

Hierarchies of wounding: Media framings of ‘combat’ and ‘non-combat’ injury

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Abstract

In this article, we examine the representational practices of British newspapers in relation to forms of military injury. Using critical discourse analysis, we studied the reporting of injuries sustained by military personnel during the height of the UK's war in Afghanistan in 2009 – and a comparison period five years later – and concluded that representations of injured personnel differed substantially between articles reporting on 'combat' and 'non-combat' injuries. We argue that the different reporting frames work to construct a moral separation of injuries into 'heroic' (combat) and 'non-heroic' (non-combat) forms. The consequences of this hierarchisation of injury, we suggest, include the reification of 'combat' as an idealized form of masculine violence, the privileging of some soldiers and veterans over others as exemplars of national heroism, and elision of the day-to-day realities of military injury from public consciousness. Findings are discussed in relation to broader consequences for understanding heroism and the military.

Keywords: heroism; military injury; Afghanistan; critical discourse analysis

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Wounded bodies confront societies with the damage of war. They make war real, visceral, and concrete to publics who are often far removed from the violence itself. But how this confrontation takes place and what the consequences of it might be depends to a large extent on how injured soldiers and veterans are framed in the media reports of their injuries. The consequences of media framing for understanding war, conflict, and soldiers/veterans are rarely benign. For instance, the media plays a key role in both generating and amplifying the heroic rhetoric which sticks to soldiers and veterans during times of war (Kelly 2013; McCartney 2011; Woodward et al. 2009), and which facilitates a generalised atmosphere of sympathy, support and patriotism towards the state and the military (Dawney 2018; Stahl 2009). Another important effect – one unexamined by prior research – may be the obstruction from view of other ‘types’ of military injury, such as those resulting from the preparation for war and routine military training and activity. Military life and training carries with it a risk of injury, even death, which often fails to register during discussions about war and its injurious potential. In this paper, we critically examine news media reports of injured soldiers and veterans in order to explore the existence of a ‘hierarchy of wounding’ in terms of the injuries caused by war and military activity. Our purpose is to draw attention to the possible effects of such a hierarchy on commonplace assumptions about injured soldiers and veterans, and the political meanings their stories are used to reinforce¹.

¹ Throughout, we aim for precise usage of the terms ‘soldier’ and ‘veteran’, with ‘soldier’ referring to active service members and ‘veteran’ referring to those no longer serving. Analytically, our interest is in hierarchies constructed across *both* categories, though it is important to distinguish between them, not least because wounding is often (though not always) an experience that results in a soldier exiting the military and becoming a veteran. Furthermore, whilst recognising that not all service members are ‘soldiers’ (e.g., sailors, airmen/women), the media reports we examine refer almost exclusively to soldiers, and we thus adopt this term throughout for consistency.

The figure of the injured soldier/veteran evokes powerful sentiments in the national press and in popular culture (Dawney 2018). It is an emotive and politicised image to which a variety of meanings are often attached. Invariably, such meanings include gendered notions of military heroism. Heroic portrayals of soldiers and veterans abound in the media. In contemporary Britain, the term ‘hero’ indeed remains firmly attached to the British Armed Forces (McCartney 2011). In particular, heroic status is readily attributed to those deemed to have ‘given the most’; those who become seriously injured or disabled as a result of their service. Yet, they are also portrayed as the victims of wartime experience or of government or Ministry of Defence callousness and incompetence (McCartney 2011). These are ‘vulnerable heroes’ (Woodward et al 2009), for whom public anxieties about war and the consequences of military violence have created a narrative of victimhood (McCartney 2011; Woodward et al 2009). Further still, injured soldiers and veterans may become powerful symbols of national pride, honour, and sacrifice, with themes of patriotism and triumph over adversity fused with their public stories (Batts & Andrews 2011; Grabham 2009; Kelly 2013).

The notion of a ‘hierarchy of wounding’ – that some injuries might be considered more worthy and respectable depending on the manner in which they were sustained – becomes relevant and important when we consider the political work undertaken by the category of ‘combat’. In their critique of combat and the ‘heroic soldier myth’, Millar and Tidy (2017) argue that combat should not be treated as a common-sense empirical category; as a ‘thing’ that simply ‘is’. Instead, combat should be understood as a socially constructed concept packed full of assumptions concerning “socially valued masculinity, civil–military relations, violence, physical geographies, and the state” (p. 147). Combat is imagined as an idealised form of violence that produces a socially valorised masculinity through its association with risk, sacrifice, and violence on behalf of the nation-state. Being associated

with combat accords privileges (Tidy 2016), such as the accrual of symbolic and cultural capital both within and beyond the military institution (Cooper et al 2018).

Likewise, hierarchisation implies that greater value is/ought to be attached to particular persons (and forms of loss) over others. Such is clear from work exploring the hierarchisation of grief; whereby, for instance, Western lives are imagined as inherently more ‘grievable’ than non-Western lives (Butler 2010), and dead female soldiers are remembered differently than dead male ones because their identities *as* soldiers cannot be as readily acknowledged (Millar 2015). Hierarchies of grief enable the possibility of war: if some lives are more expendable than others – such as the lives of military personnel – these lives may be risked in order to save other lives (Zehfuss 2009). In this paper, we examine how hierarchisation may operate in other ways, specifically in shaping the meaning of military injury and personhood in ways that fundamentally alter our conception of war’s injurious capability (see, e.g., Scarry 1985). Indeed, if certain forms of bodily injury and loss are privileged over others – rendering them morally or conceptually superior forms – then a willingness to accept or even celebrate such injuries becomes part of the fabric of war as we understand it.

