Discourses We Live By

Narratives of Educational and Social Endeavour

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23. From Defender to Offender
British Female Ex-Military Re-Joining Civilian Society

Linda Cooper

Linda Cooper considers the problems that the ex-military experience when returning to civilian life. She examines the narratives of two female former soldiers who have committed offences, unable to sustain a productive role in the 'real' world where individuals have to create their own structures and relationships if they are to take control of their lives.

T he notion of belonging is a key tenet of life in the UK Armed Forces. Yet the issues surrounding the loss of this camaraderie are often under-estimated when soldiers transition out of the Army and into civilian life. Difficulties are faced by personnel when moving from a job that encompasses one's self-identity — i.e., a Soldier in the Army — to re-negotiation back into a regular job in society and the family home — becoming 'just' an ordinary citizen. Whilst the majority of people who leave the Armed Forces transition successfully into civilian life, there is a significant minority that do not. For many veterans — defined by the Ministry of Defence (MOD, 2011) as somebody who has served at least one day in Her Majesty's Armed Forces — adjustment can be difficult. This chapter tells the stories of two women who created successful careers in the British Army and, importantly, found a real sense of belonging, as women in a male dominated workplace. Only on leaving the Military did they struggle to re-adjust to a civilian, feminized identity and both women found themselves arrested and in the criminal justice system (CJS). For these

women, the Army offered a practical educational experience that was formative; their stories reveal how their lifestyles were shaped by their sense of belonging in the Armed Forces, its loss on their return to civilian life and the re-building of their female, civilian selves.

This chapter stands apart from the mainstream literature on veterans as its focus is on female ex-Soldiers who offended, and it is well-documented that male veterans significantly constitute the veteran offender population (Fossey et al., 2017). Thus, the stories offer some original insights into the problems that women face when returning to civilian life. However, before I engage with the actual narratives and the discourse within which they are embedded, I should explain the broader context for the study. The opportunity to interview these two female veterans arose as my research team (the Veterans & Families Institute for Military Social Research at Anglia Ruskin University) was commissioned to undertake an independent study of a one-year pilot intervention programme running in the East of England, the first stage of a larger initiative, Project Nova.

Project Nova was set up in 2013 to fill a void in support for veterans in the criminal justice system, specifically at the point of arrest. It is a novel and unique initiative funded by FiMT, the Forces in Mind Trust and delivered by RFEA (the Forces Employment Charity) and Walking with the Wounded. Team members will both guide veterans who offend through the criminal justice system and help them to develop practical strategies and coping skills, post-arrest. The service is staffed with support workers who are part of the military community, which is key to encouraging offender management.

The pilot itself was intended to highlight the difficulties that veterans face and its focus was support work with a number of veterans facing criminal charges, including the two females whose stories are central to this chapter. Our task was to evaluate the pilot intervention, and to do this we carried out a mixed methods study that involved interviews with veterans, members of the Project Nova team and a Police officer. In this chapter I will focus on two key findings from the veterans' interviews: firstly, the specific difficulties that the two women faced when adjusting to a civilian lifestyle and secondly, how their stories reflect the wider issues that confront veterans during resettlement, particularly those who are female (and much-less commonly discussed in the literature). In carrying out these analyses I shall draw on discourses of identity.

Identity is a difficult concept to define, as there are various constructions and meanings, which are determined by shared characteristics. Doing this in the context of the Military is made more complex by the way that discourses of diversity are cloaked beneath a masque of solidarity, not surprising as common attitudes, consensus, collaboration and coordination are essential for collective survival in hostile circumstances. Lawler (2008) suggests identity is a combination of sameness and difference, for instance, soldiers in the Army will have shared understandings, but they will have unique differences: age, relationship status, family formation. For the purposes of this chapter, I wish to explore the intensity of shared understanding and identities that exist during military service and the difficulty of adjusting to individual civilian, social norms. I consider how differing identities and traits mean that although for those leaving the Army the transition process is the same, it is negotiated differently by every individual.

