

## Intimate Partner Violence and Abuse Against Men: Voices of Victimization Among Ex-Servicemen of the British Armed Forces

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## **Abstract**

This study presents the personal testimonies of male British ex-Armed Forces personnel who have experienced violence and abuse victimisation that was perpetrated by civilian female partners. In this research, we argue that to embark upon any understanding of the domestic lives of military personnel, an appreciation of the linkages to the cultural context of the military institution is necessary. Understanding the influence of the military institution beyond the military domain is crucial. We unveil the nature and character of the violence and abuse and how the servicemen negotiated their relationships. In doing so, we highlight the embodiment of military discipline, skills and tactics in the home - not ones of violence which may be routinely linked to military masculinities; rather ones of restraint, tolerance, stoicism and the reduction of a threat to inconsequential individual significance.

**Keywords:** military institution; intimate partner violence and abuse; help seeking; victimisation

## Introduction

This article investigates the experiences of victimisation among servicemen who have endured intimate partner violence and abuse (IPVA) in England. To date, nothing is known of male military personnel's experience of IPVA, and so this paper provides an important illustration of human experience in this particular context. The main aim of the paper is to assess and provide an understanding of the inter-relationship between the military institution and the domestic domain grounded within the narratives of male victims of IPVA.

Academic literature on violence and abuse between couples in the military has predominantly followed two lines of enquiry; the mental ill-health of the military/ex-military perpetrator, and secondly, the cultural dimensions of the military institution as important in facilitating the conditions where violence and abuse can manifest. In Sherman et al.'s (2006) assessment within couples therapy of domestic violence perpetrated by military veterans, high rates of violence are observed among those veterans experiencing mental health conditions such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and depression. As the authors have noted, substantial numbers of those returning from conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan experience PTSD and other mental health conditions, thus making insights into domestic contexts relevant. However, while assessments of domestic violence and abuse through a clinical lens may be useful, enquiries have also been made in connecting up the culture of the military and matters of abuse within relationships. Writers such as Harrison (2006) have provided crucial insights into the victimisation of female military spouses in a Canadian Armed Forces context. In particular, Harrison (2006) highlights how despite the presence of a 'zero tolerance' approach to family violence in the Canadian Armed Forces, only marginal interventions have been made by military authorities in such cases. Reasons of a 'pact of silence' and 'cover up ethos' for fear of personnel being withdrawn as deployable by superiors prevail. Protection of a conflict-readiness identity holds firm, structured by cultural components such as the 'pact of silence' and group cohesion. As Harrison (2006, p. 567) points out, military culture compromises 'the abused spouse's preparedness for the risks involved in reporting the abuse, pursuing assault charges, leaving her relationship, or doing anything other than cooperating with her partner to keep the abuse hidden'.

Out with the military context, the historical backdrop to the rise and consolidation of literature on the topic of IPVA dates over the last fifty years has been gender specific (Lombard and McMillan, 2013). Without a doubt, sociological fields of academia and legal practice had influenced the ambivalence towards the individual experience of victims. Notwithstanding this, the on-going struggle for a deserved attention towards women's experience has seen important intellectual enquiries. A key voice in this process in calling for a feminist examination of the law in practice has been the landmark work of Carol Smart. Smart's contributions have shone light on the trivialisation of male violence against women in the home by the police, and the process of prosecution remains an enduring problem (Harne and Radford, 2008; Keeling, van Wormer and Taylor, 2015), paralleled with scepticism towards whether legal reforms will ever provide adequate protections for women.

While studies have illustrated that military experience may lead servicemen to perpetrate IPVA against women (such as they are trained to use controlling behaviour and violence against others coupled with the embedded masculinisation of military cultures), this analysis posits that military training and experience may also shape the experiences of men as victims of IPVA. This has unintended consequences. It may prevent them from seeking help because of deeply held ideas of stoicism, stigma and the idea that they should be able to cope with their problems themselves.

It must be stated, as a backdrop to this research, the study of men as victims of IPVA, while slowly emerging, does not have the critical mass of substantial research on gender-specific victimisation. Indeed, women are more likely to be victims of IPVA, and therefore the development of the intellectual field is motivated by this. However, Drijber, Reijnders and Ceelen (2013) have argued that the dominance of women's centrality as victim (which has also brought about some feminist criticisms for the portrayal of women as weak and helpless) has contributed significantly to the discursive construction of intimate violence to the cost of the recognition of male victimisation. Matters of patriarchy, vulnerability, gender-roles and normative scripts of femininity are inextricably linked and influence a limited paradigm of what we know about IPVA. Indeed, those writing in this area suggest that failures in men seeking support for victimisation may be the consequence of their perceived inferior ability to compete within discourse, policy and practice

which is structured in such a way that is female-victim centric (Cheung, Leung and Tsui, 2009). In a context of a continuing legacy of problems of legal protection for women, when making comparisons, studies illustrate that despite inherent levels of under-reporting, women are more likely to disclose their victimisation than men (Houry et al., 2008) and that cultural influences are fundamentally essential in the analysis of non-disclosure by men. According to Dutton and White (2013), issues of 'maleness' and male victimisation in the context of an intimate relationship may well accrue suggestions of improper masculinity or a crime of less severity. The result of poor reporting by men is impactful as difficulties arise in the State's role to manage legal recourse for victims of crime and address public health matters adequately. The perceived incongruous duality of a masculine identity *and* victimisation (and heightened where the perpetrator is female) challenges the discursive constructions and expected alignments in the consciousness of onlookers. Such challenges to the prism by which IPVA is examined are problemised potentially further by other dimensions of the male victim's identity not least their professional role.

