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Assessing and addressing domestic abuse by ex-armed service personnel

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Assessing and Addressing Domestic Abuse by Ex-Armed Service Personnel

Abstract

In the context that separate peer-led services are increasingly being developed to meet the needs of Ex-armed service personnel (Ex-asp) in the criminal justice system, we explore whether such services should also be developed to address any tendencies towards domestic abuse. Based on interviews with 12 imprisoned Ex-asp and 10 service affiliated informants working with them, we found domestic abuse is not always recognised as a potential problem for Ex-asp. Nonetheless, respondents suggested that interventions to address the potential for domestic abuse by some Ex-asp would be useful and legitimate if they are provided by those with service affiliations. Considering our findings, however, we strike a note of caution about separate and peer-led approaches becoming the default option for working with Ex-asp in the criminal justice system. We suggest the gendered nature of military culture may be associated with concerns about the implications of re-engaging Ex-asp with their military identities. Moreover, being steeped in military culture, we suggest that without training some service affiliated staff may be unsighted on important aspects that the role gender expectancies play in domestic abuse and poorly placed to respond appropriately to this type of offending.

Literature Review

Approximately 20,000 personnel leave the UK Armed Forces annually and most ex- transition well into civilian life (Defence Analytical Services and Advice, 2010). This paper focuses on those who do not resettle well and how services might be developed to meet their needs.

Individuals are largely recruited into the armed forces from particular community groups. The Defence Select Committee (2005) has suggested that 50% of new army recruits are from a deprived background; 69% come from a broken home and 16% were long-term unemployed before joining. From the outset therefore, it may be noted that many individuals enter the armed forces at a higher risk of involvement in crime. A long standing suggestion, however, is that recruits into the armed forces learn to be honest, dependable and to show integrity as a result of the training they receive (Hakeem, 1946; Goffman, 1960; Gerth and Mills, 1954). Joining the armed forces has been noted as a potentially protective factor in the development of social bonds and social control as well as socially and economically valuable practical skills for some young people (Sampson and Laub, 2005).

Women are increasingly present in all branches of the armed services, however, they account for only 12.7% of officers and 9.4% of other ranks (House of Commons 2014). Thus Green et al. (2010) argued that the culture which prevails in military settings privileges a hegemonic masculinity which prescribes that men should be tough, risk taking and dominant. In the US Hunter (2007) identified several problematic elements of such a gendered culture including the general acceptance of violence and anti-social conduct following alcohol use. Heavy drinking is recognised as a particular problem within the UK Armed Services. One study found 67% of ex-servicemen, compared to 38% of men in the general population in the UK were drinking at a level considered by the World Health Organisation to be harmful to health (Fear et al., 2007).

As Wainwright (2016, p.11) pointed out “leaving the armed forces is more than leaving a place of employment; for many it is a loss of family and a complete way of life”. In most cases the transition will be facilitated by opportunities to use skills and capital accumulated during service life. However, a common assertion is that some armed forces personnel become institutionalised during their service career. Thus on transitioning out of the military they may be less self-reliant, knowledgeable about and capable of dealing with stressors associated with normal civilian life. Most Ex-asp work through the challenges associated with transition into the civilian field. Some, however, may come to the attention of statutory services if their capacities for coping are overwhelmed.

Research suggests that only between 3 and 7% of the prison population have service links (Treadwell, 2010; Defence Analytical Services and Advice, 2010; Howard League, 2011; Bray et al., 2013; HMIP, 2014). Whilst they represent the largest occupational group of people in prison, MacManus et al. (2013) suggested male serving and ex-service personnel are much less likely than similar men in the general population in England and Wales to have a criminal conviction.