The institutional nature of the Armed Forces instils a sense of social membership, a community with a shared social identity (Gibson & Condor, 2009). Condor, Gibson and Abell (2006) assert that institutions are more than a category of people, rather a hybrid of community, environment and the wider societal system. The close-knit living and working conditions in the Armed Forces, often in extreme and harsh surroundings, can mean friendships become more than familial-like in the degree of attachment, providing the strong bonds necessary in such a working environment. They are important for survival in combat and can have positive mental health benefits (Hinojosa & Hinojosa, 2011). Woodward and Jenkings (2011) consider these relationships to be similar to kinship, due to deeply personal shared identities and encounters. This sense of empowerment through friendships, kinships and mutual experiences creates memories of lifelong bonds that are frequently broken or left behind following transition, ties rarely continue into civilian life.

For male soldiers there appears to be a good fit between self-identity and occupation. According to Savage, Bagnall and Longhurst (2001), working class men normatively gain a positive sense of self-identity through engagement with certain forms of physically intensive employment and, in terms of demographics, a significant number of those who enlist come from low socio-economic backgrounds (MOD,

2016). It is yet too soon to be sure how women who are employed in the same environment will shape and re-shape their identities as it was only in 2014 that the Women in Close Combat Review (MOD, 2014), meant that women could serve on the front line and engage in combat, and only in July 2016 that women in most areas of the Armed Forces were given equal workplace rights. However, although their experiences are similar, their personal needs differ from those of their male counterparts (Burkhart and Hogan, 2015). As Secretary of State in December 2015, Theresa May was swift to allay fears that women in principally male environments could be problematic for unit cohesion, but it should be noted that she also voiced the need for further research on the physical challenges and differing health needs of a female cohort (MOD, 2016), and we shall see in the interview material that the problems women face on leaving the Army also need focused attention. Indeed, the evidence is that it is no longer possible to neatly separate 'work' and the 'personal' as, perhaps, it was in the past.

Lawler (2008) recognizes that work can no longer be considered a social field purely aimed at gaining an income. It is now understood to be a place of personal fulfilment, where this is visible in terms of progression, success and failure in the workplace. But employment in the Armed Forces is not a 'regular job' which creates a further layer of identity risk, for as Lawler (ibid.) also argues, the self-esteem we encounter through success in the workplace may not be equally regarded by those who lack insight into a specific job. This ambivalence is particularly true for the Military, which research has shown to be open to misinterpretation (Gibson & Condor, 2009). Gibson and Condor found that to civilians, members of the Armed Forces are viewed as obedient government servants and the Military is by its nature, a disciplined, hierarchal environment, driven by the need for mutual dependency, often for real life survival. Yet they found that, for soldiers, it is not obedience but loyalty that is paramount as they support their colleagues and serve their country. Loyalty is a powerfully emotive characteristic, and it is not difficult to see how this creates bonds and ties that will be sundered on leaving active service, exacerbating the difficulties of adjustment to civilian life.

In Foucauldian terms, the Military overtly acts as a disciplinary force (Foucault, 1991/1975) through the setting of rules and regulations,

punishment when these are broken, and an adherence to strict hierarchies of command. Yet, it also covertly demands fealty from those who serve, through engendering feelings of camaraderie, allegiance and loyalty towards peers, which induces continual self-surveillance in its members lest they 'let the side down'. Thus, power is both a hidden and direct discourse controlling all aspects of daily life in the Military, likely to leave a void when people enter civilian society and find they have to make their own choices; have to care, fully, for their own wants; need to set their own boundaries if they want a routine to shape their days and a behavioural code to live by.

Understanding the Veteran CJS Landscape

There is a lack of robust data on veterans in the criminal justice system, an absence of historical statistical information, and little known about specific cohorts, including female veterans (Albertson et al., 2015). Indeed, the last approximation of veterans in prison, dates from 2009, when it was estimated at 2,820 offenders, or 3.5% of the prison population, although anecdotally, this figure is considered to be larger in real terms (Howard League, 2011). This is not a large number in percentage terms, but not to be sanctioned when it is considered that these offenders have played a significant in role in serving and defending their country.