This article builds on previous research into the media framings of injured soldiers/veterans (e.g., Cree & Caddick 2019; Dawney 2018; Woodward et al 2009), as well as other work which deconstructs the idealised fantasy of ‘combat’ and the work it performs in sustaining normative attitudes toward violence and conflict (Millar & Tidy 2017). What, we ask, does the notion of ‘combat injury’ do to our understanding of injured soldiers/veterans’ status and deservingness in comparison with other military personnel – and, indeed, other people – who experience injury and disability as a result of their occupation? Furthermore, how might media discourse about combat injury influence our comprehension of the wars that produced these injuries? Using critical discourse analysis

(CDA), we examine historical media discourses used to represent soldiers and veterans injured during the UK's war in Afghanistan, and ask whether certain soldiers/veterans with particular kinds of injuries are predominantly thrust into the role of national heroes. We consider what effects the selective use of heroic discourse might have on injured soldiers/veterans, and on the possibilities for meaning making in connection to the war in Afghanistan. A critical examination of media discourse about injured soldiers and veterans helps to reveal taken-for-granted assumptions about the military and its operations, and thus a critique of discourse has relevance and importance for media, war and conflict studies.

Risking life and limb

Before describing our approach to undertaking this research, it is worth reflecting on the official categorisation of military death and injury, as this may help to constitute the hierarchisation we explore and critique. Defence Statistics² provides records of the numbers of British military personnel injured by various means and in various locations since the war in Afghanistan began in 2001. These records classify injuries sustained by personnel as 'battle injuries' and 'non-battle injuries'. Battle injuries are defined by the Ministry of Defence (MoD) as "those wounded as a result of hostile action. This includes injuries sustained whilst avoiding direct or indirect fire"³. Battle injuries are further subdivided into three broad categories: explosions (mines and improvised explosive devices), small arms fire (such as gunshot wounds and rocket propelled grenades), and 'other battle injuries'. Non-battle injuries are defined as "any injury that is not caused by a hostile act and includes any accidental injuries" (ibid.), though with each of these definitions it is unclear as to exactly how the line between a hostile and non-hostile act is drawn. Non-battle injuries are said to

² Replacing the former 'Defence Analytical Services and Advice' (DASA) in 2013, Defence Statistics is the Ministry of Defence's outlet for national and official statistics on a wide range of defence-related topics.

³ 'Types of Injuries Sustained by UK Service Personnel on Op HERRICK in Afghanistan', available online: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/502888/20160223_Afghanistan_Types_of_Injuries_Official_Statistic_Final_OS.pdf

include sports injuries, road traffic accidents, climatic injuries, and slips, trips and falls, though the distinction is blurred by the categorisation of some injuries caused by explosives and small arms fire as ‘non-battle injuries’ if, for instance, they were caused by negligent discharge of a weapon.

Battle injuries, particularly those caused by explosives, are often medically more complex than non-battle injuries, and include a larger number of amputations. MoD figures indicate that 275 British military personnel suffered one or more limb amputations in Afghanistan between 2006 and 2014⁴. These are among the most visible and traumatic injuries sustained during military service, and make up a number of the 2201 personnel admitted to the Field Hospital in Camp Bastion for battle injuries during this period. A further 2019 personnel were admitted to the Field Hospital during operations as a result of non-battle injuries including crushing accidents, negligent small arms fire, slips, trips and falls, and other ‘non-combat’ causes. This amounted to almost half of the Field Hospital admissions during the same period⁵. Aside from operational casualties, Defence Statistics also reveals that in 2014-2015 alone, there were 2985 major or serious injury⁶ or ill health incidents sustained by UK Armed Forces personnel, the majority of which had causes recorded as military training and exercises, sport and recreation, or normal duties⁷. As such, there can be many causes of serious injury connected to service in the military, not all of which result from activities traditionally considered as ‘combat’. Furthermore, whilst the focus of this

⁴ ‘Quarterly Afghanistan and Iraq amputation statistics 7 October 2001 – 30 June 2015’, available online: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/449400/AnnexA_20150730_DAY-RELEASE_Quarterly_Afghanistan_Iraq_Amputation_Statistics.pdf

⁵ ‘Types of Injuries Sustained by UK Service Personnel on Op HERRICK in Afghanistan’

⁶ With ‘major’ defined as those which could result in death or in hospitalisation for more than 24 hours and ‘serious’ defined as those not classified as major but which could result in a person being unable to perform their normal duties for a period of more than 7 days.

⁷ ‘MOD Health and Safety Statistics: Annual Summary & Trends Over Time 2010/11 - 2014/15’, available online: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/471875/20150803_MOD_Health_and_Safety_Annual_Report_14-15_O.pdf

paper is on injuries rather than military fatalities, it is worth emphasising that deployment to a warzone is not the only form of military activity which carries a risk of death. Road traffic accidents as well as heat exhaustion during summer training exercises⁸ have also caused the deaths of some soldiers, not to mention the continuing controversy surrounding events at Deepcut Barracks in Surrey and questions over the deaths of young soldiers⁹. Deaths associated with additional stressors and poor mental health should also not be overlooked, for the 20-year period 1999-2018, 310 suicides occurred among UK regular Armed Forces personnel¹⁰.