Certain groups of recruits and Ex-asp, however, seem to be more at risk of crime than others. Bouffard (2005) identified those with convictions prior to service life as being most at risk of pre-discharge offending. In the UK early service leavers (who leave before competing 4 years) have been identified as a group that may be especially vulnerable to criminality on discharge from the army. Those compulsorily discharged for poor conduct are identified as the highest risk (Iveson et al., 2005). In addition, it has been suggested that some peculiarities pertain to the profile of Ex-asp in custody in England and Wales (Howard League, 2011). Namely that they are more likely to have been convicted for violent and sexual offences. Thus, whilst 28.6% of civilian prisoners were in prison for violent offences and 11% for sex offending, this compared to 32.9% and 25% of Ex-asp. There is no crime of domestic violence in the UK and so it is unclear whether domestic abuse is a particular concern amongst Ex-asp. In 2009, however, Napo (2009) reported on a breakdown of the types of offences in 90 cases involving Ex-asp and found the most common conviction was for violence in a domestic setting. Although its applicability to the UK context is unclear, further afield, the bulk of US research reported higher rates of domestic abuse amongst some serving and ex-military personnel (Williston et al., 2015; Tasso et al., 2016; Marshall et al., 2005; Cantos et al., 1994; Cronin, 1995; Griffin and Morgan, 1988; Heyman and Neidig, 1999)

Studies frequently associate violence against women with expectations of male dominance. Thus they understand domestic violence through the prism of gender. From this perspective domestic abuse is understood as perpetrated by men for the purpose of exercising power and exerting control over women (Dobash and Dobash, 1979; Overlien, 2013). According to Johnson (1995; 2008; 2011), however, this gendered scenario is less common than is suggested. Johnson (2011) distinguished between acts of intimate terrorism, violent resistance and situational couple violence. Intimate terrorism is a form of domestic abuse that is orientated towards securing power and control in a relationship. Conversely violent resistance is in response to this oppression. Johnson (1995; 2011) suggested that by far the most common form of domestic abuse is ‘situational couple violence’ which is roughly gender-symmetric in terms of perpetration and often has its origins in substance abuse or stress giving rise to communication issues (Johnson, 2011). Regular long overseas deployment and family separation, stress arising from risk of injury and death, geographic mobility and residence in foreign countries as well as the demands of having to adjust to civilian life on leaving the armed forces places strains on family units of serving and Ex-asp (Finley et al., 2010).

Here it is apposite to note that offending by Ex-asp is sometimes explained by reference to mental disorder (Phillips, 2014). In 2005, 28.9% of Ex-asp self-reported as having had a mental health problem, of which depression (48.3%) and stress (37.9%) were the dominant conditions (Ivesen et al., 2005). The King's Centre for Mental Health Research, however, conducted a cohort study into the physical and psychological health of those who took part in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. It found that albeit that their military career provided a very specific context for some presentations, the mental health of Ex-asp was broadly similar to that of the general population. Research suggests that around 3-4% of serving soldiers in the UK go on to experience symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (Health, Wellbeing and Local Government Committee, 2011; Fear et al., 2010). Mental health conditions might be going unnoticed, but nonetheless, more recently Lyne and Packham (2014) suggested there is only moderate evidence to suggest that mental health problems are more typical in Ex-asp in the Criminal Justice System of England and Wales.

It has been argued that military culture is characterised by strong deference to the chain of command and encouraged protection of colleagues and the 'unit' (Marshall et al., 2005). Thus domestic abuse and violence may go unreported or may be dealt with in an inappropriately informal manner. In recent years, however, a number of campaigns have sought to address sexual assault and domestic abuse in the armed forces and amongst the Ex-asp community. Web sites and phone lines have been developed to increase awareness of the issues and highlight sources of support. Military welfare support is primarily provided by specialist welfare service staff in the Army or Navy and staff associated with SSAFA (the Armed Forces charity, formerly known as Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Families Association) in the Royal Air Force. Thereafter, organisations such as the British Legion and SSAFA maintain a presence in the community and provide services for ex-service staff. Services available include family support groups, mentoring programmes, bereavement support, and a confidential telephone and email helpline service called Forcesline to servicemen and women and their families (Gray, 2015).

