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Masculinities and emotional expression in UK servicemen: 'Big boys don't cry'?

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ABSTRACT

Dominant discourses of military servicemen position them as more prone to psychological damage than the general population, but as reluctant to seek psychological assistance, because of the military culture of 'toughness', a *military masculinity,* that values stoicism, emotional control and invulnerability and implicitly excludes 'feminine' characteristics like emotionality. This is seen as a barrier to military personnel seeking help, by implicitly discouraging emotional disclosure and expression. This article presents an analysis of semi-structured interviews with six male military and ex-military personnel, focused on their experience and understandings of emotion, emotional expression and 'mental health' in the military. The dominant construction of military masculinity certainly renders some forms of emotion inexpressible within certain contexts. However, we argue that the construct is more complex than a simple exclusion of the 'feminine' and the 'emotional'. We explore how the highly masculine notions of military solidarity and 'brotherhood' create a 'safe' masculine space within which men could share their emotional experiences, but also highlight how this space for emotional expression is relatively constrained. We argue that these notions of solidarity and brotherhood open a space for emotional connection and expression that must be respected and worked with creatively, in therapeutic and other interventions.

Introduction

Recent years have seen a significant increase in research on 'military mental health', detailing the prevalence of mental health difficulties, as well as appropriate service provision (See Cohen, Fink, Sampson, & Galea, 2015; Fulton et al., 2015; Hoge et al., 2014). Masculinity, and particularly the culture of 'Military Masculinity' in the forces (Higate, 2003) is often described as a barrier to the expression of emotion for military personnel (Finnegan et al., 2014; Green, Emslie, O'Neill, Hunt, & Walker, 2010; Hall, 2008; Higate, 2003; Lorber & Garcia, 2010). It is argued that this kind of masculine construction positions emotion as inherently problematic in the military, acting as a barrier to the expression of distress, anxiety and other challenging emotions, aggravating mental health difficulties. This in turn impacts negatively on help-seeking behaviours. For military mental health services, the challenge therefore is not just the provision of support, but how to make this support acceptable and accessible to military personnel (Jones, Keeling, Thandi, & Greenberg, 2015).

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In this article, we highlight how emotion is constituted and performed in particular military contexts, arguing that it is not the case that emotion is simply *suppressed* in military culture; rather it is expressed *differently*. Understanding the contextual and relational constitution of emotion is essential to building acceptable, appropriate and responsive mental health support for serving and former members of the military. We argue that understanding how emotion is understood and performed in -and after- military life is an important element in providing more culturally relevant and context specific mental health services for serving and ex-military personnel.

Military masculine culture

Military culture is typically described as male dominated, competitive, disciplined, and hierarchal (Higate, 2003). Military culture privileges 'all things male', and traditional expressions of hegemonic masculinity are presumed (Hale, 2008; Sasson-Levy & Amram-Katz, 2013), emphasizing 'manly' characteristics, such as being heterosexual, competitive, dominant, rational and physically strong (Connell, 2005). Masculinity is not a fixed characteristic, but a cultural positioning that intertwines other social structures and processes (Connell, 2005). Scholars have identified a contextually located 'Hegemonic *Military* Masculinity', which encourages a culture of heteronormative masculinity, centred on physical and mental 'toughness', emotional control, physical fitness, and competition (Higate, 2003, 2016; Hinojosa, 2010; Hockey, 2003).

The emphasis on competitiveness is evident in military advertising campaigns, such as 'Be the Best' (by the British Army), and 'It's a State of Mind' (by the Royal Marines), encouraging prospective recruits to be a 'better version' of themselves. Military personnel work to embody a 'top dog' status, and marginalize those (including women and other men), who do not conform to military masculine ideals (Hinojosa, 2010). The ability to compete in a hyper-masculine arena is also a theme in induction processes, where it is explicitly contrasted with being 'girly', problematized as lacking a competitive edge (Brown, 2012; Wells, 2014). This constitutes femininity as 'other' to the military masculine norm (Higate, 2003; Hinojosa, 2010; Woodward & Neil Jenkings, 2011; Bjarnegård & Melander, 2011). Embodying masculinity is discursively framed in military culture not just as an ideal, but as necessary to do the job, and to survive (Higate, 2003; Kovitz, 2003; Sasson-Levy & Amram-Katz, 2013). Cultural femininity is positioned as 'risky' within the military environment, conflated with an essentialised emotional and physical delicacy that positions women as 'unfit' for military service (Herbert, 2010, p. 3). In this way, emotion is constructed in military discourse and practice as *other* to military masculinity.

