. I understood that. Everything I did he put me down. Even when I was joining the army he was saying: "You'll not last two minutes this man". Now that was coming from a person, the nearest he's been to [the] military was Action Man.

Although physical violence was a regular feature of William's home life, with his step-father using him as a 'punch bag', he recognises that it was the mental abuse that 'used to knock seven bells out of me':

When I were young, kids in the street would ask him: "Is your [William] coming out [to play]?". He'd be coming home from [the] club pissed up and he'd say to lads aged nine, ten: "He's not my son, he's a bastard him, he's no dad".

The conflict and insecurity embedded in the family life of children such as William and Sean can lead to them developing an acute understanding of the raw interactional utility of violence, in turn developing an all-encompassing commitment to it as a means of negotiating life's challenges (Winlow, 2014). In short, they come to recognise that: 'Violence gets things done.' (Ibid: 42).

Appreciation of the symbolic value of violence is evident in our interviewees' accounts of confrontations that occurred throughout late adolescence. Alongside their descriptions of violent victimisation, both Frank and William relate the perpetration of violent acts that resulted in contact with the criminal justice system. Frank gleefully recounts the regularity of violent conflict with police officers, bikers, skinheads and others:

Frank: Oh I've had a good slap off coppers when I was younger.

Interviewer: What was that for?

Frank: When I was mixing with skinheads you didn't get arrested then, you got threw in van, a good kicking, and threw out a long way away. Then you had to walk home.

Interviewer: Would they just target you for no reason?

Frank: Oh no, we were a shower of bastards [laughs].

Interviewer: Why would you say that?

Frank: Because that's what we were. Jesus Christ if you were a gimp you'd get your head kicked in if you walked past a skinhead. If you were a biker you'd get your head kicked in. The skinheads used to rule this town.

Interviewer: So there was a lot of fighting then?

Frank: Oh aye, especially at [the] rugby ground, [our] skinheads and [their] skinheads; some of the battles we've had with them was unreal. Oh it was wild [laughs].

Here Frank and his peers respond to the 'mimetic rivalry' (Hall, 2002) that characterises subcultures, such as skinheads, through the use of violence; a ritualistic performance which acts as mundane subcultural capital that enables individuals to perform masculinity, meet expectations and earn the respect of the group.

Unlike Frank, William presents a more sombre account of a violent confrontation that led to his first arrest and prosecution for actual bodily harm. In contrast to his childhood, when he was unable to defend himself against his step-father, by late adolescence William had developed the physical capacity to exploit the weaknesses of combatants, exact violence and advance his masculine status:

I was nineteen and this bloke he bullied me, kept bullying me. Every time I went to [town], I got a smack off him. But I was getting bigger and bigger, and this particular time he'd had a bit too much [to drink] so I took advantage of that and let him have it. I went over the top kind of thing because I kicked rat holes in him. But it was alright when he was doing it to me, no police were involved. I was unlucky that the police got involved and they got me for ABH. I made a mess of his tootsies face. I am not saying that I am violent person, far from it. But the drink puts a few Rambo muscles on you, your adrenalin's pumping and you're not thinking the same. And I did go over the top to be honest. But when I was giving it him, I thought this is for what you've done to me over the years and since then he's never bothered me.

In his retelling of this violent encounter, William depicts himself as an honourable man. His excessive use of violence is rationalised as a response to sustained bullying, an aberration that was fuelled, in part, by alcohol and adrenalin. The dissonance between William's self-identity and behaviour is common amongst violent men, who often employ fight stories such as this to create distance between themselves and others who engage in inappropriate acts of violence (Hochstetler, Copes and Williams, 2010).

William, Frank, Robert and Sean's accounts of their pre-enlistment lives centre on the challenges of growing up in urban and industrial communities that are characterised by poverty, disadvantage, and low educational attainment. Against this backdrop, the violence they experienced represent significant events in both childhood and early adolescence. Frank, William, Sean, and Robert all encountered violent confrontation in public domains, confrontations that challenged their masculinity and self-dignity. For William and Sean, violence was also a prominent feature of a family environment that was characterised by insecurity and anxiety. Collectively, such events highlight how the working class male habitus can institute an understanding that masculine identities can be achieved through acts of violence and that such violence carries symbolic capital. Narratives demonstrate that the class conditions or 'visceral habitus' of interviewees' early lives introduced them to a 'suite of brutalizing sensibilities', which are reinforced by their military experiences, and guide future behaviour (Hall, 1997: 465). Moreover, the violent perpetration and victimisation experienced by such young men could well serve to propel them into the army, as they seek to escape the hardships of their day-to-day lives and forge or reinstate a valorised masculine identity. In accordance with previous research (Woodhead et al., 2011), the veterans interviewed in this study have experienced both childhood adversity and trauma, presenting violent events as meaningful experiences which they return to when discussing their military and post-military lives.