Media discourse and injured veterans

This paper follows several examples (Cree & Caddick 2019; Kelly, 2013; McCartney, 2011; Woodward et al., 2009) in turning critical attention toward media discourses about war and injury. Media discourses are worthy of critical attention because, as McGannon et al. (2016) point out, they construct and reinforce powerful meanings about particular topics or social groups (such as injured soldiers/veterans). Following Fairclough (2010), we understand discourse as language use invested by ideology, with language being a material form of ideology. The production and diffusion of media texts (such as newspaper articles) constitutes a reproduction of ideology, since these texts are, as Kelly (2013: 725) puts it, “inescapably connected to particular social, political and historical power relations”. The operation of discourse is thereby tied to power and hegemonic struggle, with the aim of critical discourse analysis being to locate discourse within wider ideological systems and to

⁸ ‘MoD faces questions over soldier’s death after Brecon Beacons exercise’, article in *The Guardian* UK newspaper, available online: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/jul/20/soldier-dies-on-training-exercise-in-brecon-beacons-mod-says>

⁹ ‘Deepcut inquest: Father of private found dead was warned by soldiers ‘it could be one of us next’, online article by *Sky News*, available online: <https://news.sky.com/story/deepcut-inquest-father-of-private-found-dead-was-warned-by-soldiers-it-could-be-one-of-us-next-11649251>

¹⁰ ‘Suicides in the UK Regular Armed Forces: Annual Summary and Trends Over Time 1 January 1984 to 31 December 2018’, available online: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/789799/20190328_UK_AF_Suicide_National_Statistic_2019_O.pdf

unravel the power relations inherent within language use. Relatedly, we hold the role of the media – specifically the British press – to be *primarily* that of publicist (Thussu & Freeman 2003), for the most part privileging official versions of conflict. That is, we adopt a critical perspective which views the media as ideologically laden – a site for the reproduction of meaning and ideology (McGannon et al. 2016). During conflict, media narratives are “powerful conduits between government and citizen” (Kelly 2013: 724), whereby media operate under ideological constraints which bind them to a predominantly ‘military friendly’ frame of reporting.

Closely related to the concept of discourse, in this paper we also draw attention to the ‘discursive formations’ around war, soldiers/veterans, injury and disability. A discursive formation helps to define the accepted or acceptable ways of talking about a subject and “governs the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about” (Hall, 1997; p. 44). For example, as Kelly (2013) argues in relation to the ‘hero-fication’ of British militarism:

The discursive formation circumscribes acceptable and unacceptable discussion of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts, juxtaposing ‘hero’ with ‘extremist’ in an ideological hierarchical dualism . . . revealing a powerful, if implicit, hierarchy of morality that articulates for us the virtuous and heroic British soldier to be juxtaposed alongside evil insurgents. (p. 724)

With particular relevance to the arguments we advance in this paper, discourses and discursive formations are linked to wider forms of power, ideology and social interest (Foucault 1978). Importantly for studies of media, war and conflict, critical discourse analysis thereby enables powerful ideologies (e.g., patriarchy, militarism) to be deconstructed and critiqued by examining ideologically invested modes of explaining and interpreting. For

instance, Stahl (2009) shows how the discursive formation ‘support the troops’ embeds ideological support for war by deflecting criticisms of the wars in which these troops are fighting. Highlighting the effects of this discursive formation in the social and political arena, Stahl (2009) argues that ‘support the troops’ rhetoric is used as a “strategic bludgeon to suppress dissent and guarantee that war opponents lose any debate” (p. 535). In this paper then, we call attention not only to discourses and their immediate communicative effects, but also the wider structures of power and influence from which these discourses emerge and which they help to reinforce and maintain.

Methods

To identify core discourses being used to represent injured soldiers and veterans in the media, we analysed a sample of British newspaper articles taken from two distinct time periods during the UK’s war in Afghanistan. Following Woodward et al. (2009), the sample included a broad range of newspapers representing a spread of political views and opinions. The papers we searched included: *The Daily Mirror*, *The Sun*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Scotsman*, *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Times*, *The Daily Telegraph* and Sunday sister papers including *The Mail on Sunday*, *The Sunday Mirror*, *The News of the World*, *The Sunday Telegraph*, *The Sunday Times*, *The Independent on Sunday*, *Scotland on Sunday*, *The Observer*. Having identified these newspapers as our source material for stories on injured soldiers and veterans, we then selected two sampling frames within which to search them. The first sample included the six months from April to September 2009, which coincided with the peak of British casualties in Afghanistan. It was during this period, the summer of 2009, that one of the UK Armed Forces’ largest offensive operations against the Taliban (Operation Panther’s Claw) took place, and consequently was a time when there was a high volume of media output relating to injured soldiers/veterans. The second sample included the six months from April to September 2014, and was chosen as a comparison period during

which the UK's military operations in Afghanistan were drawing to a close and the media were beginning to assess the costs of the war for the UK Armed Forces. This period also included the build up to the first Invictus Games event – an international Paralympic-style sports event created by the Duke of Sussex, Prince Harry, for wounded, injured or sick military personnel and veterans.