Doing emotion in the military

Emotion itself is not as widely considered in mental health research as might be anticipated, and when it is, it is typically considered in fairly instrumental ways – as something to be regulated and managed. This is reproduced in military mental health research, which engages concerns around emotion as something that is either *bottled up,* or expressed *explosively. Whilst* 'military mental health' is the focus of much government discussion and academic research, *the emphasis in mental health research and practice* is larg*ely on managing symptoms.* Within this framework, emotion becomes positioned as a symptom to be controlled. Both the expression of emotion (exploding) and not articulating emotion (repressing) are positioned within military mental health evidence of pathology. The reification of emotion as something to be controlled and regulated neglects the affective context (relational, cultural and spatial) (Cataldi, 1993, p. 130), within which emotion is constituted, embodied and lived. This risks an overly reductionist account of emotion in the military context, that overlooks the potential for emotion to be expressed, lived and managed within military masculine culture.

Research on emotion in the military largely focuses on members' difficulties with emotional expression ascribed to perceived pressure to embody hegemonic military masculinity (Finnegan et al., 2014; Green et al., 2010; Lorber & Garcia, 2010). Military personnel describe emotionality as 'unhelpful', 'burdensome', as 'unmilitary' and 'womanly' (Hall, 2008; Higate, 2003; Niendenthal, Krauth-Gruber & Ric, 2006).

Recruits are also trained to view emotion as a barrier to progress up the ranks (Hall, 2008; Sasson-Levy & Amram-Katz, 2013).

Emotional detachment acts as a marker that recruits have been effectively militarized, and the associated expectation of being 'like a machine' produces a pressure to appear emotionally untouched (Wadham, 2013, p. 224), a quality also associated with hegemonic masculinity (Moore, 2010). The suppression of emotional expression is therefore related to the gendering of emotion, and the conflation of 'military' and 'masculine' (Marshall, 2006). This cultural construction of emotional detachment, control and toughness as central to military identity produces a specific challenge; it leaves military personnel without legitimate cultural resources to cope with difficult emotions and situations that make them feel vulnerable (Lorber & Garcia, 2010). If 'real men' (and particularly real military men) cannot show emotion (Connell, 2005; Higate, 2003), what do they do with the potentially overwhelming stressors associated with military work?

Creating a common 'identity type' may solidify bonds between recruits (Hamilton & Sherman, 1996), producing a familial support network or 'military brotherhood' (Green et al., 2010; Caddick, Phoenix, & Smith, 2015) that could offer emotional support (Grossman, 1995). In that sense, the 'military brotherhood' may be read as a masculine way of doing care and enabling emotional expression, resolving the apparent incompatibility of care and emotion with masculinity (see Green et al., 2010; Hearn, 2003). However, this military brotherhood may also act as an unhelpful mechanism of control, encouraging secrecy and silencing or tightly restricting their expression of emotion (Hall, 2008).

In this article, we aim to unravel the interwoven but competing ideologies of emotion, care and masculinity, by exploring specifically how emotion is understood in, and after, military life. Making sense of and unpacking these competing ideologies will enable practitioners working with members of the military to better understand the complexity of how emotion is experienced within the military context.

Method

Participants

A purposive sampling method was used to recruit individuals with military experience. We used snowballing and word of mouth to recruit 6 participants. All participants were white British. Interviewees were of varying ages and ranks.

Interviews

Semi-structured face to face interviews were conducted by one researcher (LM) at a location of the participant's choice. Participants were asked about experiences in the military, and particularly how they felt emotionally stressful events were discussed and dealt. Whilst the majority of the participants did reflect on their own experience and felt grateful to have their views heard, questions were structured to enable more generic answers about military culture too, enabling them to what to disclose. Interviews were audio recorded and lasted between 45 min and 2.5 h.

Table 1. Participants.

Alias name	Serving/retired	Organization	Age band
Mark	Serving	The Royal Marines	20–30
Nick	Retired	The Navy	40–50
Pat	Retired	The Army	40–50
Paul	Retired	The Reserves	50–60
Peter	Retired	The Royal Marines	30–40
Ron	Retired	The Royal Air Force	20–30

Analysing the data

Interviews were transcribed in full and analysed using a socio-constructionist informed thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis was guided by an open question: how did participants make sense of what it means to be 'emotional' within their roles? Using an inductive process, the transcripts were coded individually, by two members of the research team. Codes were then compared, refined, and then comparisons drawn across interview transcripts, to build themes.

Reflexivity

All three researchers are white women academics, who have not worked in the military, but do have family and friends in the service. The interviews were conducted by the first author (LM), a white British woman. It is important to consider how her positioning impacted the 'research space' (Berger, 2014; Bucerius, 2013), as it was clear that researchers' gender and lack of military experience played an important role in the interviews. During the interviews, LM experienced the participants as attentive, hospitable, and even chivalrous. Interestingly, they explicitly indicated that they would have treated her differently had she been a man. One participant noted that he was 'surprised' he had told her so much, and suggested that he would not have done so, had she been a man. Being a female researcher then, provided a 'different point of access' (Bucerius, 2013, p. 717) to facilitate interviewees' disclosures. Given the extent of their disclosure and the length of the interviews, LM felt she was positioned as a 'trusted outsider' (Bucerius, 2013) by participants. This meant participants felt able to disclose material they might not have disclosed to a member of the military (Higate, 2003) and provided detail they might have skimmed over had they seen her as someone with shared cultural knowledge. Thus, her perceived naivety about military culture enabled a useful and privileged point of access (Berger, 2014; Finlay, 2000).