When examining what we know about IPVA in military contexts, overwhelmingly in what is largely a U.S.-centric scholarly picture, it is one of military personnel as aggressors and perpetrators. Claims have been made of correlates between psychological and emotional conditions as a product of combat exposure and intimate partner violence (Marshall, Panuzio and Taft, 2005), the social and racial demographics of perpetrators and victims (McCarroll et al., 1999), recidivism by spouse abusers (McCarroll et al., 2000) and whether veteran status makes a difference in marital aggression (Bradley, 2007). Additionally, studies have sought to enquire into female soldiers as aggressors to civilian spouses (Newby et al., 2003).

Exploring the military context of domestic violence victimisation and perpetration is a relatively recent endeavour in the UK context. Help seeking and decision making over reporting by civilian partners who are victims of domestic abuse has been brought to light in the work of Williamson (2012). Understanding barriers to welfare service use for military families is viewed as crucial. Indeed, Williamson's (2012) research paints a portrait of the challenges and tensions within families where partners return from deployment. Often, as the research has

suggested, complex issues in the family are often kept as private matters, or support gained via informal networks (e.g. friends) rather than seeking support from military services. The apprehension of partners engaging with military welfare and support services is often rooted in fears of its impact on the careers of partners and problems of confidentiality. As Williamson (2012) indicates, such practices often lead to a dearth of formal or professional intervention. Such sentiments among victims have echoed in Gray's (2015) analysis of the British Armed Forces. Expected 'stoicism', 'strength' and defence of their husband are unveiled as key requisites of the constructed identity of the 'military wife'. Narratives collected by Gray (2015) identify that such an identity is something which some wives and partners work tirelessly to attain and present to the wider audience - stoicism then is a performative act which is not without a potential to be anxiety-inducing in and of itself.

The body of understanding of partner abuse and violence in the military is growing. A *critical* account of the military institution is recently forming amidst a more developed backcloth of focus on establishing the nature of experience of IPV and whether military policies sufficiently protect women from harm (Campbell et al., 2003); its prevalence and a questioning whether women in military roles endure domestic violence or abuse more than civilian populations (Murdoch and Nichol, 1995) and; the extent of injury and consequences of victimisation (Forgey and Badger, 2006). What can be seen, however, is a scarcity to date of an understanding of male victimisation, something which this research study aims to provide a critical understanding of.

### **The Military Institution as a Site of Sociological Interest**

The military and post-military life have, for some time, been a place of sociological interest. The manner in which military life (and identities) is an important dimension and/or influence on behaviours and experiences of active duty service personnel, and those who have left, is an avenue of enquiry which is developing with ambition (McGarry, Walklate and Mythen, 2014; Murray, 2015, 2016; Treadwell, 2016).

Work, whatever the profession, plays a fundamental part in the constructed process of interpreting the social world. In the workplace, individuals are subject to

an immersion in cultural forces and complexities such as value sets and commitments, informal obligations of membership to work groups and work cultures, and shared expectations on how employees should conduct themselves professionally or within the workplace. Processes of workplace acculturation and adaptation undoubtedly contribute to the identity of the worker both within and outside of the workplace. Occupational cultures shape organisational functioning. On inspection, they have been viewed as complex systems of 'tribalism' (Brooks, 2003) and made up of visible customs, traditions, rites, rituals, stories and myths (Trice, 1993).

Sociological investigations into military subcultures offer a rich insight into norms, values and beliefs, and the processes of socialisation into a culture and an 'anchoring into their field' (Lande, 2007, p. 106). The 'performance' of a military identity has also been duly analysed by Woodward and Jenkins (2011) explaining that military identities are 'enacted around the performance, citation and reiteration of specific activities and ideas' (p. 263). Moreover, hyper and exaggerated masculinities have repeatedly been examined within military units (Rosen, Knudson and Fancher, 2003) and outside in how military publicity and representations construct dominant discourses of the 'warrior hero' and heroism (Woodward, 2000; Woodward, Winter and Jenkins, 2009). Writers such as Hockey (1986, 2002) and Winslow (1999) have described vividly matters of group cohesion, informal (peer expectations) and formal rituals (e.g. discipline, drills, etc.), processes of identity stripping and rebuilding into 'approved' occupational roles, and how members of the Armed Forces rationalise potential harm to themselves.