The archives of our selected newspapers were searched within the two sample periods using the database ProQuest Newsstand. Opting initially for an inclusive search strategy, we used the following broad search terms to identify all potentially relevant articles: (“Veteran*” OR “Soldier*”) AND (Injur* OR Wound*). This search resulted in 3750 initial hits. Newspaper titles were then divided up among the study team and screened for relevant articles using the following two criteria. Firstly, the substantive content of the article must be related to injured soldiers or veterans (or war in general, with specific mention of injured soldiers/veterans), and secondly, articles which focused on soldiers killed in action (a different category of heroic discourse which was not the focus of this study), or were not military-focused (e.g., articles relating to injured ‘veteran’ athletes) were screened out. The final sample consisted of 595 relevant articles across the two sample frames. All articles were transferred to the qualitative software package NVIVO to assist with the analysis process.

To conduct the analysis, we began by ‘coding’ each of the articles we identified. This initial phase of the analysis involved highlighting individual ‘meaning units’ (words, phrases, and/or passages of text) and assigning ‘codes’ or themes (e.g., ‘anger at military operations overseas’) which describe the content of the text. As part of this coding process, we also aimed to identify linguistic categories (e.g., ‘heroes’, ‘incompetent ministers’) and rhetorical strategies (e.g., ‘scandal-isation’, ‘heroes deserve better’) that were used to convey meanings about injured soldiers and veterans (McGannon et al., 2016). Given the high volume of articles identified, the coding process was divided among the study team by allocating a

portion of the newspaper articles. Several project meetings, as well as informal discussions, among the study team helped to generate consistency in terms of the coding principles applied (e.g., what constituted a meaning unit or rhetorical strategy, and what themes or codes were recurring throughout the analysis). During the next phase of analysis, themes were refined into overarching discourses (e.g., ‘heroic combat injury’) as we identified patterns, core meanings and categories across the articles. Throughout the analysis, our focus was on critiquing and *denaturalising* the discourses used to represent injured soldiers and veterans. As Fairclough (2010) argued, “naturalisation gives to particular ideological representations the status of common sense”, thereby making these representations opaque and not visible *as* ideology (p. 44). As such, the findings we present below are intended to shed light on taken-for-granted meanings by illustrating the content (i.e., what was said) and the process (i.e., how it was presented) of news features (McGannon & Spence, 2012).

Framing heroes and non-heroes

The vast majority of articles we identified focused, unsurprisingly, on soldiers injured during ‘combat’, as conventionally understood. In the context of intensive overseas operations by UK Armed Forces, the fact that our national newspapers would focus on injuries sustained as a result of these conflicts is, by itself, unremarkable. More important, from our perspective, was the collective image of injured soldiers and veterans created by the media focus, and the meanings created and reinforced by the heroic discourses being circulated. Within the articles (47 out of 595) which either focused on or included some reference to soldiers injured through means other than ‘combat’, a different discursive formation was evident compared with articles reporting on ‘combat injuries’. This distinction was one of factual reporting of non-combat injuries, compared with drama, horror, and heroism in relation to combat injury. Consider, for example, the following two extracts reporting ‘non-combat’ injuries:

A YOUNG army officer is in a critical condition after being caught in the backblast from a rocket fired during training. Lieutenant Kenneth Sheehan, 29, was injured at 11.30pm on Wednesday while working as a safety supervisor in a night-firing exercise at Kilworth camp in Cork. (Sherry, *Daily Mail* 2009)

ONE of the Queen's Royal Guards was seriously injured in a car crash near Balmoral yesterday. The soldier suffered a punctured lung after three Army Land Rovers were involved in a collision four miles east of the royal castle in Aberdeenshire. (Tolmie, *Daily Mail* 2009)

These examples may be contrasted with the following two extracts depicting injuries that occurred during ‘combat’:

AN Army medic who was hurt by shrapnel during a Taliban attack in Afghanistan ignored her injuries to treat seven colleagues who were badly wounded in the ambush. . . . Lance Corporal Clarke then refused to be airlifted with her wounded comrades because she wanted to be on hand for the rest of her unit as they returned to base. (Levy, *Daily Mail* 2009)

THE past days have seen two harrowing portraits of courage. Yesterday we carried the image of Fusilier Thomas James, who was horrifyingly injured in an explosion in Afghanistan, attending the funeral of a comrade who died in the same attack. Fusilier Thomas was in a wheelchair, covered in bandages, yet as he was wheeled by another soldier to pay his last respects he evoked a heroic dignity, giving the lie to the ever more strident denigration of Britain's young people. (Daily Mail 2009)

Evident in the former examples is a discursive formation based around straightforwardly or ‘factually’ reporting the incident that has taken place. The severity of the injuries in each case appear to make the incidents newsworthy, yet the intention of the articles seems geared

toward simply communicating the details of what happened. The first example later includes mention of a “full investigation” into the circumstances of the accident, giving perhaps some indication of culpability or liability to be explored. Generally speaking, however, reports of ‘non-combat’ injuries were brief, bland, and factual. This is in marked contrast to the latter examples, which present a highly charged, sensationalised and emotive narrative rendering of combat injury. In such cases, injuries become ‘horrificing’ or ‘harrowing’, and soldiers bear them with courage and dignity. The discursive formation invites us to feel proud of the soldiers and their selfless actions, presented to us as shining examples of “Britain’s young people” in a manner absent from the former examples. That these examples all occur in the same national newspaper (*The Daily Mail*) illustrates something of the consistency with which these separate frames of reporting were maintained.