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Northampton's Psychology ethics panel, and we adhered to the guidelines of the British Psychological Society. Before the interviews, we sent potential participants information about the study and interview questions. Informed consent was secured at the beginning of each interview. Given the potential sensitivity of their participation, we took care to ensure the anonymity of participants, removing names and other identifying detail from transcripts before analysis. At the request of participants, they are not identified by rank, or by specific age (see Table 1, which details individual age range). Participants were sent a copy of the research findings.

Analysis and discussion

Three overarching themes emerged from the analysis: Performing Military Masculinity and Emotion; The 'Brotherhood'; Supportive or Regulatory? and Dichotomising and Concretising Emotion**.** A concern with the enactment of masculinity ran through all participants' accounts, and also emerged as important feature in each of the other themes.

Performing military masculinity and emotion

All participants described the importance of 'manliness' to military competence. Their descriptions of being a capable and effective member of the military relied on normative masculine ideas like being tough, hardy and rational (Blanchard, 2014; Cant, 2003; Welland, 2013). Participants used naturalized and biological ideas to justify the distinctions they drew between men and women, as fixed properties of male and female bodies. Understandings of sex and gender were conflated within many of their accounts. Women were understood as implicitly feminine, restricted by their bodies and physiology, and therefore not 'suited' to the demands of military life. In contrast, men were discussed as physically

'different'; participants drew on hormonal distinctions (i.e. testosterone associated with maleness and strength) and 'upper body strength' as markers of maleness, and offered these as consequent justifications for suitability for the military role. Women were represented as a defined and static category, *limited* by their bodies – particularly in relation to their management (or their purported failure to manage) emotion and feeling.

Although all participants described men as inherently more suited to the military, nonetheless, being a *military man* was still presented as an achievement. They described how the rigours of training demanded 'manly' bodies. Several talked about the importance of 'being physically tough' and 'mentally tough' – military manhood being performed both physically and psychologically. For example, talking about his training experiences Mark says:

> … and I tell you what, climbing a rope with 30 lb of weight is a fucking man test.

His use of the term 'man test' implies that recruits were expected to evidence their 'natural' (manly) capability. The hyperbolic expression ('fucking man test') suggests that being in the military doesn't require just masculinity, but 'hyper-masculinity', combining toughness, perseverance, endurance and physical strength. This extract suggests that that whilst only men are 'naturally capable' of dealing with military life, passing 'the fucking man test' evidences that you are not just a man, but a *military man*. The training environment was seen as an important opportunity to demonstrate capability and commitment to a consistent performance of masculinity. Thus, training tests are not just assessments of ability and strength, but of a performance of military masculine identity and belonging – you can only pass the 'man test' if you are the right kind of man.

Pat also suggests that recruits must demonstrate hyper-masculine invulnerability to be inducted into the military community:

> If you get injured or something like that or you can't do something because of something like that then you're perceived as weak. I suppose so you tend to push on through the injuries. I suppose the emotional side of it its laughed out, you laugh it off, in a way its banter.

Physical and emotional vulnerability are constituted here as unacceptable to the military culture, resulting in a minimization of both physical and emotional wounds. Mark made a similar comment about the importance of 'pushing through' pain and injury, in an anecdote about continuing a basic training test, despite an injury that had led to septicaemia. He said: *I knew something was wrong. But, I wasn't gonna stop,* and commented on the value of *mental determination*. This kind of story, often shared amongst recruits and military members, circulates as a shared value system, which prioritizes physical endurance and emotional toughness over, for instance, self-care.

The notion that enduring hardship is an important part of the entry 'test' can contribute to an acceptance of brutal methods to judge the recruit's fitness and worthiness to be part of the military brotherhood:

> Ron: Like the bullying went down, it could have been classed as bullying, it may not have been classed as bullying, like I felt like I was bullied. But I realised after six months of being there you were bullied to catch you up to speed into what was going on.

Here, Ron rationalizes his experience of being bullied, as justifiable, as a way of inducting individuals into the rigours of military life (See also Harrison, 2003). This complements the endurance of the 'man test', with brutalization seen as contributing to the ability to withstand adversity and to the development of operational effectiveness. These experiences of brutality and endurance enable a kind of legitimate peripheral participation in the military community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1990), enabling recruits to build both the required physical and mental skills and traits, and the identity of military manhood required to belong in the military. In this sense it is clear that masculinity is constituted through the social practices – and particularly the induction practices – of military communities as a necessary feature of military identity and belonging. Military manliness is therefore an embodied identity, evidenced through the *performance* of hyper-masculinity, in training processes and in community practices.