Military experiences

Violent masculinities are produced and legitimated within military culture. Yet as Treadwell (2016: 337) notes, to date, the highly masculinised setting of the military has been 'airbrushed out of' the criminal biographies of violent veterans. Military culture is orientated toward constructing hyper-masculine males, through a 'combination of ideology, reward, punishment and coercion.' (Keats, 2010: 295). Masculine norms and values embrace a range of behaviours and interactions including emotional insensitivity, dominant and misogynistic relationships with women, hard drinking, disrespect, distrust, aggression and violence (Rosen, Knudsen and Fancher, 2003). Masculine traits are instilled through both direct indoctrination and informal group interactions. Robert recalls how the use of controlled violence was employed by senior military figures to ensure compliance and engender discipline and respect:

On the first day I was in the army, I saw a sergeant major walking past and went: "Alright sergeant major?!". At this time I didn't realise there was more than one god in the world... and he broke two of my ribs. One thump. And says: "You'll never call me sergeant major again until you're an officer". So I went up to the MRS [(Medical Reception Station)]. The doctor had a good feel about and says: "You've got two cracked ribs son. Nowt we can do about it. Two aspirins, drop your pants, away you go". So you learn to live, adapt and overcome. The first six weeks were strenuous, as they had to knock the boy out of you.

In accordance with the research of Brunger, Serrato and Ogden (2013: 91), our interviewees 'alluded to how military culture allowed for the expression of aggressive intent'. For example,

Sean details how corporal punishment was normalised, with physical discipline meted out informally by soldiers to peers who committed 'stealing or unhygienic misdemeanours':

For hygiene the guy would get stripped off, put into the shower room and scrubbed down with the yard brushes with lots of Vim until his skin was red raw from head to toe. He'd be bleeding and get carted off or they would tell the medical orderly. Basically that guy has had all his skin ripped off him because he was unhygienic. He'd left dirty socks and smelly clothes lying around. But he would be given warnings upon warnings to change your way otherwise you know. Whereas the theft! When they caught him with the [stolen] boots, they held a 'Kangaroo Court', took him around the back and broke all of his fingers. Nothing was said. If they'd got caught, they would have got jailed. But he couldn't say anything. He got shipped off, had all of his fingers sorted out but he was just ostracised from the Regiment.

Military indoctrination acts as a powerful adult socialization process, inculcating a hyper-masculine culture through group interactions, rituals and lore (Keats, 2010). Underpinned by hyper-masculine values, Dunivin's (1994) combat-masculine-warrior (CMW) paradigm emphasises that combat is at the core of the military's very existence and meaning.

Entrenched within this cultural paradigm, is the image of the soldier as a masculine-warrior; a tough, unemotional, unflinching and unforgiving combatant. Yet as William notes, the maintenance of such an image requires the soldier to mask the lived experience of war:

When you are in your training, they're saying you are going to Ireland, you're going Paddy bashing and things like that. It's nowt like that when you are over there. The soldiers are all shit scared because, at the time, in the seventies and eighties, there was a lot of soldiers being shot, blown up and everything. So I

come home on leave and they were: "Are you not scared?", "Nar I am John Wayne me". When I was really shitting myself.

The military's 'cult of masculinity' is reflected in the recreational activities of servicemen, which frequently centre on alcohol, women and violence directed at outsiders, deviants and 'others'. William and Frank highlight how fighting is a core part of regiments' leisure time, acting as mechanism through which group bonds are solidified and individuals can enhance their masculine identity:

We always used to kick off with the Italians and the "Turks". Once we got near them you would guarantee there was a big brawl. So, if you get a group of Italians, a group of Turks and all the drink, you know what's going to happen. (William)

Every Wednesday I'd end up in [the] glasshouse [(military prison)]. I used to play rugby on a Wednesday afternoon and then I used to go down to this pub that was out of bounds because all the gypsies used to go in it. I'd end up in a punch up and so I'd end up in jail. I knew I was gonna end up in jail but it was my Wednesday expedition that one... They called me "the Alcatraz kid". (Frank)

A violent subjectivity is clearly embraced and valorised by Frank who places the use of violence at the core of his masculine identity. In his tale of a revenge attack on his school bully some years later when he was home on leave, Frank illustrates how memories of humiliating experiences can shape behaviour 'in the here and now' (Winlow and Hall, 2009: 285):

You didn't want to go [to school] because I knew I was gonna get a kicking but I still went. He used to take any money I had off me. He was trying to prove himself, how to be the big man. But he wasn't the big man when I got him at me

sister's pub years later. He was crying his eyes out in the car park. I'd say I was about 24 or 25. I was home on leave and he happened to come into my sister's pub. I thought: 'You've just made my day'. He really had because I'd resented that lad for so long for the pain he put me through.