Violence is a normative component of the environment (Malešević, 2010), be that for example, in the context of training for combat roles using weapons and tactics. As Treadwell (2016) explains, 'the military is an institution that trades in violence (albeit of a controlled form, a disciplined and directed violence as it were, but violence nonetheless)' (p. 337). However, as Treadwell (2016) also critically posits, boundaries of acceptability between legitimate and illegitimate violence are not always finite or easily distinguishable. Treadwell (2016) presents a compelling argument that military life must be taken into account when evaluating serious violent and sexual crimes perpetrated by ex-Armed Forces personnel. Already, we have shown the existence of military personnel as perpetrators of IPVA which

similarly gives weight to the description of the military institution as violent. Engagement in increased risk taking (Killgore et al., 2008) and post-deployment violence and antisocial behaviour (MacManus et al., 2012) have also been cited as causes for concern. Importantly, however, and as Treadwell's (2016) analysis consolidates, the role of the military institution must not be forgotten in any appreciation of military personnel's behaviours or experiences; indeed, the explanatory logic of individualism is redundant given the nature, character and context that 'doing military work' takes place within. Whilst the context in which military work takes place is violent, imbued with masculine characteristics of toughness, resilience and authoritarianism, where might experiences of IPVA victimisation sit?

Valuable insights into the cultural context that military work takes place within are building, and criticality is vital. Critical military studies have real potential to vitalise the field of knowledge in, outside and around the military. Moving 'beyond a simple oppositional stance', Basham, Belkin and Gifkins (2015, p. 1) encourage, and offer up the platform, to critically debate and radically challenge the prism by which we may traditionally view the multifaceted world of the military.

### **Research Design and Method**

The aim of this research study was to explore the experience of ex-members of the British Armed Forces who have endured IPVA. The research set about examining the connections between the military institutional environment and the civilian environment where IPVA took place. The research gained full University ethical approval and was conducted in a manner that was appreciative of the sensitivities of doing research on such a topic (Skinner, Hester and Malos, 2005). A University awarded grant funded the research. Participants of this study were recruited using a purposeful sampling technique through community-based veteran support agencies. Group facilitators advertised the study in the support agencies and participants contacted the research team of their own volition. All participants had experienced IPVA in at least one previous relationship whether that was at the time of military service or following their discharge from military service. All perpetrators were civilian and female.



The research was exploratory in nature with a broad aim to capture the lived experiences of ex-Armed Forces personnel in relation to their experiences of IPVA. Objectives were set to consider how participants viewed these incidents in light of their occupational identity, and also to examine systems of informal and formal support to illuminate upon help-seeking behaviours.

Informed and written consent was gained from all participants with each selecting a pseudonym to maintain anonymity. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. All participants were male and described their experience in the context of heterosexual intimate relationships. Six military veterans participated in this study although more had made initial enquiries to participate. Often changes in domestic circumstances prompted withdrawal from the research in advance of interviews being held. Research interview transcriptions were subjected to a process of thematic analysis. The research team chose an inductive approach to analyse the narratives. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), this approach enables researchers to understand the participants' everyday experience, leading to an improved understanding of the particular phenomenon being explored (McLeod, 2001). Using a thematic map, themes continued to develop from the initial codes, building the relationship between themes, and considering what constituted an overarching theme and what constituted a sub-theme (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Regular team meetings enabled discussion of the developing analysis to achieve consensus where differences in coding occurred, ensuring homogeneity of the findings.

### **Research Findings**

The narratives of ex-servicemen in this research have pointed towards the complexities of the abusive relationships in a context of their military occupation. The military institution is both supportive and submissive in the context of the IPVA experienced. Crucially, the finding presented here are a subversion of dominant tropes of military personnel being aggressive. Findings have been arranged thematically, and here the authors present the analysis in three dominant streams. Firstly, the *suffering* of physical and non-physical violence and abuse within the context of an intimate relationship is shown. Secondly, participants made reference to the influence of the military institution on their domestic situation. Subordination

of their own individualism is a major theme which we have presented as *subservience*. These dimensions appear as a contributing factor to a forestalling of help, support and assistance, or timely recognition of their victimisation. Lastly, we investigate the routes of *survival* that these ex-servicemen describe.

As can be seen from the themes presented here, taking an approach that appreciates dominant facets of a military role, identity and life have a real potential to explain how these men's work played an important part in the experience of victimisation. What is important to recognise is the significance of the military institution in the domestic context. Indeed, while the military institution may facilitate mechanisms of support or aid in navigating victimisation, at the same time it may problematise, exacerbate, delay action or worsen the context that the violence and/or abuse takes place within.

### ***Suffering***

Here the authors present the detail of the instances of domestic violence and ill-treatment. Both non-physical and physical violence are evidenced in the biographical histories of the participants. Participants did not at any time reflect on their own participation in violent acts towards their partner or any psychological abuse exercised by them.