The emphasis on training as a 'man test' also explicitly excludes the feminine and the emotional, positioning both as too 'weak' for military life. In contrast, women were portrayed as naturally more

vulnerable, fragile and 'emotional' and therefore unable to function effectively in the operational military environment. For example, Ron suggested:

> It's not in a man to get upset like a woman anyway

This statement establishes a clear gender binary, in which a particular form of emotionality is associated with femininity, and it naturalizes this binary. Ron's suggesting that it is not 'in a man' to get upset implies there is something inherent to masculinity that is antithetical to emotion. Men inherently do not experience distress – or at least they do not experience it *like women do*. In this sense, emotion is constructed as implicitly bound to women's bodies, with emotional expression set outside the realms of manliness. However, there is a hint in Ron's statement of the potential for a different and more masculine way of doing emotion – the possibility of getting upset *like a man*. Pat reiterates the view that men and women perform emotionality differently:

> When you say do the military prepare you emotionally, the way they prepare you emotionally is to deaden your emotions, yeah and men can do that a lot easier than women.

Pat sees the 'deadening' of emotion as an essential part of military training, preparing recruits for the brutal realities of combat, and suggests men are inherently more suited to this emotional desensitization, and thus more naturally suited to military service. In both accounts, women are implicitly positioned as more emotionally sensitive, less controlled and more irrational and therefore logically excluded from traditionally masculine work. Within the military, this belief that women are naturally more emotional than men is used as an explanation for why women are not able to manage combat situations, where rationality and calmness are deemed paramount to survival (Kovitz, 2003). With their apparently feminine emotion, softness and vulnerability women are constructed as antithetical to the norm of military masculinity and the ability to get the job done (Kovitz, 2003). 'Women' become symbolic, in participants' talk, of how not to be emotional within the military community.

Participants suggested that military effectiveness required emotional control. However, the term emotion was rarely used in these interviews, with participants preferring to use the word 'stress'. This offers a concretization of something abstract ('emotion') into something more concrete, measurable and manageable ('stress'). Stress is seen as an inevitable part of the 'man test' of military life – something to be endured and dealt with pragmatically. Showing *signs of stress* on the other hand is more problematic:

> Ron: If I had a problem with stress I'd keep it to myself as it's seen as a sign of weakness because they obviously write your report.

This extract hints at the linguistic reframing of all difficult emotion as 'stress'. The phrase 'having a problem' with stress suggests Ron's concern about the potential 'leakiness' and uncontrollability of emotion. His concern that 'problems' with stress might be written into his report positions emotional expression as something that needs close regulation; expressing stress is seen as inappropriate, that could become part of a permanent record. Not managing the 'problem' of stress is seen as a sign of weakness and as a block to potential career continuity and promotion. This concern is seemingly not without foundation. For instance, Finnegan et al. (2014) found military mental health nurses were expected to monitor 'operational capacity' (p. 55), and report to the chain of command if an individuals' mental state and emotional regulation was unsafe. In this kind of context, it is realistic to be concerned that seeking support for emotional difficulties, problems with stress or mental health issues might compromise their work and their future career prospects. It is well documented that members of the military are concerned about being seen as 'emotional', in case they are perceived as weak, and not 'up to the job' (National Association of Mental Illness, 2011). The military community's stigmatizing attitudes to emotional and mental health difficulty also have a detrimental impact on help seeking for individuals experiencing distress (Greene-Shortridge, Britt, & Castro, 2007; Cheung, Britt, Raymond, Zinzow, & Pury, 2016). In this sense the cultural opprobrium against emotion as both feminine and anti-military could potentially undermine military effectiveness; positioning it so far outside the realm of proper military identity makes it too difficult for individuals to ask for support in need.

In this theme, we have explored how military masculinity is constituted as a necessary quality of a successful member of the military community. Central to this construct of military masculinity is a

sense of emotional and physical stoicism, the capacity to endure and to 'crack on' despite emotional and physical distress. These qualities are understood as quintessentially masculine, and the performance of these qualities is necessary for recruits to be inducted into the military community. We have highlighted how 'stress' is framed as an inevitable part of military life, an acceptable cover-all term for emotion. However, loss of control over that 'stress', or leaky emotion is seen as far more problematic and framed as outside what is appropriate in military culture. In the next theme we will explore further how this military community is constituted to support and regulate the expression of emotional distress.

The 'Brotherhood': supportive or regulatory?

The military community has been described as a 'Brotherhood' (Hockey 2003), referring to the sense of the military as a familial institution, characterized by close bonds amongst military personnel, a strong sense of community and belonging, and a sense of protectiveness and loyalty. The military community is bound together by a narrative of shared history, kinship and mutual bonds that emphasise loyalty, trust and self-sacrifice:

> Peter: That's the greatest part of the military, that brotherhood that you'd die for each other.