Here Frank rewrites the script of his early life, turning himself from victim to victor. His past failures, which jar against the masculine identity earned throughout late adolescence and military life, are expunged through this violent reencounter with his childhood bully.

In accordance with the work of Winlow and Hall (2009), the veterans we interviewed demonstrate how the challenges and conflicts that occurred in childhood and adolescence, and the feelings of humiliation, resentment, regret, guilt and shame they engender, are mobilised in acts of violence against those deemed to threaten their masculinity. 'Dark memories' (Ibid. 289) that accompany acts of interpersonal violence are also prominent in Sean and William's accounts of violence committed during and after their military service. For Sean, a violent confrontation whilst on rest on and recuperation in Cyprus led to his court martial and a period in military jail, before he was transferred to a UK prison:

My mate he'd stole this 9mm pistol. I caught him [(the victim)] in the alley and was just going to beat him to a pulp. But my mate was stood behind me, pissed up, and he went: "BANG, BANG". I said: "What are you doing with that you dickhead?". He'd pinched it [(the gun)] out of the armoury. I said: "Give it here" and I walked over to him [(the victim)]. It was a mixture of my childhood as well, my younger brother, my sister, my older brother...annoyed...I resented them all. The rage built up inside me and that was it. I was like a walking time bomb. "Bollocks" I went and: "You're having this", and to this day I can't tell you what stopped me doing it. I really wanted to shoot him in the head, but I just shot at, I

knee capped him. I blew both of his kneecaps off. I got caught with the gun residue on my hand at the time. (Sean)

In Sean's narrative, previous family experiences and the anger they generate act as a motivational force in his attack on an enemy. Here 'the repressed memory inevitably returns as the psyche attempts to cathartically release the disturbing energy of the traumatic event' (Winlow, 2014: 42).

Veterans' narratives illustrate how the military serves as a 'rite of passage into adulthood' (Klein, 1999: 47), eradicating the effeminate, whilst building hyper-masculine males that demonstrate resilience, resourcefulness, strength and aggressive intent. Violence is both experienced and engaged in by our interviewees throughout their military service, whilst traumatic experiences from their formative years are harnessed in violent encounters in the here and now. In turn, the violent encounters that occurred throughout veterans' pre-enlistment and military lives continued into their post-service years.

Post-military experiences

Mirroring the accounts of Frank and Sean, William intimates that the trauma of his childhood was extremely influential in his ongoing confrontations in civilian life:

Violence was a regular occurrence because I was paranoid. Some innocent lad would be watching the football or horse racing on tele and I'd be there ripping his head off because I think he's looking at me. I had loads of scraps. Loads of times, I used to get my head caved in. There was a lot of times I used to give it 'em back. I didn't give a shit if they were six foot seven, the bigger the better you know. Then I realised how bad my nerves were and that was all down to my childhood.

That's the little [William] from all them days ago when he [(William's step-father)] used to beat me up and say things like: 'He's not my son, he's a bastard'. He used to get me four step-sisters, sit them on the couch and make me stand up in front of them. He would ask: "Who is that?". And they would say: "Our [William]". And he would say: "No, no, no, he's a bastard him, he's no dad. He's a bastard, he's not your brother, he's a bastard".

William's account echoes a host of other qualitative studies (see, for example, Hobbs, 1995; Messerschmidt, 1999; Gadd, 2002; Winlow, 2014) which demonstrate that men who engage in violent crime often have biographies that illustrate that they have experienced physical and psychological abuse, frequently at the hands of family members or other carers.

But although previous disturbing experiences certainly appear to act as motivational forces in the veterans' violent behaviour, evidence also indicates that their return to 'a rapidly mutating society' (Ellis, 2016: 31) served to trigger acts of violence, which were often directed at innocent others. Such a finding intimates that the challenges and strains of adapting to a civilian environment that is alien to many veterans can lead to violent outbursts.