Since this pilot study was carried out, the Philips Review of veterans in the criminal justice system (commissioned in 2014) has proposed a package of measures to identify and support veterans when entering, serving and leaving prison. As a consequence, since January 2015, every prisoner going through the custody process is asked if they have ever served in Her Majesty's Armed Forces. Other key recommendations of the Review (Phillips, 2014) included the need for veteran-specific programmes, transitional support at the end of a prison sentence and a targeted approach to reducing recidivism, including help for offenders' families. In 2015, the government began a process of reform for rehabilitation following release from prison through private companies. This was found to be 'putting the public at risk' necessitating a return of offender monitoring to the National Probation Services (Dearden, 2019). However, at the time of carrying out the pilot study, matters

were less clear-cut. Indeed, the review was a consequence of sustained concern voiced by a number of key bodies, starting as early as 2007 with a report in Military Medicine (van Staden et al., 2007), and sustained by the Howard League (2011); the Kings Centre for Military Health Research (MacManus & Wessely, 2011; MacManus et al., 2012, 2013, 2014); often aided by academic articles (Treadwell, 2010; Taylor et al., 2012; Bray et al., 2013; Murray, 2013; and Albertson et al., 2015). It is in this context that Project Nova was established. But we now turn to the women themselves to hear their stories and examine the discourse that shapes their lives. They are, of course, given pseudonyms to protect their identities: Anna and Beth.

The Women's Stories

Anna is 46 years of age. Her father was in the Army and so she was raised as a Service child, with many changes of schools and homes when he was re-stationed. She served for ten years in the Women's Royal Army Corps, with numerous tours in Germany, Bosnia and Ireland and left to pursue marriage and a civilian lifestyle, so this was a definite choice. She had plans for the future and a new and relational context, into which to relocate. However, longer term, the relationship broke down and following a family bereavement and other employment related issues, she was arrested for theft (shoplifting), but no further action was taken, demonstrating that mental health issues were seen to underpin her actions.

Beth is younger, only 29 years old, so she and Anna represent different generations of Army personnel. Beth was one of the first women to work as a draughts person in the Royal Engineers and served for six years from the age of 16, including two tours of Afghanistan. Like Anna, she left to develop an existing personal relationship, but this came to an end soon after she discharged from the Army. She decided to go travelling to compensate for her loss and during her travels, began to struggle with her alcohol and mental health issues. She was later arrested for criminal damage to commercial buildings and issued with community service.

I undertook ten interviews with Project Nova clients and Anna and Beth were the only two female Nova clients at that time. In line with my ethical approval through Anglia Ruskin University, we met in the

Project Nova Hub and I was accompanied at all of the interviews by a Nova Support Worker, in case the clients needed emotional support during the meetings. In fact, both interviews needed to be stopped when they became upset and needed help whilst re-living elements of their stories. After a break, and agreement they were fine, I continued with a set of semi-structured questions and the interviews covered their pre-Service histories, Service life, post-Service and arrest details. The Project Nova Hub is a functional, no-frills office space, providing veterans with the opportunity to drop in and meet with Nova workers. We held individual, one-off interviews, both lasting approximately two hours. Further data were collected through a battery of questions asked by Nova Officers during their initial telephone conversation with their clients. This data does not form the scope for this chapter but can be found in the final Report (Fossey et al., 2017).

Both Anna and Beth talked of having happy childhoods, raised in homes by both parents and siblings, without problem or difficulty. Although Anna moved around with her father's re-stationing and attended many schools, she reflected on her childhood with good memories. Beth too had a 'normal' childhood. Both of them talked of having an adventurous, out-door living nature, which is a key attribute of military personnel. Crowley and Sandhoff's (2017) research with female veterans suggests that those who refer to themselves with masculine attributes such as 'tomboy' believe they will be able to relate better to men. In this respect, both participants fitted this characteristic really well; both women were able to work effectively in a male dominated workplace:

> Mum and Dad were really disappointed, they wanted me to go to university and be a nurse, I was just more of a tomboy, I had an insatiable amount of energy. (Anna)

> I was quite adventurous and I like sport and challenge, so I sort of went down that route. (Beth)

Whether women need to display masculine characteristics in order to achieve success whilst in Service is disputed in the literature. Crowley and Sandhoff (2017) believe it to be necessary for them to be respected and be 'one of the lads' but Woodward and Jenkings (2011) note that the acquisition of a military identity is grounded in military capabilities and skill sets and not in personal attributes.