The willingness to lay down your life for your military brother is a core military value. 'Brotherhood' is central to military identity, providing a sense of belonging and a moral compass for members. The idea of the military as 'family' was articulated by all participants, and was seen as an important resource for supporting individuals experiencing emotional difficulties:

> Pat: Other recruits are like brothers and sisters, you know when they are not 'right'

Pat draws a parallel to the intimacy of sibling relationships to make sense of how the military 'family' contained distress. Sibling relationships are typically characterized by shared personal history, which makes them more 'known' to each other. Pat suggests that knowing or understanding another recruit's distress was an implicit process, gained through shared 'familial' experience. Emotion remains unarticulated, and framed in quite operational terms, echoing the concretization of emotion as 'stress' and 'problems with stress' seen in the previous theme. The individual is seen as 'not right' – not upset, distressed, angry, etc., but rather currently dysfunctional and less able to operate effectively.

> Mark: It's my little theory about it, you show any sign of weakness, Erm, we are a family but it's very competitive at the same time and you show weakness you're gonna get shit for it.

So the 'family' will protect you, do anything for you, as long as you adhere to the family's values. Being 'not right' is acceptable, but 'signs of weakness' are not. In this sense, although the construct of The Military Brotherhood opens up some potential for mutual understanding and response to members' emotional difficulties, this is nonetheless very constrained. This constructs a catch-22. The intimacy of the military family offers a space in which emotional distress can be seen, recognized and contained, but it also tightly regulates that affective space. It may be that this encourages distress, reframed here as 'weakness', to go underground, and not to be expressed overtly. Green et al. (2010) noted that whilst ex-servicemen explicitly described military culture in terms of 'mutual support', there was also this 'intolerance' to anyone perceived as 'defective' (p. 1484). The idea of 'brotherhood' is alluring, offering a sense of unconditional acceptance, and a lifelong bond. However, when looking at the containment offered for emotional support, the conditionality of the bond is made apparent. If you 'show weakness' you will 'get shit for it'. The brotherhood is both containing, offering emotional support, and regulative, laying out the conditions under which that support to be offered. The brotherhood performs as a regulatory body, acting as a form of gender policing, containing emotion as something that is explicitly 'weak' and within the female body, with this body presented as the way 'not to be'.

The public face of the military relies heavily on the notion of brotherhood and family in the way that it represents support for mental health and well-being. The MOD's 'Don't Bottle it Up' campaign (Ministry of Defence, 2011) encouraged members of the military to challenge mental health stigma, and to seek help for their mental health difficulties through their 'brothers'. However, the implicit culture

of the military contradicts this overt message, through its emphasis on emotional endurance, which is *also* a core part of the culture of military brotherhood. Members are actively discouraged from talking about such issues unless it is perceived to be impinging on their occupational performance. Pat, a high ranking individual, suggests that the stigmatization of emotion is necessary for operational effectiveness, and that if it is not appropriately contained, it could spread:

> Pat: Personally I can see why it's stigmatised I think if it wasn't lots of young lads would be crying their eyes out … It seems to me if you tell someone they are strong they are, if you say ((small voice)) 'oh you alright mate do you wanna cry?' then they will.

Emotion, particularly distress, is set in opposition to strength, and expressing empathy is framed as enabling weakness. The way emotions are understood is quite simplistic, as something that young men can be 'talked out of' or encouraged into. Encouraging recruits to express their emotions is described as exposing the community to apparently uncontrollable emotions, which would spread to 'lots of young lads', like a contagion.

In this theme, we have explored how military culture constructs a double bind for individuals. Whilst the construct of military 'brotherhood' provided a supportive framework through which recruits *could* express themselves and receive support and care, it also implicitly acted as a regulative framework through which expression of emotion was contained. Military personnel must effectively navigate this tension in order to manage the emotional military self. This produces a culture in which participants described a need to 'keep it to myself', despite an apparent familial context suggesting support would be there if needed. It is the Catch-22 of 'express yourself' but 'not too much' that is embedded in military culture that constrains and regulates the expression of emotion. The construct of brotherhood and family offer important potential spaces for intervention in the emotional life of recruits, but the conflation of emotion with weakness and femininity inherent in military life prevents this. It is therefore unhelpful to suggest personnel should 'speak up' or 'challenge stigma' if the culture that regulates emotional express is not directly challenged by the command structure and cultural and training practices of the military. The issue is not mental health stigma, or the stigmatization of emotional distress; rather it is the denigration of femininity and of emotion per se as 'non-military' that constructs the 'talk / don't talk' double bind that military personnel must manage.

Dichotomizing and concretizing emotion

Despite the regulation and containment of emotion offered in the cultural construct of brotherhood, some emotion proved too difficult to contain in this way. Strong emotion can demand expression, and participants suggested this emotion needed to be expressed, in order for you to work effectively in the military. As noted above, participants' accounts suggested that the military 'Brotherhood' could act as a community within which embodied and emotional experiences might be understood, contained and regulated. This created a context in which some emotion could be talked about in an acceptable way, despite the broader military environment with its emphasis on stoicism and control. However, there is a clear dichotomy in the interviews between acceptable and unacceptable emotion:

> Pat: If you're a little bit upset because you're missing your family you tend to keep that to yourself because at the end of the day that's perceived as weak or, y'know, 'stop being a girl' sort of thing, or 'missing your wife arrrr you're with the lads come on'. I suppose if something stressful happened on operation like you're involved in when somebody got hurt, injured or killed or whatever then erh, then I suppose yeah they do look after you quite well

Pat differentiates between an appropriate emotional response to a serious situation ('somebody got hurt, injured or killed'), and an inappropriate response to an everyday situation ('missing the wife'). Reasons for being emotional were clearly dichotomized, with the same emotional response being perceived differently depending on the reason it is expressed. Emotion and its expression are understood as something that requires justification. If another recruit was injured whilst in a combat situation, this would justify others showing these inner feelings. In comparison, issues relating to home, such as missing a partner, are considered to be unacceptable and 'soft', and thus recruits are implicitly expected to internalize their distress, or risk being teased (e.g. 'stop being a girl').

The ability to suppress emotions in times of crisis and trauma is a functional one in the short term, enabling the individual to deal with the volatile, emotionally and physically stressful realities of military life. However, modern warfare can be all encompassing, with little space for recovery between deployments, and insufficient facility for emotional catharsis. This makes the strategy of emotional repression increasingly inappropriate. Within the modern military, there is some tolerance therefore for the expression of some emotion, but this is highly regulated, contained and enabled in contexts when such expression is deemed 'proper' or the individual has a 'good reason' to be upset – for instance, the death of a family member, or witnessing something particularly brutal in combat.

Peter describes how one of his colleagues Tom reacted to witnessing his friend's death from an Improvised Explosive Device (IED):

> Obviously Tom was very upset, suicide watch. So we just looked out for him and it was very much a case that we just kind of all pulled together. He was still cracking on with his job and again it was really a case of you're letting down your oppos if you don't.

In this extract, we see two important elements of the management of emotion in the military – the positioning of emotional reactions as 'appropriate / justified' or 'inappropriate'. The death of Tom's friend was deemed an appropriate source of distress. His distress was seen as significant, but containable within the military community - his peers are reported as supporting him to continue to do his job. This is partly because his distress fits with the military ethos; more importantly perhaps, his own containment of his distress – 'cracking on' with the job after trauma – legitimates his continuing presence in the serving military. His ability to contain his overt distress reaffirms his appropriate and legitimate position within the community (not 'letting his oppos down'[1]). In these instances, the very act of expressing emotion and then carrying on with the job acted as a performance of emotional regulation, self-control and ultimately, commitment to military ideals. 'Cracking on' was an important concept in many of the interviews – military personnel were seen as responsible for 'cracking on' despite trauma or distress. Being seen to 'crack on' or 'push on' through difficult experiences, regardless of the risk of being damaged or broken, was seen as evidence of individuals' commitment to the military ideal of toughness, endurance and loyalty. This ability to endure is evident on a physical level (Mark's persistence despite septicaemia) and an emotional level ('cracking on' despite evident distress).

Although they felt pressure to maintain a 'stiff upper lip' (Green et al., 2010, p. 1484) in response to emotionally stressful situations, nonetheless, there was an acknowledgement of a need to express particularly difficult experiences in combat, experiences of loss, extreme violence, significant family difficulties etc. Such emotions could be contained within the military brotherhood, if they were appropriately expressed. This required a transformation of emotional self-expression, away from an apparently feminine softness to a more concrete and instrumental way of talking about feelings. We refer to this process of transformation as the 'concretisation of emotionality'. Through a particular form of emotion-talk, the perceived abstractness and 'softness' of emotion is reworked into something they could feel, touch, see and work with. Transformed in this way, some emotional expression is rendered as acceptable within a military community.

As previously noted, participants rarely used words like emotion or feeling, nor did they tend to label specific emotions (sadness, grief, rage). Rather their emotional vocabulary was restricted to quite generic instrumental terms, like 'stress' and 'upset'. These are states that can be understood both in operational terms (as a normal consequence of the job) and as visible. For example, Peter suggests:

> I think the way that you're trained that you're looking after one another, so that even the people under the greatest stress you get on with it because of that.

Emotion here is conceptualized as something that is produced from the outside (external stressors, combat stress), and therefore can be worked on. This externality and materialization also positions it is seen as being containable through the support offered through training and 'brotherhood'.

One strategy participants used to manage the unspeakability of emotion was to transfer it to someone else. A specific metaphoric discourse enabled interviewees to talk about *others'* emotional distress, in a way that was consistent with the military masculine affective space:

Mark: People break, they do, you just watch them go

Ron: He was falling to bits … I don't think he was really there

Both Ron and Mark here use a specific metaphoric language to 'materialise' the abstract emotion they observed in another person – the person is 'in bits', or broken. In this way, distress is framed as embodied in the person observed – you can 'watch it'. Distress is also positioned as something very dangerous and damaging, threatening the wholeness and the integrity of the person ('broken' and 'not there'). Emotion is given an exteriority through its materialization, enabling it to be both concrete and observable – it can be read of the body of the distressed person – when someone is not 'right' within the military community, it can be seen in their body ('you just watch them go'). Emotion is not described as an intangible 'inner' experience, but is external, observable, and consequently both predictable and controllable. The exteriorization of emotion makes it something the military community can *work with*.