Specialist provision for Ex-asp have developed apace in the criminal justice system over the last few years. In custodial settings veterans' wings have been created at some establishments e.g. HMP and YOI Parc. All prisons in Wales have introduced a single point of contact for Ex-asp, and Custody Support Officers or Ex-Forces Lead Officers to help Ex-asp towards rehabilitation (WAG, 2013). In the Cheshire and Greater Manchester Community Rehabilitation area, service users who are identified as being Ex-asp may be referred to a new partnership that has been developed with the Defence Medical Welfare Service (DMWS). The E-Fan project provides an individual assessment and intervention service for Ex-asp that may be counted as Rehabilitation Activity Requirement days. It has been suggested that some of the features of more successful services for Ex-asp include that it is provided by staff who are ex-service themselves and they operate apart from mainstream services. (WAG, 2013). According to WAG (2013) the consensus view is that ex-service personnel are likely to be more comfortable and forthcoming with members of staff who have experienced service life rather than simply having knowledge of it.

Methods

This paper engages with a subset of the data gathered as part of a larger study that sought to explore Ex-asp's experiences of transitioning out of armed service, healthy relationships and domestic abuse.

The larger study was funded and facilitated by the National Offender Management Service in Wales (NOMS). It was approved by the National Research Council for NOMS and Glyndwr Research Ethics Committee. The larger study drew on findings from qualitative interviews with 12 Ex-asp who owned to engaging in or having experience of domestic abuse and 20 key informants working with Ex-asp across Wales. Here we focus on what the 12 prisoners and 10 service providers who themselves had a service background told us. This is with the intention of focussing the paper on data collected from Ex-asp themselves and their first-hand experience of maintaining healthy relationships whilst managing the transition process.

A gatekeeper in a prison establishment indicated a willingness to help with respondent recruitment. The term 'gatekeeper bias' has been used to describe the process whereby a gatekeeper may come to have undue influence over sampling in research (Sanders and Munford, 2017, p.6). However this was minimised by using a poster to advertise the research in the prison and to invite volunteers. The poster indicated that men were deemed eligible to take part in the study if they had a history in the armed services and either had a conviction for an offence associated with domestic abuse e.g. violence, harassment, criminal damage; or otherwise considered their experiences meant they could contribute to our research. No inducements were offered other than the opportunity to help inform service provision for future ex-service staff. Volunteers were told that if they so wished, they could elect to be interviewed by an Ex-asp. This is because one of the researchers and an author of this paper is an Ex-asp themselves. Arrangements were made by the gatekeeper for the researchers to attend the prison to undertake interviews. Prior to interviews, capacity to consent was assessed by considering how well the potential participant seemed to understand relevant information and appreciate the implications of their engagement and its likely consequences. Where there were doubts or concerns about capacity to consent, the researcher explored the potential respondent's understanding of the research, for example by asking 'what is the aim of the study' and 'do you have to take part'. It was explained to respondents that participation was voluntary and would be anonymous and have no bearing on the management of their case. However, it was also explained that confidentiality would have to be broken if during the course of an interview researchers became concerned about a potential associated with a risk of harm to self or others.

Twelve men volunteered to take part and were assessed by gatekeepers as meeting the research criteria. All 12 were subsequently interviewed face to face at the gatekeeping prison. Almost all of these respondents described themselves as coming from deprived backgrounds and as having joined the military at the age of 16 or 17. Most had served in conflict zones and had been in the army but one respondent had been in the navy and another in the military police. The longest service history was 15 years, the shortest 2.5 years, but the mode was 3- 4 years. All of the respondents were white and most were in their late twenties. Nine respondents made reference to engaging in behaviour that would constitute being abusive or violent within a relationship. All but two (drug offences) were in custody for a violent offence.

Key representatives within agencies/organisations were identified through existing links researchers had with the ASP and Ex-asp community. Twelve face to face and ten telephone interviews were conducted with stakeholder respondents representing these agencies. Interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. It is noteworthy that around 10 of the service providers interviewed were themselves ex-service staff and had been in the armed services. Thus as well as being able to comment on the

needs of ex-service staff as it presented itself to them in a professional capacity, these respondents were able to draw on their own experiences of service life when answering research questions.

The transcripts were organised into headings that addressed issues of relevance to the research as follows: *the experiences of ex-armed forces personnel and their relationships; their interaction with statutory and non-statutory organisations; the potential ability of organisations to intervene to support ex-armed forces personnel and their families; and whether bespoke interventions to support ex-armed forces personnel would be of benefit.* Data of specific interest was highlighted in all transcripts and then the research team met to discuss these highlighted themes and sub-themes, looking for consensus in interpreting the findings (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

In the following section we draw selectively on accounts of respondents from the larger study sample whose comments most effectively illustrate the issues which form the focus of this paper. To protect respondents' anonymity, findings are presented using data extracts codes. Prisoner respondents are coded P1-P12 in data extracts; Stakeholders are coded SP1-SP10.