In capturing the non-physical as well as physical violence, the authors aim to provide a more nuanced understanding of coercion and control beyond physically violent tactics (Stark, 2013; Frankland and Brown, 2014; Martin, 2016). Albeit the contexts are different, evidence exists here of what has been extensively evaluated in feminist literature and understandings of female victimisation. We see evidence of a generality of control (see Schneider, 2000) and a pervasive, ongoing emotional control and psychological abuse (see Crossman, Hardesty and Raffaelli, 2015), threats and fear (Hardesty et al., 2015). Participant's narratives illuminated the impact of these behaviours on their autonomy. Sam noted:

She'd say 'The red mist is starting to rise' and that would tell me back off otherwise you're going to get punched, ...it was just threats like that to get at me, just constantly, and she's still even doing it to this day .

Both in the cases of Espresso and Bill, the temporal dimension of living with violence was directed at a micro level of control over many aspects of their everyday life:

There was always a threat there I suppose...which is, as I said, was worse, was the emotional and psychological...you do become this creature where you are quite pathetic because in hindsight, because I agreed with everything, decision making was, you know, and always asking, "Is this okay with you? I'm going to do this, it is alright with you? (Espresso).

Reflective of the power differentials in the relationship, Bill goes on to say:

In the house it was you sat where you were told to sit, you cooked or ate what you were told to cook or eat, bedtimes were governed (Bill).

In advancing his own understandings of the fear and threat that he experienced in his domestic life, Paul compares the 'danger' at home to his work in the Armed Forces. Preparedness for war versus preparedness for disputes in the intimate relationship provides a rich picture of the gravity which Paul ascribes to the situation:

The fear of going away...I wasn't scared about going to war, I was scared about telling her [partner] that I was going to have to go away and how she would react, because just going away for a day got me all sorts of questions and anger and accusations and things.

Obedience and subordination is also described in narratives of participants. Here Sam describes the domination of his partner which invariably subjugates his position in the home. In describing his situation, he is clearly alluding to the deeply-engrained nature of this dynamic given his comparison to hierarchies in his professional life. Sam's conformity in the home is traced to his intrinsic occupational values, which appears to be exploited through coercive means:

I would be the 'Private', she would be 'Sergeant Major', my partner, so what she said, I did.... It's built into you.

The abuse was varied across the participants. While all had experienced non-physical violence and abuse, only some talked or shared their experiences of physical violence. The men who spoke of physical abuse and violence related incidences that occurred when they returned home on leave, but also after they had left the Armed Forces. These appeared to be mostly disaggregated acts of violence, not an escalation of violence over a period. Paul noted the most severe physical violence he experienced involving weapons:

And she went to the kitchen and she got out like a small, best described as a meat cleaver and she started brandishing that in front of me.

As much of the literature contends, violent attacks and domestic assaults that require medical treatment are typically perpetrated by men (Straus, 1999). However, in this example, Expresso candidly describes an occasion when his spouse violently attacked him without warning:

The next thing I know she's hit me...smashing into my side so I'm just about blanking out and there's blood peeing out all over the place...

Patterns of intimate partner violence are challenging to track. While in many cases research reports a propensity of incidents to escalate in severity; a plateauing may also occur. Reflections on the expectation for violent assaults feature in Sam's narrative here. He describes that the violence was intermittent. However the nature and mechanism of the violence was predictable for him:

...she grabbed me from behind, got me on the floor and started punching and kicking me...[O]ne thing she did do was, whenever she punched me...it was always in the back of the head.

Moreover, Sam's account illustrates how the mechanism of violence may be deliberately utilised to obscure obvious visible signs of injury.

### ***Subservience***

Whilst some have argued that no one military culture exists; rather what is evident is countless subcultures (Buckingham, 1999), powerful values are inherent in the socialisation process of service men and women into a role where the presence of influence such as risk, authority and violence shape the occupational realities (see for example Arkin and Dobrofsky, 1978; Soeters, Winslow and Weibull, 2006). A sense of mission (Wilson, 2008) imbued with loyalty, dedication, dependency and cohesion (Hall, 2011) has been identified whereby the importance of unity prevails. As Winslow (1998, 1999) powerfully describes, individualism is subordinated to the group identity with expectations that values and norms of the group will be respected above and beyond self-interest.

### ***Perception***

Realising that a problem existed in the familial context was not immediate, and indeed for some participants, a level of denial of the severity of incidences remains fixed in their narratives. The explanation that military training offers techniques of tolerance and resilience was commonly felt. Hardened attitudes to encounters and interactions appear to transcend boundaries of military and domestic life. Here Expresso, a British army veteran of Northern Ireland sectarian violence describes how he 'tolerated' his family circumstances and victimisation:

I think that the Army training probably [helped], again going back to sort of tolerance, the peace keeping elements, you know, where being in situations where stuff was thrown at you and you were wound up, people spat in your face in Northern Ireland. I can remember going to a bus full of republican women who'd come across to The Maze and just covered me in gob and just going "Ladies, this isn't very pleasant", you know, and all this sort of thing because it was a stop check sort of thing and they were just I mean pure hate.