However, one problematic implication of reframing emotions as something material and visible in others, is that the military community might focus on the exteriority of emotional distress, overlooking the significance of unexpressed or interiorized emotion. Talking about a colleague who had had an extreme combat experience, Mark says:

And like, on the surface there was absolutely nothing wrong with him and after he'd back for a month or so it all died down again it just, y'know he'd totally re-adjusted. (Mark)

He appears here to recognize that there might be some discrepancy between the outer display of emotional calmness and some inner turmoil. However, his focus is on the outer. His outward emotional expression had 'died down', and based on that, Mark suggests 'he'd totally readjusted'. This focus on 'adjustment' suggests that emotion is only really a cause for concern in the military brotherhood if it threatens operational competencies. It is only when emotions are readable and expressed on the exterior that they are acknowledged within the military community. Unless these emotions are spoken or are visibly and overtly expressed, they are deemed not to exist (e.g. 'it all died down again'). However, this does not mean that the visible expression of distress is more acceptable – it is simply more readable. The construction described previously of emotion as evidence of a threat to wholeness and of emotional weakness emphasizes the need for individuals to 'get on with it', and self-manage distress. It may be acceptable for it to be briefly visible (and therefore real to the community) but if it goes on for too long or is too intense in its public expression, then emotion becomes read as threatening. The unspeakability and riskiness of this is further articulated by Mark, later in the interview:

But, when it does happen, or when I do break, well not break but you push me too far, it's a fuckin nightmare, I go, I snap. That is a big problem … I let it build up, over time and gradually someone … Yeah, I went. Some … I … Well, all that actually happened … What actually happened was some bloomin' guy started on me in town in Plymouth. Erm … I went. Like, Bad. The guy ended up with a broken jaw, I broke his nose and his arm as well. I just went. And that's not me … I'm not like that.'

Mark's difficulties with his emotional woundedness is clear in this extract (even in the way his account is narrated, in incomplete phrases and speech fragments). Whilst he is willing to attribute 'brokenness' to others, he is not willing to attribute it to himself. When his emotions are explosive, he frames this as 'being pushed' – an exterior source of the emotional strain. His inner experiences are described as building up under pressure, ready to explode at the slightest provocation. The only possible options for emotion here are through exteriorization – either by 'letting go' or by someone 'ending up with a broken jaw'. There are no mechanisms to support him in integrating his distress and related rage into his self-concept. Instead, his strategies are either to push away (let go) or act out. It is clear in this extract that Mark lacks an emotional language to express his experience, and it is understood entirely in terms of external triggers, explosiveness and external consequences (his antagonist's broken jaw). His final statement 'that's not me … I'm not like that' underscores the sense of unprocessed emotion, split off and exteriorized in external causes and external expression, but unintegrated into the self or into their personal narrative.

In this theme, we have explored how strong emotion is expressed, understood and read in military personnel's accounts. In a context where people are placed under extreme stress and are likely to

experience traumatic events, strong emotion is inevitable. However, the positioning of emotion as 'weak', feminine and not military produces a tension in how to think about and manage it as an inevitable element of military life. This is achieved through a dichotomous construction of emotion as appropriate (e.g. experiencing trauma) and inappropriate (e.g. feeling lonely or homesick). This produces a space in military culture for some emotion to be expressed. This dichotomous construction also intersects with a positioning of emotion as concrete, visible, external, and / or embodied in participants' accounts. By rendering emotion as something tangible, that can be read on the body or in behaviour, it is produced as an object that can be operationalized, identified, and worked on.

Discussion and conclusions

This article has explored how members of military organizations make sense of their experience of emotion in the military context. We have highlighted that emotion constituted within particular contexts, in relation to military masculinities and a culture of brotherhood. On the one hand, this context functions to regulate and control the expression of emotion, by making certain kinds of emotion inexpressible in military culture. However, at the same time, the construct of brotherhood in particular does offer some sense of a caring context within which difficult emotion, in particular, might be expressed and contained. The space for emotional expression is very tightly regulated in military contexts but it is present. There is an agreed ethic of care in operation, through the construct of brotherhood that permits some sense of emotional labour in the care of others, and some sense of acceptable emotional expression. However, the regulative and highly masculinized nature of the military community only permits a narrow range of legitimated emotion to be expressed, and even then in a highly contained way. This is particularly clear in the constrained emotional vocabulary of the interviewees, as well as the exteriorization of emotion that their language suggests.