Findings

Domestic Abuse

In civilian contexts, domestic abuse and violence is known to be a significant social problem, resistant to informal social control and notwithstanding recent improvements, something criminal justice agencies have struggled to identify and respond to effectively (Madoc-Jones et al., 2015). The weight of existing research would commend a conclusion that domestic abuse and violence would be an issue of, at least, equal significance in military contexts and for Ex-asp. Many of the armed service affiliated respondents in this research, however, considered domestic abuse to be a less significant issue for military and Ex-asp. Explaining why he thought this one such respondent said:

... if it came to light I'm sure senior officers would be appalled and react to it... because in the military service if you turn up late you can be locked up so we have a strong sense of discipline, so I feel it is less likely to happen, and when it does happen, I can assure you that people from within their own peer group, it is unacceptable and you wouldn't want to go through life with everybody knowing that you knock your wife around because you wouldn't last two minutes. It would be worse than if you're outside I imagine (SP2).

Another affiliated respondent was asked if they came across domestic violence and or abuse in their work place and suggested:

I've not come across it, no, maybe one or two in over 30 years (SP9).

Similarly, a service affiliated provider respondent commented:

It's not something I'm particularly aware of..., I don't get see the other halves and the wives' husbands, other guys' girlfriends too much, and not particularly. I've had some soldiers come to me and told me about things where they have had a marital breakup and their other half was in court, but that's quite unusual really (SP8).

There were reasons to interpret these responses as indicative of individuals being unsighted rather than insightful on the issue of domestic abuse. For example, a prisoner respondent made the following comments about sharing their difficulties and accessing help:

No, I wouldn't have done [shared their difficulties] ... I would have just dealt with it myself, I wouldn't have looked for any help or anything... Yeah that's just me I think but there wasn't anywhere I could see where we could go and get help. But because I wasn't looking for it I probably wouldn't have found it (P1).

One service provider indicated the tendency of Ex-asp to avoid self-disclosure and be self-reliant:

I think that seems to be a common trend with quite a lot of the older ex-army. They were a bit of a lone warrior sort of thing and they say I don't need anyone else, I'm capable on my own (SP9).

In addition, an informal approach to managing domestic abuse in the military was described as prevailing. Referring to how domestic abuse and violence might be dealt with on a military base one service affiliated respondent suggested:

If the police had to enter a property they would report it to the duty officer then the welfare officer then it would come down to you because it's your soldier involved, which would lead then to a quiet chat, without prying too much... It was all kept in house so other people didn't get involved. Not that it gets brushed under the table (SP4).

Other respondents referred to practices that could lead to domestic abuse or violence being under reported:

I've come across it in my role and its difficult because what happens is in the armed forces they cover it up, they will take the man away put them somewhere and cover it up and its only when they get out that that's when it gets reported and the wife thinks I told the family officer and they did nothing about it so she thinks I've got to shut up and crack on (SP1).

Healthy Relationships

At the same time service life and, in particular, transitioning out of armed service was considered to give rise to challenges in maintaining healthy non-abusive relationships. For example, many respondents referred to unemployment causing particular hardship for Ex-asp and having the potential to lead to relationship difficulties and domestic abuse. In the following extract, unemployment is described as 'doubly bad' for an Ex-asp:

We were in the house together all the time, I had nothing to do and so we were under each other's feet and I was fidgety, that's doubly bad for a para who's used to doing things - either doing something or getting ready to do something (P6).

Ex-asp referred to themselves and each other as being more settled in relationships when they were working. This was because being employed was associated with having a daily routine and some

structure to life. A preference for routine and structure was said to render prison more tolerable for Ex-asp. Thus, on being in prison, one respondent commented:

You shouldn't say it really but in prison I enjoy being you know I'm driven back to prison because prison is like routine you know whereas outside life is not you've got to work hard to make it like routine. In here it's all like the army you know you have to get up at a certain time, you eat at a certain time, it's a very similar atmosphere (P1).