Not recognising, resisting the realities of victimisation or downplaying their impact is perhaps exacerbated by omnipotent occupational norms. Above, Expresso describes the cross-fertilisation of skills from a professional context to a domestic one. Strategies of tolerance have perhaps delayed him from seeking support and addressing the challenging and violent domestic context that he found himself within. Principles and skills adopted in combat or peacekeeping roles are evidently applied to the domestic context. While much literature has suggested incidences of domestic violence perpetrated by servicemen as being influenced by their military role (e.g. combat exposure), the examples here provide an alternative picture. The military role appears embodied within the home in a way that seems to reduce the relational violence to 'measured' assessment. Such practices could arguably represent such 'threat assessments' and decision making provided in basic training

Expectations of conformity to 'approved' occupational norms are also visible in Sam's occupational life story. He discusses how he maintained a non-confrontational position with his abusive partner. Through his narrative, Sam explains that values of 'toughness' ostensibly imbued with skills of restraint, resilience and chivalry are cemented early in his (and other's) military career. Controlled aggression is, as Woodward and Jenkins (2012, p. 156) have discussed, 'by necessity, inculcated and developed as a military skill'. In discussing his most recent post-military victimisation, Sam explains that through various training and

cultural contexts, values of restraint have translated into a view of his domestic circumstances that was non-confrontational and accommodating of his partner's behaviours. Further, he talks of the guarding of his victimisation from the outside world:

[In the Forces] at times you were forced to do boxing, without gloves. You were put in a boxing ring, they'd pick you an opponent, I didn't like doing that, I got a broken nose. But that's just to toughen you up as a soldier, which is what you expected.

I think, if I'd have never joined the Forces, I may, I may have punched her back. It was discipline, respect [that stopped me]. The men don't touch women.

**INTERVIEWER: what prevented you from going out and saying, "I'm being hit"?**

The fact that she'd always say it wouldn't happen again, and I didn't want, because I worked as a publican [after leaving military service], I didn't want people knowing that it was going on.

Both Expresso's and Sam's narrative provide rich sources of support for the idea of, in what military ethicists have described, the instilling of virtues through military training and socialisation (Miller, 2004; Robinson, 2007a). Emphasising military ethics and virtues such as honour, courage, loyalty, integrity and respect (see Olsthoorn, 2011), while seen as productive in the Armed Forces role, could well, when embodied into the domestic situation, problematise domestic violence victimisation.

### *Stigma*

Freedom to express and disclose individual circumstances is a bonded enterprise for the victim, bound up in omnipotent pressures of the socialising process. For example, an unveiling of victimisation could resemble the antithesis of virtues such as honour - whereby honour may be seen as commensurate with 'toughness' (Cohen and Nisbett, 1994); courage - to act without courage is to act cowardly (see Olsthoorn, 2007); loyalty - to be considered disloyal to the spouse or partner and undermine the 'ideals' of an intimate relationship (see Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas and Giles, 1999); integrity - 'doing what one thinks is right because doing otherwise would undermine one's sense of one's own self-worth' (Robinson, 2007b, p. 260);

respect - that a victim status may attract stigmatisation and confirm the designation of a 'spoiled identity'.

Other participants have also described professional norms of the military and their challenges in disclosing their victimisation. Paul describes the difficulties he faced in attempting to address the emotional fallout of his sustained victimisation:

I'm sure it is getting better now, but back then, things like mental health or things that were more kind of taboo like domestic abuse or isolation and depression, it just wasn't talked about or dealt with really, it was kind of alien. You went to the med [*medical*] centre if you had a physical injury or an illness and even then, you were kind of frowned upon as being trying to get out of something, but there was just no talk of things like therapy or emotional problems or anything like that. It was just "laugh it off, have a drink and get on with it", "get down the rugby club, have a drink, have a fight, go out in town", yes, those are the solutions to everything really...

While physical injuries associated with military life are accepted, Paul emphasises the difficulties of expressing emotional or psychological ill health within the military institution. Expectations for emotional resilience are high from the peer group, with remedies aligned to hegemonic caricatures of approved military masculinities. These 'appropriate' militarised gendered behaviours of stoicism, strength and dexterity, as Gray (2015) eloquently describes, are challenged by the perceived weakness of emotional distress, hence why they remain concealed to preserve group and public imaginings of the masculine military body (also see Woodward and Jenkins, 2013 for an overview of the significance of the 'physical' and the 'body' in the military). Paul goes on to describe the reasons why such emotional or psychological distress is hidden from colleagues:

I mean knowing what I know now that I'm involved with all these mental health services and therapy, people that do the therapy and IAPT and all that sort of thing, just, just alien. And to the point where if you did, if you had access to them then and people knew about it, people would be very suspicious of you, I think, they would be very 'what on earth is that? What's going on there?' And I think there would have been a lot of ridicule for somebody who had been abused by their partner as being weak and pathetic so I think even in civilian society, I think there's still that kind of stigma attached to it but particularly in the Forces where it's a very macho environment.

Analyses of mental health, stigma and the military have provided critical insights into the actuality of, and potential for, feelings of marginalisation, experiences of

discrimination, fears of limited career prospects and self-stigma (Greene-Shortridge et al., 2007; Nash, Silva and Litz, 2009; Kim et al., 2011).