Beth was actually the first female in her Squadron to undertake what had formerly been a male only role, therefore, being a female in a previously male dominated space was a significant factor in her account and she states this clearly on several occasions but does not always see this in a positive light:

> I was the only female engineer there, so I had to do more, like the tests were more intense, like to lift further or carry heavier. I was the only girl there throughout the training. You've got to be one of the lads, you can't be a woman really […] For the lads to be able to respect you, you need to be able to fit in. (Beth)

Anna and Beth displayed attributes of being strong women during their time in Service, including several tours in theatres of war. However, this 'fitting in' and being in a hyper masculine environment was at the cost of their femininity. Negra (2009) uses the notion of choice dilemmas to understand the emotional and practical options women face when trying to attain a work/life balance. However, Beth joined the Army at 16 and was still a very young woman discovering her adult, feminine self when posted to austere work environments. Further, it is clear from her narrative that in trying to 'fit in with the lads' and undertaking life or death situations, she felt the loss of her teenage, feminine identity.

> I just feel like I had my whole teenage hood taken away from me really being a girl, because you're not allowed to do the girly things that normal girls enjoy, like straightening your hair or putting your make-up on. So you do lose a lot of your femininity. It took me ages to become a woman and get my femininity back. (Beth)

Cooper and colleagues (2017) discuss the notion of push/pull factors shaping the pressures faced by Service personnel. They recognize that at some point when joining the Armed Forces, there is a need to integrate completely into the military way, in order to thrive in such an environment. New recruits are detached from their civilian identity and are embedded into a military lifestyle. At some stage, however, the need for the regular things in life, including a home, family or normal working hours in a Service person's career pushes them back to wanting attributes of a civilian way of life, and this can be the catalyst for leaving the Army. Smith and Rosenstein (2017) have further found that although there appears to be greater gender balance between military careers and

family life, Armed Forces personnel are still leaving due to the impact of Service on their families, demonstrating positive rather than negative reasons for leaving the Army. The push/pull factors are evident in Anna and Beth's narratives. In Anna's case particularly, age considerations may have made this more urgent. In Beth's, her partner-to-be had also experienced Army life — another way in which their situations differed. Both of the participants romanticized their return to civilian life, with a desire to settle down, be 'looked after', and to start a family:

> My boyfriend had just proposed and I was wanting to settle down and have a family and not be part of an institution anymore. I wanted my own identity with kids and a dog and a house and catch up on family life. I couldn't think of anything more that the Army could offer me that I'd find interesting […] Being a civilian was all new and exciting, getting rid of all the Army uniform and that institution. I wasn't in a rush to do anything, I just wanted to find my feet. (Anna)

> I didn't want to go back, I didn't want to do another operational tour […] I was engaged to a guy who was also in the Army and he left. He persuaded me to leave and we'd get married and he'd look after me. (Beth)

More recently, there has been a great deal of support for Serving personnel undergoing the resettlement process offered by the Careers Transition Partnership (CTP, 2018) but the type and level of support is dependent on the length of service and the individual's motivation to seek guidance. Findings from the evaluation of Project Nova (Fossey et al., 2017) indicate that among veterans seeking help is problematic: they have a perceived sense of weakness and loss of pride when asking for help for themselves. Anna and Beth were aware of the advice available to them, but like many who are in the period of transition, neither engaged beyond the basic levels of support, assuming they would cope with the practical demands of resettlement back into civilian life.

Ashcroft (2014) acknowledges that most veterans transition well and without problem. However, for Anna and Beth, the return to civilian life was more difficult than they had anticipated. As well as negotiating the practical elements of finding work, housing and settling into completely different lifestyles, they also had to adjust to the loss of camaraderie and the complete change in social attitudes and values. Bergman and colleagues (2014) refer to the movement back into civilian life as a

reverse culture shock, where the veteran is required to undo their
military norms of hierarchy, uniformity and rigidity and mould into
civilian ways. The loss of belonging is evident in these narratives, both
in terms of personal relationships and their ways of living.