This preference for routine and structure, however, was considered potentially problematic in some family contexts. Thus one affiliated provider respondent commented:

I would say particularly then with the veteran who has been brought up very institutionalised way of life, it is all about control, controlling what happens in his own home or in his own life and that can be carried on once they have left the military so he likes things regimented, things done at a certain time and that can then be perceived likely as domestic abuse (SP8).

Respondents also suggested that transitioning out of the armed service could be associated with problems communicating with partners. It was suggested military culture could render self-disclosure, and the vulnerability attendant on this, especially problematic. One affiliated service provider suggested:

You have a situation where a normal person, someone you are with wants to talk, but that's the last thing you want to do, you've learned to bottle it up or just get on with it - so your partner might say might be called distant or aloof but that's how it is in the army (SP9).

The following respondent described a process of avoiding closeness with others:

... I didn't want to ask him [relative] for help if you like because I didn't want to seem weak in front of him. I think that was a big problem as well, seeming weak and asking for help, you know being a burden (P11).

Heavy drinking was described as commonplace in military settings. This was something all prisoner respondents suggested caused relationship difficulties when Ex-asp were in the community. Reflecting on his marriage one respondent said:

We split up loads of times because of my drinking (P11).

Heavy drinking was identified as a mechanism some Ex-asp used to manage stress. Military life was understood by many Ex-asp to be associated with having few responsibilities. Making decisions, instead of responding to orders was thereafter identified as a challenge for some and having the potential to precipitate abuse. Summing this up, an affiliated respondent explained:

You've got to understand it isn't about one thing, if your adjusting to a new life and new friends perhaps, then all of this and then on top of all that you

don't know about how things work and it's just more stress on top of stress and that's obviously going to lead to problems isn't it (SP9).

Many of the prisoner respondents sought to explain their offending behaviour by referring to their military training. It was suggested that military training could inculcate an aggressive or confrontational attitude towards others that would endure after returning to the civilian sphere:

I was never drawn to conflict and as soon as I got into the military - boom! And in the military people change they never back down to somebody and if somebody argues with you - you argue back. If someone punches you and throws something at you - you punch them back. It's the way a lot of the people from the military have been taught (P4).

In the following account, domestic violence is explained with reference to a tendency to react violently to any perceived physical threat:

You don't know when to switch off. When an argument comes, if someone swings for you, you swing straight back - you don't think 'is it a woman?' (P5).

Service delivery

Whilst provider respondents referred to more services available to help Ex-asp transition out of armed service, prisoner respondents suggested little help had been made available to them and what was offered was limited to finding employment. In this regard one respondent commented:

But because I served 5 years I wasn't, I couldn't get the full resettlement¹, I got a 5 day resettlement, a very basic, digital, you write a CV, they test your grammar and English and Maths before they set you off, so very little basically (P7).

None of the prisoner respondents owned to having contacted service welfare agencies regarding domestic abuse:

Let's be honest if you hit your missus right, you can't go and speak to the police about it because you will go to jail. Bottom line you can't go and speak to anyone else about it (P8).

Nonetheless, most of our service affiliated provider respondents considered their agency was uniquely able to recognise and act to address early signs of relationship difficulties or abuse. Accounts of this referenced a unique bond that would exist between two interlocutors with a service history:

There is a bond, an understanding between military people that you don't see elsewhere (SP8).

In support of such assertions one of the men in prison explained:

¹ Here the respondent is referring to the 'resettlement package' offered to recruits on discharge from the armed forces.

It's easier to speak to somebody like yourself - an ex-military but it's hard speaking to civilians because they just look at you like that sometimes. You get some coming the jail that's a civilian and they just come and speak to you as a you are just an animal in a cage ...never mind the person never mind who I am that is, one time (P4).

However, common though the perception was that military people better related to other military people, accounts of this phenomenon hinted at the potential for expectations and norms associated with military culture to then structure conversations:

When I meet guys for the first time I'll tell them my military background... but one of the first questions they will ask me is what rank are you and you can see they are working out how do I pitch myself to this guy. And trying to say to them 'I'm a civilian' but I've had guys that have called me 'sir' (SP7).