While aetiologically they may be different, domestic violence victimisation and mental disorder in the cultural context of the military may occupy a similar domain and may overlap through causality (i.e. mental distress as a product of victimisation). Programmes have been developed and evaluated, and work continues to assist in reducing stigma in the military that surrounds issues such as mental health through education and support (Gould et al., 2007). However, in all likelihood, and amidst environments of hegemonic militarised masculinities, hostile stigmatisers will be ever-present. Where values such as camaraderie, bravery, pride, loyalty and strength hold dominant positions in the military culture and the construction of military identities, their presence consigns those who fall short in meeting these approved norms as weak, and therefore stigma will ensue (McFarling, 2011). Various attempts are made by respondents in this study to mitigate against *public stigma* by the primary group through the maintenance of victimisation as a hidden and personal matter. However, media and traditional accounts of male victims of domestic violence in civilian society have portrayed them as atypical and contrary to shared and normative ideas over appropriate gendered roles, ideas of the aggressor and ideas of the victim (Pagelow, 1983; McLeod, 1984; Felson, 2002 to name but a few). While for military personnel some may elect to hide their victimisation and its effects, the presence of popular cultural stereotypes and ideas over male victimisation is likely to produce symptoms of *self-stigma*.

### *Obstacles to help-seeking*

What we see here across several participants is *label avoidance* occurring purposefully (e.g. through self-medicating using alcohol and a denial of circumstances) as well as a more automatic process driven by culturally and formally instilled norms of conduct and behaviour (e.g. a trivialising of, a tolerance of, or an accommodating of, violent and confrontational situations).

Masculine characteristics that permeate throughout military cultures are likely to make help-seeking more challenging (Gould, Greenberg and Hetherington, 2007). Paul discusses just this, and the potential consequences that disclosure would bring with it. However, he locates barriers imposed by his partner in gaining



the support of his primary group. As Paul explains, accessing, and maintaining support is problematised because of the primary group ethos and the restrictions that the domestic situation creates or imposes:

...there was one guy I got quite matey with not long before I left actually, not long before I left the Forces, and his wife was quite controlling so we would quite often talk to each other about it.

And then, but then again, she would fall out with her, you know, something would go wrong and she hated her and then suddenly not only was she, didn't want to see this, you know, my friend's wife, she didn't want me being mates with him either because he's obviously like her and she didn't want things, 'I told him to go back to her' and that sort of thing.

But yes, I don't think to the extent that I was struggling but he was pretty isolated but if there were more, you didn't get to know about it because people never really talked about it really, it wouldn't have been... much the reason I never really brought it up with many people or I would try and cover it up or make excuses.

Participants such as Paul have made clear judgements as to how they would expect their victimisation to be received by colleagues. Like other human experiences, IPVA victimisation is relegated to a 'taboo' status. Prevailing conditions of masculinity, patriarchy, and more broadly the military institution for all its characteristics, creates what may be seen as impervious barriers to confessions of experience, which may be deemed culturally as improper, or at odds with dominant values and norms. Remedy and support then appear to be an individualised enterprise.

### ***Surviving***

'Surviving' the victimisation is taken critically here as a term to discuss aspects of behaviour and experience that may distract from the victimisation and postpone the experience. Further, we also examine narratives of support. Alcohol features prominently in Guber's account, both as an issue that sustained his victimisation *and* provided the conditions whereby his experience was anesthetised by consumption afforded by the military culture. Secondly, findings suggest that a lack of physical proximity to the perpetrator has afforded some relief from the victimisation. While such survival may be short term, inevitably it risks simply a deferral of the victimisation. Finally, surviving victimisation is articulated along lines of group support, here Brian describes his experience of navigating the peer group.

## *Alcohol*

Habitual alcohol consumption has been argued as a prominent issue among military personnel, both investigating it as a health problem, and also in the context of morale boosting and group cohesion (see Jones and Fear, 2011 for an overview). Combat exposure, PTSD and stress have been cited as being inextricably linked to binge and sustained alcohol usage (Lande, Marin, Chang and Lande, 2011; Bray, Brown and Williams, 2013).

Outside of the military, IPV research has articulated connectivity between chronic traumatic events (such as domestic violence and abuse victimisation) and alcohol use where heavy episodic drinking is motivated by a need to cope with traumatic circumstances in the relationship (Kaysen et al., 2007). For Guber, he reflects that alcoholism has been a defining source of his relational problems and contributory to the breakdowns in relationships, his abuse and victimisation. The salience of alcohol in the context of reflections on military service and culture are discussed here in detail:

All I know is about being in the Army is that it's kept me, it's kept me, I know how to look after myself, I know how to wash, I know how to cook, I know how to sew, I learnt all that, um, the only time I go off the rails if I've had a drink and you can ask anybody that's been in the Forces and most of them have a drink problem.

In the Army or any kind of Forces usually it's [a mentality] been forced into you isn't it? It's like "do now, think later".

**INTERVIEWER:** Can you explain why this may be the case?

Well you are trained to kill aren't you? You're not playing nursery rhymes when you've got a gun in your hand.