One of the above extracts is also a rare example of heroic qualities being afforded to a female soldier; qualities which in the rest of our sample were associated almost exclusively with male soldiers and veterans. That her injuries were sustained during *combat* partially enables her to be represented using the heroic discourse usually reserved for men, but also – we may presume – because this episode features a female soldier engaged in the more gender-conforming role of *saving* fellow soldiers rather than *killing* enemy combatants, the dominant trope of the male warrior remains intact (Millar 2015; Millar & Tidy 2017). Despite the asynchronous reference to female courage and heroism, the article – ‘Wounded medic Sally saves seven in Afghan ambush’ – illustrates several features common to the articles reporting on combat injuries. It is longer, for example, than the ‘non-combat’ articles, and includes quotes from family members (“She’s a gutsy, brave girl and always has been”) reflecting on the soldier’s heroic actions. The Ministry of Defence also comment, “Lance Corporal Clarke's actions demonstrated the sort of bravery and stoicism for which the British

Army is rightly renowned”, appearing thereby to make the most of an opportunity for positive press.

Another feature worth highlighting is that both the ‘non-combat’ and ‘combat’ extracts above include examples of injuries sustained as a direct result of explosive weaponry. However, that the latter took place in a war zone and was the result of a ‘hostile act’ by the enemy seems to grant the episode a particular (“horrifying”) meaning that is lacking from the former example. Thus there is an apparent distinction between war on one hand, and the ‘mere’ preparation for it on the other, whereby warfighting activity is automatically rendered heroic while training is portrayed as routine, regardless of the relative practical or tactical significance of these activities. Across our sample, a core discourse of military heroism was routinely used to represent soldiers injured in combat. As other studies focusing on media reports of war have demonstrated, heroism seems to be the only discourse around which stories of ‘combat’-injured personnel can circulate (Woodward et al., 2009).

Moral separation of injury forms

Within the limited coverage of ‘non-combat’ injured soldiers and veterans, we found a number of articles which included comparisons of soldiers injured through different means. These articles appeared to construct separate moral categories for combat and non-combat injury, with ‘combat injuries’ deemed more honourable, respectable, and of greater moral worth than ‘non-combat’ injuries. The construction of separate moral categories of injury is evident in the following extracts:

SOLDIERS wounded in combat are to get higher pay-outs after ministers signalled a full-scale retreat from the failing compensation scheme. Defence ministers have ordered that those who risk their lives in the front line must get more than servicemen hurt in training exercises. A source said: 'At the moment, if you break a leg you get paid according to the injury, regardless of whether it is in combat or training. 'We

want the review to look at how we can introduce an element that ensures people who were wounded in combat get more.' (Shipman, *Daily Mail* 2009)

INJURED while training in Iraq, a British police officer demands £700,000 compensation -- for a cut head and its consequences. An incredible £548,000 more than was offered to a full-time soldier who lost both legs and suffered major brain injuries in a landmine blast. (Anon, *News of the World* 2009)

The above articles are situated in the context of a public row which broke out in 2009 over the Armed Forces Compensation Scheme (AFCS)¹¹; a row which many of the articles in the 2009 sample contributed to. Whilst the AFCS now pays out to claimants based on the severity of injury (not by mode of occurrence), at the time the government and the Ministry of Defence came under intense pressure to abandon attempts to limit compensation payouts to personnel injured in action against the Taliban, and to increase the size of the payouts they offered. The soldiers at the centre of this row were represented by a dominant discourse of 'the betrayed hero'. This was a subject position (i.e., a location within a discourse, or position imbued with particular meanings; see Davies & Harré, 1990) that was readily ascribed to 'combat'-injured soldiers and veterans but which appeared silent or agnostic with regard to personnel injured in training or by other 'non-combat' means. This subject position forms part of the wider discursive formation – evident across our sample – which constructed 'combat' injuries as not only more honourable and respectable, but also more *compensable* than 'non-combat' injuries. Indeed, we noted examples of moral outrage (such as the latter example titled "Insult to our heroes") over cases where personnel injured away from the front line were reported to have received higher payouts than others injured during 'combat' operations.

¹¹ The AFCS is the Ministry of Defence's mechanism for providing financial compensation to soldiers and veterans injured as a result of their service.

Besides the ‘outrageous’ genre of stories, there were also more trivial or light-hearted examples which nonetheless worked to maintain a moral separation between ‘combat’ and ‘non-combat’ injury:

A FALKLANDS war veteran had his right leg amputated above the knee -- after stubbing his toe. Ex-paratrooper Eric Baker, 67, was prescribed antibiotics after banging the digit on his bed. But he developed gangrene, needed two ops, and is now in a wheelchair. (Sims, *The Sun* 2014)

The distinction here is subtle, but telling: the contrast between Baker’s wartime service and the trivialisation of the injury which led to amputation clearly marking the former as honourable and the latter absurd. This subtler form of distinguishing the moral worth of combat injuries also extended to more high-brow literary constructions, such as the following example from *The Independent* newspaper:

In yesterday's paper we carried a long report about army casualties in Afghanistan in which we said that "the number of British troops injured has soared - 57 were wounded in action in the first two weeks of July." So were they injured or were they wounded? I would argue that the military is the realm of the wounded. Injured is for the rest of us. A footballer who pulls a hamstring is injured, not wounded. A soldier blown up by the Taliban is wounded, not injured. (O’Hagan, *The Independent* 2009)

At issue in this piece is the explicit defence of the term ‘wounded’ as morally applicable only to the military, or specifically to soldiers “blown up by the Taliban”. Whilst this example could perhaps be considered a minor argument over linguistic propriety, it forms part of a nonetheless consistent construction of differential moral statuses of injury: soldiers may claim to be ‘wounded’, above and apart from “the rest of us”, merely ‘injured’.