In the above extract, it is suggested that it is not unusual when two- Ex-asp meet for an attempt to be made to understand hierarchical military relations. What is interesting is the respondent then refers to that hierarchy being re-established.

Such hierarchical and 'military Identity work' occurred with some of the researchers during the interviews at which point greater legitimacy would be conditional on having a service background:

Interviewee: I did 15 years myself in the army, serving all over in Ireland, Bosnia you name it in the Special Forces, and so I know these lads and speak their language. Have you served?

Researcher: No, I don't have any sort of service history.

Interviewee: What you'd find is I speak their language and they speak my language, we understand each other.

The services identified by service providers and prisoners as bring relevant to address the potential for domestic abuse were those associated with 'situational couple's violence'. Relevant services were therefore considered to be those addressing social isolation via peer support schemes; signposting Ex-asp to specialist agencies to deal with health problems e.g. alcohol misuse, financial or mental health problems. Thus an affiliated service provider suggested:

If we come across it we can provide the necessary referrals, so we are good at signposting to agencies, housing if its housing [name of organisation] if its alcohol or drugs, and accessing pots of money if that's needed and for most things we've seen it all before so it's not anything new to us (SP10).

Discussion

According to Williamson (2011) and Gray (2015) very little research has been conducted in the UK on healthy relationships, domestic abuse and military personnel. However, the post deployment needs

of Ex-asp will assume a greater significance over the next few years. This is by dint of the 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) leading to reductions in the numbers of regular personnel and, correspondingly, greater number of Ex-asp in the community.

In our wider study, we noted almost of the respondents spoke positively about their service histories and the sense of comradeship and belonging they enjoyed during their service careers. Here, however, we report that many of the service affiliated respondents did not consider domestic abuse to be a significant issue for military personnel. Conversely, transitioning out of the armed services was understood to be full of challenges in terms of maintaining healthy relationships and where domestic abuse was identified as a potential issue, it was often associated with the experience of having served.

We suggest there are reasons to be concerned about the disjuncture involved here. Some of our respondents suggested domestic abuse could be ignored or managed informally in military settings. Recent scandals, for example involving members of the Catholic Church, however, highlight the longer term harm that can attend a greater sense of loyalty to an organisation and its reputation than to individual needs. As Gray (2015) suggested unless it is recognised that military contexts can be fertile grounds for the development of attitudes and behaviour supportive of domestic abuse, dealing effectively with it will be more difficult.

Conversely there are reasons to be cautious about accounts of domestic abuse that focus only on situational factors linked to transitioning. For example, our respondents referred to a preference by some Ex-asp for work and their home lives to be controlled and structured. As much as this may reflect a military mind-set, it reflects an inclination for power and control commonly associated with domestic abuse in a range of settings. Military men were also said to struggle with intimacy and self-disclosure. However, such problems are not uncommon amongst men in general (Bank et al., 2000) and those who commit domestic abuse in particular who, whether they are ex-military or not, are also less likely than women to engage in help seeking behaviour (Galdas et al., 2005).

Murray (2016, p.20) coined the term 'veteranality', to capture the tendency for the criminality of Ex-asp to be perceived as being different from others. She commented:

We understand them as having different criminogenic needs, vulnerabilities and risk factors just as other populations but in the background is a unique perception that veteran offenders are good or that their crimes are understandable coupled with the notion that they are high risk

Jones and Milroy (2016) suggest non-disclosure of personal troubles is a significant issue for Ex-asp. However, they found that military histories may also be embellished and the status of 'heroic soldier' drawn upon to serve particular ends. Referencing Goffman's theory of offenders as having 'spoiled identities', Murray (2014) referred to contemporary processes whereby an Ex-asp who has offended may still be perceived as having a victim identity. The Royal British Legion has cautioned that such process may be problematic if they leaves room for some Ex-asp to avoid responsibility for their crimes and perceive themselves to be less guilty than other offenders (Royal British Legion, 2014).