> It's a shock to the system. I think they (veterans) find it very hard to try
> and relate to how the outside world works outside of the Army [...] It
> was a case of take each day as it comes, breathe, find your feet and see
> where you go. (Anna)

> I just felt lost. I didn't feel like I had any friends. I didn't have much
> support [...] I couldn't get any proper work, it was just whatever I could
> fit in. It was just making new friends, just feeling like you don't fit in as
> well. Just different mentality, different attitude on life, different ways of
> thinking. Just totally feeling like you don't belong anywhere. (Beth)

> The girls that I served with, I don't really speak to anymore. I haven't got
> any buddy systems. The Army was a lot more social. (Beth)

There is an assumption that family will act as the main support system
for veterans in transition. Both Anna and Beth left the Military to start
a life with their partners. However, this support network was lost when
both of their relationships broke down. Anna relied on her elderly
parents, but her mother died soon after she left the Army, causing
further distress and difficulty. Beth went travelling around the world on
her own, but soon had to return to the UK when she began to present
with mental health issues, on top of her anti-social drinking behaviour.
The issues of mental health and alcohol addiction were considered by
both of them to be the catalyst for their offending behaviour:

> I think I got down to about 8 stone. My hair was falling out in clumps
> and I didn't have a scrap of clothing [...] I was in a daze. I was walking
> around and I was there for about two and a half hours picking up stuff,
> then I just walked out of the store. The store detective came out and the
> alarms went off. (Anna)

> I became really withdrawn. I didn't want to be anywhere. I didn't know
> where I felt safe. When I came back from Afghan I was drinking heavily.
> I would definitely link the drinking to my military service [...] like after
> a Friday afternoon you're ordered to parade to the bar and if you're not
> there then you get in trouble. (Beth)

Interestingly, Higate (2003) argues that the masculine practices within the military culture are tenacious and continue into civilian life after leaving the forces and Beth certainly had significant alcohol-related problems on her resettlement. Yet emotion and dependency are seen as feminine traits that are considered signs of weakness and further prevent veterans from seeking help (Cooper et al., 2016; Fossey et al., 2017) and these, too, appear to have played a role in both narratives.

Conclusion

Anna and Beth's narratives describe the stories of two women who moved into a predominantly masculine environment, gained strong collegiate attachments and adapted their lifestyles to thrive within a military environment. In order to achieve in their chosen work roles, these women adopted masculine traits, necessary for the difficult environment in which they operated, and gained individual success. On leaving the Military, it was necessary for Anna and Beth to re-adapt again back into civilian norms. The difficulty both women found during the transition period, along with personal and mental health issues, culminated in their arrests. It is important to remember that offending is no greater in the veteran cohort than it is within the civilian population and that military service is not a pre-requisite for offending behaviour (MacManus & Wessely, 2011). Moreover, there are numerous, extraneous factors why people commit crime. Those who have committed crime are more likely to have been on a criminal trajectory prior to their military service and crucially, therefore, there is a need to examine pre-enlistment behaviours when considering motives for those in the CJS.

For Anna and Beth, however, life just 'got in the way' for they had not committed offences either prior to joining or during their time in the Army. Thus, their experiences highlight how a radical change of lifestyle can be sufficient to 'knock' a person off balance, turning them from active and effective defenders of the realm into needy and vulnerable offenders instead. For these two women, in particular, Project Nova has been a necessary support and signposting system to help them back onto their feet and demonstrates the importance of systems that can tailor support to meet the needs of the individual. At the time of the

interviews, Anna and Beth were seeking help and slowly returning to some sense of a 'normal' life. Since the time of the study, Project Nova has been rolled out to support veterans across nineteen counties within the UK. It, therefore, has the potential to help much greater numbers of former soldiers to find their way back into 'normal' society. However, in becoming a universal service for ex-military personnel in the CJS who need help in adjusting to civilian life, it must take care neither to neglect its clients' diverse needs nor too closely parody the protective, if controlling, ethos of the Army that they are leaving. The ex-soldiers, male or female, need a set of discourses to live by that help them achieve an effective balance between independence and dependence if they are to avoid isolation and the poor mental health this engenders and, instead, form new, lasting and rewarding reciprocal relationships.

Acknowledgements

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