Complicating the moral separation of injuries, we also noted one or two occasions whereby soldiers and veterans with ‘non-combat’ injuries were drawn into the same heroic

discourses as their ‘combat’-injured peers. In such cases, the discursive frames governing the reporting of military injury appeared to be relaxed in order to promote a more general heroic discourse linked to ideals of service, as in the following example:

A ROYAL Marine Commando who survived three tours of Afghanistan unscathed lost a leg helping the victims of a motorway crash. Colour Sergeant Lee Spencer, 45, had gone to the aid of a vehicle that had smashed into the central reservation of the M3 at night. He made sure the driver and passengers were unhurt before trying to warn oncoming drivers of the danger using a torch. But an Audi failed to stop and ploughed into the wreckage. Father of two C/Sgt Spencer was standing more than 200ft away but the impact tore the BMW's engine free and sent it flying across several lanes and on to him. He remained conscious just long enough to tell bystanders how to tie a tourniquet around his leg before waking up in hospital to be told his limb needed to be amputated. (Salkeld, *Daily Mail* 2014)

At first glance, this example may appear to highlight an inconsistency in the reporting frames which typically manage the presentation of ‘combat’ and ‘non-combat’ injury. The injury was unrelated to combat, yet heroic framings (e.g. dramatic tension and the reporting of selfless and heroic actions) are clearly in evidence. Arguably, however, it is the reference to the Marine’s combat experience which makes the piece ‘work’ as an ironic example of duty, courage and sacrifice. Indeed, a quote from C/Sgt Spencer’s wife reinforces the centrality of his combat experience: “He's served in Afghanistan three times, as well as tours in Northern Ireland and Iraq. He's served his country. He comes back unscathed from war, and then loses his leg on leave while helping someone. He just amazes me.” A potential slippage in the moral separation of injury forms is therefore recovered by making the self-sacrificing gesturing of risking life and limb to help others continuous with combat experience, and, as such, especially demonstrative of moral excellence.

What is it about ‘combat’ that makes it seem so natural, so obvious that people injured during this particular form of military activity are more deserving of honour, respect and compensation for their injuries? Following Millar and Tidy (2017), we suggest this centrally relates to the elevation of ‘combat’ as a “particular imagined space of idealized violence” (p. 148), along with the tethering of combat to notions of heroic masculinity. As part of the normative imagination that makes ‘combat’ a morally superior activity to ‘training’ (for example), the mythologised figure of the heroic soldier is constructed, in whom resides the ideal and fantasy of the true and brave warrior selflessly placing himself in harm’s way on behalf of the nation (Millar & Tidy 2017). This mythologised figure is “masculinity-defining” (Millar & Tidy 2017: 142), in the sense that other iterations of masculinity are measured against the idealised combat soldier. Combat and masculinity can thus be said to be *co-constitutive*, in that they shape and define each other in the normative imagination of war and violence. This abundance of meaning invested in the notion of ‘combat’ thus seems to underpin the moral separation of injury forms, and provides the basis for a hierarchy of wounding.

Injurious ideologies?

Are injuries sustained in the theatre of war always considered ‘heroic’? Only 10-20% of the military is engaged in ‘teeth arms’ combat roles, with the majority functioning to support front line troops and to enhance their combat capability. However, the asymmetric nature of conflict in places like Afghanistan meant that all personnel were – to some degree – at risk of encountering hostile threats, whether mortar rounds aimed over the walls of Camp Bastion, or the existential threat of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) – one of the most prominent causes of serious injury during the UK’s war in Afghanistan. Within the broader theatre of the Afghanistan conflict, service personnel were also wounded by means other than ‘hostile’ action: road traffic accidents, accidental discharge of weapons, training accidents, and para-

suicidal attempts constituted a significant proportion of those injured on active service. The circumstances of these injuries and how they were framed is important in determining whether or not they are perceived as 'heroic'.

Underpinning the moral separation of injuries into 'ordinary' and 'heroic', we identified three interlocking or interwoven ideological threads consisting of militarism, patriotism, and heroic masculinity. Far from being abstract notions, part of a nebulous political machinery which somehow informed the media's reporting on injured soldiers and veterans, we suggest that each of these threads can be observed in the articles we searched. Just as ideology *invests* and *infuses* language (Fairclough 2010), the interlocking ideologies of militarism, patriotism, and heroic masculinity directly shape, and are also reproduced by, the words and phrases through which injured soldiers' stories are communicated. Moreover, these ideologies are the fuel of the heroic discourses which makes the telling of these soldiers' stories possible. In this section, we aim to *denaturalise* the moral separation of military injuries based on their mode of occurrence, and to highlight what the social implications of this separation might be.