Most respondents suggested Ex-asp would prefer to engage with other Ex-asp over the difficulties they face in civilian contexts. The greater ability of some Ex-asp to empathise with some other Ex-asp, however, stands in contrast to the greater ability of some non-Ex-asp to maintain a therapeutic detachment and see beyond what may be normative in military contexts (Iliffe and Steed, 2000). The

issue of whether empathy or detachment is most desirable is not unique to the issue of whether Ex-asp are better placed to work and engage with other Ex-asp. The desirability of ethnic matching in counselling has been debated (see Alladin, 2001) as has the issue of whether victim/survivors of domestic abuse are best placed to work with other victim/ survivors of domestic abuse (see De Keseredy et al., 2000). The advantages and concerns coalesce around an ingrained familiarity or identification a service provider may have with a service user which renders them both sighted and unsighted on the assumptions both might make about what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.

The experience of serving in the armed forces will vary as a function of factors such as age, gender, class and ethnicity (Wainwright et al., 2016). Individual differences will also mean some will experience negatively service demands that others experience positively. Military service, therefore, is not likely to be a homogenous experience inducing a singular sense of being or knowledge. That being said, sufficient commonalities are experienced by Ex-asp to evoke talk of a 'military identity' and a preference to engage with those who also embrace that identity. However, we would wish to raise the issue that if the military identity is associated with hegemonic masculinity, re-engagement with it, in the context of seeking to prevent domestic abuse may have to be approached cautiously. Our own research suggests that military hierarchies and relationships may be recreated when Ex-asp meet. Previous research has identified a tendency for relationships to become enacted in accordance to standards set down during military careers when Ex-asp reconnect with their peers (Caddick et al., 2015). This could be associated with many positives, but is also associated with challenges not least of which would be to look beyond what might be normative in military relationships (e.g. non-disclosure) and to reconnect with a form of masculinity (cultivated for the purposes of engaging in conflict) in a way that reduces the potential for abuse in intimate relationships.

In prison settings, therefore, harnessing the potential of the Ex-asp identity may require more than simply co-locating Ex-asp on particular wings. In probation settings it may involve more than simply delegating interventions to peers or generalist Ex-asp affiliated service providers. This is because addressing some forms of offending behaviour by Ex-asp requires not a reconstruction but first a thorough deconstruction of the gendered nature of the military identity. Accordingly, whilst engaging with peers may be preferred, such peers would need to be trained to understand the deeper complexities and gendered nature of military service and how re-engagement with a military identity (by themselves and others) might be both helpful and problematic in terms of addressing domestic abuse.

It would be a matter of some regret were our paper to be used to callously dismiss any suggestion that situational factors might lie behind some instances of domestic abuse by Ex-asp. Moreover were it to be referenced to invalidate claims that military experience might impact on offending behaviour or provide a useful perspective when engaging with Ex-asp. Conversely we intend our comments to encourage greater reflexivity in instances where a perpetrator of domestic abuse has a service history. Moreover, we intend to promote greater introspection about the advantages and challenges associated with developing specific peer-led services for Ex-asp. It is manifestly problematic if accounts of offending can, simultaneously, identify offending behaviour with holding onto and losing a military identity, and then identify the solution as simply re-engaging with an unreconstituted identity. Interestingly, some recent research into Ex-asp specific service provision has highlighted the importance of helping Ex-asp develop "alternative military-linked identities" (albeit, in this particular

case, how the gendered nature of military life was explored is not considered) (Albertson et al. 2017, p.69).

Our research suggests the potential for offering peer-led services to Ex-asp and their families at higher risk of domestic abuse should be explored. Domestic abuse presents as a problem that might be hidden but in need to addressing amongst Ex-asp. However, we argue that insight into gender based domestic abuse may not readily intersect with and derive from military experience. Therefore, specific peer led services should be developed cautiously. In a range of recovery contexts, the employment of peers to work with those receiving services has been promoted because it has been assumed to be linked to improved engagement and outcomes (Gordon and Bradstreet, 2015). However, the most recent Cochrane review of the effects of cultural competence on therapeutic outcomes for a range for service users has failed to show strong evidence that this improved outcomes (Meyer et al., 2016). Conversely, in probation and prison settings, staff without service histories might be helped to develop 'cultural competency' around military service. Thus specific peer led services might complement rather than replace existing criminal justice provision.

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