Feelings of loss, confusion and anxiety lay at the heart of William, Frank, Robert and Sean's accounts of their transition to civilian life. Mirroring previous research findings (Howard League, 2011), Frank bitterly recalls the lack of resettlement provision provided by the military:

Interviewer: Did the military help you with your transition to civilian life?

Frank: Did they bollocks. You're forgotten. You're only a regimental number. Once you leave there you can go and drown in the Mersey as far as they're concerned. They don't give a shit.

Interviewer: Was it hard leaving the military?

Frank: Yeah. I got off the train, when I got home here, and thought: "What the fuck have you done?". I was lost. I was in a world I don't know and coming out in a shower of civvy shit.

The struggle to transition to a civilian life that is very different from an institutionalised military existence is illustrated in William's account of working for Royal Mail:

They wanted ex-forces. They wanted people that were already disciplined. The first thing I realised was that there was no team work. We were all individuals and there were a lot of back stabbing. There were a lot of people competing for overtime. In the Army I was part of a team. So I missed that. I [was] looking to join a team and be part of a family as such. Whereas in the Royal Mail it weren't a family. We were all individuals. A lot of these postal workers get mortgages and rely on overtime to pay their mortgage. So you can imagine, the back stabbing, the fighting over overtime because they had to pay their mortgage.

The atomised and individualistic nature of the contemporary workplace – and civilian life more broadly – contrasts sharply with the veterans' depictions of the military as a 'team', 'family', 'community' and 'brotherhood'. For William, a profound sense of loneliness shaped his early post-military years:

I was upset in a way because I was missing my mates. I missed my mates more than anything. It was a special bond with them guys and I was upset when it was gone.

The strains and stresses of transitioning from military to civilian life are amplified by the profound socio-economic changes wrought by late modernity. Our interviewees highlight

how both community and the abundant availability of (menial) work were key features of their pre-enlistment lives. Yet the steady elimination of traditional working class jobs and disintegration of community structures – which servicemen such as Robert, Sean, William and Frank were largely insulated from – saw many military personnel return to environments markedly different to the ones in which they grew up:

When I left school, there was abundant jobs. In my careers office, there were thousands of jobs, which have all gone now. They used to come to school to beg you to go and work for them. (Sean)

I was born in an era where your auntie and uncles live round the corner and your grandma lived nearby. You're all a close knit family in a small area of town. I don't know if that makes sense to people. It's a very materialistic world these days. (Robert)

With the nascent symbolic order of the industrial phase of capitalism stripped away, the collective unity that enabled working class communities to combat the stresses and strains of their working environment is no more. The decline in unskilled manual labour opportunities and rise of insecure service sector work presented unique challenges for the veterans we spoke with. For example, Sean exhibits total befuddlement as to the existence of zero-hour contracts, highlighting the economic insecurity such work engenders:

I don't want to be in a part time job. I don't want to be in a job where I am at an agency job doing a week here and a week there. I will never sign on with an agency again. I can't afford to be doing a day here and a day there and them texting me when they want me.

It has been noted by Higate (2001) that those veterans who move into employment tend to head into more masculinised institutions such as security or prison work. This is illustrated by Frank, whose work as a doorman chimes with his masculine military identity:

I worked as a bouncer on the doors for a while. I basically got the job because of my reputation for being in the military. It was money in my back pocket. They paid it backhand and no tax. You still get your benefits and there's your £30 a night. It didn't do me much good when I got me nose broke in two places with a bloody beer glass. It was a fuck up of a job to be honest with you. It was me being money grabbing and making out your superman [laughs].

The conservative and rigid nature of military culture sees some veterans struggle to 'adapt to changing civilian mores' (Keats, 2010: 295). Robert highlights how the challenges of acclimatising to a workplace in which ranks and roles are less clearly defined could lead to conflict:

Somebody who is not in authority will say: "Go do that" and I am asking: "Why are you telling me to do it? Am I picking up after you?". Instead of the other half of me going: "Just get it done for an easy life". But then Mr Rage will come through and go: "No, put that down, that's not your job". So you go back: "Am I working for you or am I working for the company, cos you are not a gaffer?". "Well I'll report you". "Wrong! Cos if you start reporting me you'll get a bruise on your head". So it's too late to walk away and I feel shame and guilt after but my brain is not fast enough to stop it happening. And that's probably down to my military training. (Robert)

The tensions, fears and frustrations inherent in adjusting to an incomprehensible socio-economic environment, which is compounded by the loss of (military) community and

identity, can result in some veterans engaging in physical violence. Both Robert and Sean highlight how a host of different emotions relating to their current conditions of existence can manifest in violence:

Then it's like the screws on my inner box holding Mr Rage and Mr Anger and Mr Nasty them screws were getting worn out. They were under too much pressure. People are going around their normal lawful business and it upsets me. Not because they are doing it, they're just getting in my way. (Robert)

It was fear. When it actually came down to it, what it was...and for me to say this in front of you...I was frightened. I'd actually got to a stage in my life where I was worried. It doesn't condone what I'd done, but the element in my mind at the time was I was fearful of where my future was going. I'd put so much focus into that military career and I never thought it would end. (Sean)

The challenges of returning to and living in an environment wherein anxiety, fear and self-interest are citizens' overriding emotional responses to the insecurities that pervade the late capitalist condition is evident in the narratives of the ex-service personnel we interviewed. Their stories highlight how the profound isolation that results from the loss of military community is compounded by reduced family and kinship networks and the economic insecurities inherent in civilian life. Yet for such veterans, the deployment of physical violence as a mechanism through which they seek to cope with their experiences, past and present, 'only serves to lock these men further into spirals of ultimately pointless altercations that bring no discernible rewards' (Ellis, 2016: 36).

Discussion

This paper has sought to further understanding of why some veterans return to civilian life for only a brief period of time before they experience 'redeployment' to prison for acts of violence (Brown, 2014: 131). The narratives of the veterans interviewed in this study point toward an amalgam of social and psychological factors underpinning their post-service violence. We advance theorisation of veterans' violent crime, by drawing on psychosocial criminology to elucidate the narratives they live by. Eschewing the quantitative, positive studies that have posited that veterans' offending is a product of the trauma of war, this paper connects individual behaviour with cultural influences and structural conditions to illustrate how violent subjectivities are forged and, in turn, guide behaviour. William, Frank, Robert and Sean highlight how violent encounters were a persistent feature of their life course, with physical confrontations taking place across their pre-enlistment, military and post-military lives. Violent altercations represent significant events in both their childhood and early adolescence. For Sean, William and Frank, the emotions generated by such conflict were either harnessed or resurfaced in future encounters, whilst all of our interviewees indicate that the 'visceral habitus' (Hall 1997) of their early lives was influential in their development of a capacity for violence. The appreciation of the symbolic capital of violence developed in pre-enlistment years is reinforced within a military culture that seeks to instil masculine norms and values in soldiers. Veterans' narratives indicate that hyper-masculine identities are forged through both formal induction and training processes and informal group activities that invoke the 'masculine warrior'. In turn, controlled violence and aggressive intent are both encouraged and legitimated.

Yet the violent masculinities that moor military culture hold less relevance in the political economy of advanced capitalism. Insulated by the military from the profound socio-economic changes that had begun to take place throughout the late 1970s and the 1980s – and which continue today – the veterans return to a civilian life very different to the one they left.

In the adjoining years, localised communities have begun to fragment, traditional forms of employment have been swept away and job security has rapidly diminished. In turn, the masculine identities secured in the veterans' formative years and refined throughout their military lives hold less relevance in contemporary culture. The rise of the service economy and feminization of the workplace has stripped the veterans of the economic utility they once knew. Returning to the 'egoistic culture of a 'market society" (Reiner 2007: 109) coincides with a loss of both community and identity. The narratives presented in this paper indicate that the isolation, anxiety, insecurity and confusion it provokes in veterans can, in turn, precipitate violent behaviour.

A number of policy-making implications are derived from the study findings. Evident in the narratives of the veterans that we interviewed are the difficulties many of them faced in transitioning to civilian life, with a loss of military community, reduced kinship networks and economic insecurity characterising their post-service experience. Ensuring that veterans have the support services, networks and resources necessary to enable them to navigate this 'new' environment should be considered a priority. The development of ongoing outreach support could well reduce violent crime by ex-service personnel, as well as associated rates of social isolation, physical and mental health problems, addiction, unemployment and homelessness. Criminal justice policymakers and practitioners also need to identify and embrace the distinct experiences and needs of veterans, in order to reduce the likelihood of offending, arrest and incarceration, as well as aid re-entry into the community. Given that ex-service personnel represent the largest occupational subset of the male prison population in the UK (Howard League, 2011), the development of culturally-specific support and treatment interventions may be considered a priority. Our findings indicate that for veteran specific support services to be effective they need to be sensitive to the multiplicity of factors that place veterans at risk of a host of social ills including engagement in violent offending.

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