**INTERVIEWER:** So does the same mentality apply to alcohol consumption?

Yeah. I have seen, I have seen Majors, um, top ranking Officers all in full dressage uniforms with all their medals and all the shiny outfits with all the silverware out on the tables when you're talking about what, 12 servings and you go down and they've got all the silverware out and all their wives and girlfriends, turning into just one massive orgy and I mean a massive orgy and I mean it and I'm not telling no lies.

**INTERVIEWER:** So alcohol plays an important part in military life?

It does do and it always has done, same as being on the field, if you've been out on the field for a fortnight, straight in there, straight to the bar, it plays a great part in somebody who's in the Army's life like. The thing is... when you're out there, if you've got problems and you've got nobody to talk to about them, that's when you'll hit the bottle because you can't escape it.

Guber's perspective chimes with analysis already completed. Indeed, Ames and Cunradi (2004) have argued the ritualised drinking opportunities and the manner in which it is used as a response to stress, boredom, loneliness and making sense of the complexities of occupational and domestic life. Moreover, alcohol has been cited as making a positive contribution to group bonding and cohesion (Holmes, 2003). However, as Hall (2011) postulates, alcohol may well act as a mechanism which creates emotional distance between the user and their family. As Guber claims, alcohol may not simply be resultant in escapism from the stressors of the role, but is also an important facet of processes of socialisation into the 'military family' and masculine military identities. This view is supported by authors such as Iversen et al., (2007) who argue that aspects of the military culture may 'unwittingly encourage heavy drinking' (p. 960). Role modelling, in the context of behaviours such as alcohol consumption as Iversen et al. (2007) continues is an important dimension of military life, with younger personnel observing the behaviours of the more experienced or senior ranks. Further, the established use of alcohol in military contexts perpetuates its usage, indeed as Ames et al. (2009) contend, military cultures (in their case US naval cultures) shape normative beliefs about acceptable or unacceptable drinking behaviours. The narrative account of Guber adds support to analyses that have come before. Indeed it appears that not only does alcohol use serve as a way of coping, but also features as a core value and behaviour of the group. Failure then to participate may well leave service personnel vulnerable to a failure to access the group.

### *Proximity and peer support*

For some participants, time spent away from the family home featured as an important narrative in the story of their lived reality of abuse. While not all had experienced long periods of deployment with the 'military family', those who had described its effect on their understandings and experience. Brian, explains the contrast of home and time spent away with other servicemen:

I had absolute dread of going home and all this time I think [my mood] was...dropping and dropping and dropping. And it was like... if I read a paper at home... if I put it down, you know, wanting a cuppa or something, you put the paper down, "don't put it there".

**INTERVIEWER:** Was this going on every day all day?

Pretty much when I was home, yeah, which is why it became a relief to go to sea.

Similarly for Paul, a Royal Naval serviceman, time spent away detracted from his ability to recognise the victimisation that he was experiencing:

I suppose, um, [I] didn't see anything untoward at all but in fairness I was never there and that's probably why the relationship lasted as long as it did was because I was always either at sea or working away. But it was always a turbulent relationship, we were always arguing, it was never a relationship that I was comfortable with...

In recognising the masculine values that saturate the work context, Brian also accounts for important mechanisms of support:

Well there is a macho culture but there's also a highly supportive culture. I mean, you know, I can recall times, I remember several times, you know, blokes who were in real, real trouble and the lads had sort of pulled round with them, you'd obviously get a couple of blokes over in the corner there going whatever but, you know, you'd look after your mates and if your mates was going through some horrible shit you would, you would kind of back them up. But at the same time it would take a lot for them to get to that point and you felt stronger for not reaching that point in a way so, you know, you didn't want to kind of go down there and [*sighs*] front it happened and admit it.

Descriptions of support available from the military institution, formally and informally, for domestic matters vary somewhat. However evident from what we observe here is that support is heavily bound to the context in which military work takes place within. It is either absent for fear of ridicule, or support gained is undertaken in a hyper-cautious manner. This in itself requires a huge investment of time and emotion, and it is clear that the omnipotent presence of accusations over 'inappropriate' disclosures of vulnerability looms large for those experiencing IPVA.

## **Discussion**

It has been our intention to contribute to the critical understanding of the military institution and the experiences of those who work and have worked within it. We

have identified how, in the context of IPVA, the influence of the military institution reaches into the domestic setting. As key voices in the field of war and criminology and critical military studies have eloquently described, our need to understand individual experience in the context of (and influences of) military service is crucial if we are to appraise and account for matters with integrity and insight. The normalisation of violence in military life is an important avenue of enquiry in a range of contexts. Treadwell (2016) has already appreciated this when examining understandings of violent crime, criminal justice and post-military life. Similarly, the issue of violence and the presence of actual or anticipated violence in routine military work and training are important here both for those in the military and those who have exited. Hardened attitudes to violence through cultural conditioning have perhaps left those interviewed here unaware of the significance of IPVA. Skills in managing tolerance have masked the severity of the IPVA. Violence then presents in work and the home, and its responses hold several similarities across the domains.