Kelly (2013) warns that the UK has undergone a 'hero-fication' of militarism throughout the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In other words, the processes of normalizing and legitimizing war in society increasingly revolved around celebrating the heroic actions and qualities of British military personnel. It is this 'hero-fication' of militarism, articulated with and through the interlocking discourses of patriotism and heroic masculinity, which we observed in the newspaper coverage of injured personnel:

It is the wounded men's refusal to succumb that plays a large part in their rehabilitation. One only need spend a short while at Headley Court to marvel at their positive attitude as they strive to overcome their disabilities." "The term "hero" can be

over-used, with most servicemen and women simply believing they are doing the job they have been trained and paid to do. But one can identify a very special quality that bubbles to the surface when the chips are down. We see it in our wounded, and we see it on deployment when times become fraught. Bound by a strong leadership ethos at every level, but especially junior command, it is impressive to witness.” “But other factors matter too. The importance of knowing that our efforts are appreciated at home cannot be overstated. Those in Afghanistan accept the risk, yet can deal with it more easily when confident they have the backing of the public in whose name they act.” (Messenger, *The Times* 2009)

Whilst combat injuries are not referred to explicitly in this extract, they are implicit in the use of the term ‘wounded’ as opposed to ‘injured’ (as noted above), and by invoking the operational theatre of Afghanistan. It is also notable how the term ‘hero’, despite its cautious deployment, is linked strongly to the very special (masculine) qualities of resilience and courage in the face of profound adversity (evoked by the ‘chips are down’ metaphor). The discursive formation of men’s ‘refusal to succumb’ helps to solidify the “relationship between combat and normative idealizations of socially valorized masculinity, as articulated within the context of the military” (Millar & Tidy, 2017; p. 148). The act of rehabilitation itself thus becomes integral to the myth of the masculine warrior hero. Completing the discursive linkage of militarism, heroic masculinity, and patriotism, this extract also conveys patriotic support from the public as a core element both of warrior recovery and military success. The coverage reproduces what Wool (2015), writing in the US context, refers to as a ‘moral economy of sacrifice’ revolving around the injured soldiers rehabilitating at Walter Reed Army Medical Centre. Wool regards this moral economy as framed by a complex discursive landscape of masculinity, patriotism, and the iconicity of combat injury as a ‘sacrifice’ for the good of the mission and the good of the nation (see also Açıksöz, 2012).

The notion of sacrifice in turn creates a moral debt on the part of those for whom the sacrifice was allegedly made; that is, the civilian populace who are encouraged to believe their freedoms are defended. One key manifestation of this moral economy of sacrifice is the patriotic call to “support the troops”, a discourse which has been robustly critiqued elsewhere for the ways in which it elides both criticism of war and the treatment of veterans (e.g., Gross & Weiss, 2014; Kelly, 2013; Stahl, 2009) and which is strongly evident in the above extract.

Across the two sample frames we explored (2009 and 2014), we also observed what might be considered two distinct ‘moments’ in the ideological progression of British militarism (or, at least, in the ideological representation of wounded veterans). As noted above, the 2009 articles were situated in the midst of a public outcry over compensation payouts to injured soldiers and veterans. Relatedly, there was mounting anger in the press about the alleged underfunding of the war in Afghanistan (e.g., “204 dead heroes and one clueless minister”¹²), and a concurrent ‘militarisation offensive’ (Dixon 2018), during which elite actors tried (but largely failed) to win support for the Afghanistan conflict. As Dixon (2018: 1) explains, the militarisation offensive “was launched in 2006 by a loose and diverse group of politicians, military chiefs, newspapers and pressure groups to generate support for the ‘good war’ in Afghanistan and to repair the damage caused to the military’s reputation by the ‘bad war’ in Iraq”. It was in this febrile atmosphere that injured veterans were being hailed as ‘betrayed heroes’, and much anger was directed toward the government on their behalf.

By 2014, however, the mood appeared to have shifted. Troops were no longer being injured at such high rates, and the Invictus Games were being launched by Prince Harry as a vehicle for rehabilitating injured veterans through Paralympic-style sporting competition.

¹² Headline in *The Daily Mail*, 17 August 2009

With the war in Afghanistan winding down (for Britain), and the militarisation offence apparently less urgent, the tone of the coverage overall appeared more celebratory. Indeed, one headline dubbed the Invictus Games “A celebration of sacrifice and fighting spirit” (Davies, *The Telegraph* 2014). Coverage of the Games nonetheless offered a fervent ideological construction of injured veterans as national icons and beacons of heroic masculinity:

When para-powerlifter Micky Yule hoists almost three times his bodyweight from his neck to high above his bulging torso tonight, Scotland will stand as one with him. It takes only one look at this tattooed, muscular para-powerlifter with two prosthetic limbs to understand why the former explosives expert is already a national treasure, even before his first major event. He looks forged from the steel of Scotland's shipyards. A staff sergeant in the Royal Engineers, the 35-year-old was serving in Afghanistan just over four years ago on a mission to clear improvised explosive devices. Until he stepped on one. (Davies, *The Telegraph* 2014)

Ricky Fergusson has a problem not normally associated with a man who has lost both legs below the knee, five fingers and his left eye: he does not know which sport to do. Since being blown up in 2010, he has taken up sprinting, cycling and skiing. Corporal Fergusson, 28, of 4 Battalion, The Rifles, is considering the 100m, 200m and 400m. (Low, *The Times* 2014)

In the first of these extracts, an image is constructed – in somewhat orgasmic, almost parodied language – of an inspirational national (super)hero; a figure through whom all three of the ideologies of militarism, patriotism, and heroic masculinity are brought symbolically into coherence. Indeed, as Cree and Caddick (2019) point out, Invictus itself can be read as an attempt by the state to ‘manage’ the cultural meanings attached to wounded veterans by presenting them as triumphant warrior heroes. By offering a uniformly positive narrative of

recovery, *Invictus* and its coverage in the media shows the violence of war being redeemed and overcome, whilst obscuring other stories that tell of the continuing devastation wrought by military injury (Cree & Caddick 2019).