This article adds theoretical weight to the argument that gender expectations provide recruits with a military identity; a 'way to be' (i.e. masculine), and consequently a 'way *not* to be' (i.e. feminine) (Higate, 2003; Kovitz, 2003; Woodward, 1998). In particular, the military community constitutes a 'way to be' that functions to regulate and constrain the expression of emotion. The highly masculinized military community, and the discourse of 'brotherhood' provides a context in which emotion can be contained and held, but less easily expressed. However, the conclusion that members of the military 'do not talk about emotion' is not a particularly constructive (or representative) one. Although, the association of emotion and feeling as 'weak' and 'feminine' did serve to regulate how members of the military constructed emotion and feeling, our analysis suggests that this polarization nonetheless had important implications for the way recruits *were* able to speak about (and manage) emotional experiences within their roles. Members of the military can talk about and transform their own and others emotional experiences, but this is a complex and context specific process. For instance, recruits would often distance themselves from talking about feeling by talking about *someone else's* experience of distress, in a concrete way. This exteriorization extended to their talk about their own emotions, with their more difficult emotion in particular being framed as potentially explosive and only manageable through exteriorization. Although talking about someone else or emotion as exterior served to further reproduce the notion that 'being emotional' is unhelpful and not conducive with the military way of life, it also provided insight into the constrained ways in which emotion talk *is* enabled within the military. Although it is highly regulated, there is a constrained articulation (Callaghan et al., 2015) that offers a stepping off point from which to engage individuals in the military in emotion talk that is palatable and acceptable in that context.

This understanding of the *othering* of some emotion (like feeling homesick, or lonely) as feminine, and the *concretisation* of emotion (like trauma, some grief, and rage) when it is expressed has important practical implications for the management and treatment of emotion and mental health in the military. Participants emphasized the embodiment and visibility of emotion, but this was restricted to particular kinds of emotion, seen as appropriate to the military role. This concretization and visibility is a key element in the UK's Ministry of Defence initiative 'Trauma Risk Management' (TRiM), which focused on training recruits to identify signs of distress in other military personnel. This approach may overlook the

more internalized and unacceptable emotions, however, resulting in the further marginalization of forms of distress that are not seen as coherent with military culture. These kinds of programmes do not really challenge prevailing attitudes to help-seeking (Gould, Greenberg, & Hetherton, 2007), because they do not challenge the polarization of acceptable and unacceptable forms of distress. Further, these kinds of programmes play into anxieties that military personnel articulated in our interviews, that the expression of emotion is subject to scrutiny and regulation in the formal command structure of the military. Although the experience of being part of a military brotherhood offered participants a community context in which some emotion *could* be expressed and contained, the culture of this brotherhood is also one of scrutiny and regulation, and the space to talk her is still constrained. An approach to distress like TRiM that focuses on monitoring and regulating emotion might intersect in problemmatic ways with a cultural context in which members of the military already feel that their emotions are monitored, reported and regulated. A more useful and potentially transformative psycho-educational approach might focus on how emotional distress *feels*, focusing on its *expression,* rather than on identifying 'signs' and focusing on how emotion might be spotted and controlled. This would enable recruits to identify when they *themselves* are in need of support, rather than entrenching a sense of scrutiny by encouraging military personnel to watch each other for signs of distress. However, this would require some scaffolding to enable individuals managing difficult emotion to move from recognizing it as external and concrete to feeling it as lived.

A clear implication of this study is to challenge some of the dominant discourses in circulation in mental health research and practice in military contexts. Campaigns that focus on 'challenging mental health stigma' and encouraging individuals to 'speak out' do not go far enough in engaging the military culture that produces challenges for military personnel in distress. These difficulties are located, fundamentally, in a culture that positions emotion as feminine, and the feminine as unmilitary. The further contextualization and containment of emotion – within the brotherhood, and as concrete and dichotomized is rooted in this basic gendered construction at the heart of military training and culture. Without challenging the constructive conditions that produce the military affective space at a cultural, structural and organizational level, it unreasonable to expect individuals to 'stand up' and 'speak out'.

The present study has some important implications, but also some limitations. We chose not to recruit through military channels because to do so would have risked the narration of an 'official' story about emotion and mental health. Given that the expression of emotion and mental health difficulty is already so constrained, we felt that to add to that a layer of further regulation, as participants would undoubtedly feel significant concerns about how they might be represented, how confidential the interviews really were, and whether they might be identifiable in the interviews. For this reason we recruited by word of mouth. As a consequence, the group of participants is very varied, both in terms of their service context, and their stage of career. On the one hand, this has the advantage of giving a sense of common elements of military culture across different service contexts, and at different points in career. However, it does compromise the homogeneity of sample that is often an assumption in qualitative research. Future research might consider comparing accounts drawn from more substantial samples across the career path to explore how the experience of emotion is described across military life.

For researchers interested in mental health intervention and prevention, participants' understanding that distress for some life events and not others opens up interesting questions around tolerance of distress. It is possible that further research into how these men set their threshold for what types of events are acceptable to be upset about could inform prevention strategies aimed at changing norms about the acceptability of men acknowledging negative emotions.

Note

1. Oppo is military slang for a fellow soldier, particularly in the buddy system. It derives from the term 'opposite number'.

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Disclosure statement

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