The narratives collected here provide a rich source of insight into the multifaceted nature of victimisation and military work and culture. Work was undertaken already in military sociology on the importance and composition of military cultural conditions (Winslow, 1998; Burk, 1999) which are relevant and important in helping to assess and exploring IPVA phenomenon. For example, military groupings have traditionally utilised solidarity as a key strength. Here, we have observed through the participant's narratives processes of socialisation into the military culture. Basic training requires a process of identity stripping and the embodiment of attitudes, values, beliefs and behaviours approved by the organisation. In doing so, bonds are built between others who share the same commitment. The cohesiveness of the group is tantamount to an obedience to formally directed instruction, and informally defined and expected rules of conduct, loyalty and trust. Outliers of the group 'risk ostracism' (Winslow, 1998) due to concerns of levels of emotional investment in one another being affected. Concepts of an occupational, or more specifically a military 'family' are highly influential and deeply impressed on Armed Forces personnel. Such language, and acceptance into the role of a 'family' member brings with it functionality in teamwork, comradeship and reliable bonds. Unity then is a fundamental element of military life for many.

However, such unity and the sharing of a sense of mission can bring both benefits and hazards. We have seen that for one participant, alcohol use granted access to networks of support between fellow service personnel, but has also been significant in potentially contributing to/sustaining victimisation and acting as a source of distraction/survival to deal with victimisation. Moreover, while evidence has been put forward of the advantages that peer support can bring in offering an outlet for disclosing victimisation, there is equally evidence presented that talks of the way in which unity within the military culture serves as a barrier to disclosure for fear of ostracism or rejection from the group. By and large, customs and traditions of the military seem to undermine opportunities for disclosure. This appears to be grounded by concerns of how peers would receive IPVA victimisation, and whether this would constitute a direct interpretation of weakness and vulnerability by colleagues together with a concern for allegations of improper masculinity within the group. In an occupational context of embedded patriarchal behaviours, hyper-masculine value sets and by the common tropes of IPVA being perpetrated by men against women, any revelation of male victimisation would appear to have ramifications for group membership.

As has been seen here, a substantial theme which has emerged which may account for limited disclosure of victimisation and a delay in help-seeking is the embodiment of a military identity in the home. Studies previously have sought to explore members of the Armed Forces as aggressors in the family home, often citing a transgressing of authoritative and aggressive behaviour between work and home. However, the analysis presented here provides evidence contrary to this. While this may occur in some instances, what has emerged here demonstrates how deeply impressed military values and skills have normalised, rationalised or neutralised their victimisation, thus impeded help-seeking. This scenario speaks to processes whereby the serviceman has subordinated his own individualism to the group identity, not only in the occupational domain as Winslow (1998) describes, but further into the domestic context.

## **Conclusion**

There is a paucity of evidence in the area of ex-Armed Forces personnel who experience IPVA victimisation. A suite of scholarship is emerging which aims to

illuminate upon some of the challenges that ex-Armed Forces personnel endure; be that in the contexts of criminal justice, transitions into 'civilian' life, education and training, mental health and social mobility. The identity of serving or veteran service personnel is often celebrated for their heroism, resilience, courage and loyalty (Malešević, 2010). However, what must also be remembered is that such identities can bring with them a significant burden especially in contexts where adversity may be experienced. The very identities which are cultivated through occupational cultures and onlookers can be the things which problematise human experience and increase vulnerability. Help-seeking for those ex-Armed Forces personnel interviewed here has been delayed for a range of reasons. However in the absence of (i) a cultural acceptance of male IPVA victimisation, (ii) a recognition of this phenomenon occurring in closed and heavily unified work groups, and (iii) the provision of/enhancement of existing support mechanisms, then as bystanders we will continue to bear witness to human suffering, or not as the case may be through victim's astute and well-rehearsed strategies of masking.

There are further research and theoretical debates to unfold here as this research has just begun to contemplate some of the issues emerging from this area of enquiry. Building on what has been presented, further examinations are possible that consider characteristics of stoicism, restraint and self-control as an alternative (in contrast to normative representations of 'toughness' and violence that have structured hegemonic militarised masculinities) realities of military identity. Understanding the influence of the military institution in the lives of service personnel and veterans of the Armed Forces is critical. Doing so will assist in shaping the research and scholarly agenda as well as making valuable practical contributions to how and in what ways services can be shaped to meet the needs of individuals. It is the view of the authors that to understand the domestic phenomenon of IPVA, an interrogation of the significance of the military institution is needed. In drawing comparisons to our topic, the authors here concur with Treadwell's (2016) analysis of veteran offenders that the explanatory logic of individualism is redundant due to the complexity of experience felt in doing military work.

**Note:**

*The idea of researching ex- service personnel and IPVA victimisation was initially raised by Richard Mottershead following his own research with veterans in the criminal justice system and subsequently fully developed by the research team. We would like to thank the community based support organisations and the participants for their contribution to this research.*

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