Hierarchisation of injury also takes on an additional dimension in such coverage, in that it is not simply the acquisition of an injury during combat which imbues superior moral personhood, but how a veteran *responds* to that injury is partly what constitutes their moral character. As demonstrated by the *Invictus* coverage we analysed, a resilient and defiant response to injury is especially privileged as unique and inspirational. In the extracts above, for instance, we note the emergence of a militarized disabled or hyper-abled ‘supercrip’ subject. As Schalk (2016; p. 79) suggested, supercrip iconography revolves around “representations of disabled people who are presented as extraordinary for doing something ordinary as well as representations of disabled people who are presented as extraordinary for doing something exceptional or rare”. The critique of the supercrip within critical disability studies (e.g., Silva & Howe 2012) offers another lens through which to view the notion of hierarchicalisation. Such criticism argues that supercrip iconography is an ableist phenomenon which casts a negative shadow over the lives of ‘ordinary’ disabled folk who cannot measure up to the inspirational stories and images of Paralympic athletes and other high-achieving disabled people. Such people are celebrated for having overcome the ‘tragedy’ of disability and achieved *in spite of* their condition. What we witness above is the traditional supercrip narrative hyper-charged with patriotic symbolism and inspiration.

Importantly, the military supercrip normalises and sanitises the bodily consequences of war and military injury, decoupling injury from its association with unpopular wars and linking it with the triumphal celebration of ‘human spirit’ we associate with the overcoming of disability. Indeed, far from constituting an avoidable and unacceptable cost of war, wounding is constructed as a challenge to be overcome, an opportunity to demonstrate

masculine grit and determination (Dawney 2018). At the hierarchy of wounding's apex, therefore, we find not simply 'combat'-injured veterans, but those who can stand publically as examples of triumph and overcoming. Meanwhile, the anger which earlier circulated in the media around their under-equipped and under-compensated involvement in foreign wars fades into the recesses of social memory, and the hegemonic ideals of service, patriotism, and military triumph are maintained.

Final reflections

Having identified empirical examples of a hierarchy of wounding, we offer some brief reflections upon its potential ideological and practical effects. Specifically, we question the logic of this distinction on the grounds that the primary purpose of a military is to wage war, and that the majority of activities undertaken by the military are ultimately contributing to this overall purpose. Therefore, *any* injury sustained through taking part in military activity is potentially a result of war, whether directly or as part of its preparation. By highlighting the potentially injurious nature of all forms of military activity, we seek to question the ideological moral separation of different forms of military injury based on whether or not they occurred as part of an activity collectively imagined as 'combat'. Any distinction between 'combat' and 'non-combat' injury, along with differential moral significance attached to these concepts, reproduces the common-sense notion of 'combat' that Millar and Tidy (2017) critique, and alongside this, the socially harmful expectation that combat is an activity which bestows moral virtue upon those who engage in it. Relatedly, we critique the implicit assumption that those injured in 'combat' are more *deserving* of social and charitable support on the basis of their injuries compared to others such as soldiers injured in training or, indeed, Afghan civilians injured as a result of Western military intervention.

Heroic representations also have the effect of obscuring some of the more inglorious day-to-day realities of injured veterans. Commenting on the disjuncture between injured

veterans' public portrayals and everyday lives, Feinstein (2015) notes that, "while labels such as "national heroes" and "most deserving citizens" place the *category* of veterans at the center of the normative order, the life circumstances of many *individual* veterans place them at the margins of society" (p. 4: emphasis original). Likewise, Açiksöz (2012) suggests that injured military veterans occupy an ambivalent social status: whereas their public profile as war heroes places them at the apex of cultural masculinity, their experience of disablement and encounters with a disabling social environment ironically leaves them, "violently expelled from the world of hegemonic masculinity" (p. 20). Indeed, our previous work (see Caddick et al. 2018) has confirmed the numerous struggles that injured veterans often encounter in their daily lives, including pain, immobility, unemployment and isolation, along with age-related decline as years of straining their injured bodies to carry on walking, working, and being productive take their toll. These are the long-term consequences of military injury which are hidden from public view once the media's spotlight disappears.

This paper contributes to scholarship on wounded veterans, military masculinities, and heroism (e.g., Caso 2017; Cree & Caddick 2019; Feinstein 2015; Kelly 2013; Millar & Tidy 2017) and on media representations of soldiers and veterans (e.g., McCartney, 2011; Woodward et al., 2009) by highlighting the moral separation of military injuries into the 'heroic' (combat) and 'non-heroic' (non-combat). This separation is achieved partly by the non-reporting of non-combat injuries, and partly by the discursive frames which govern the reporting of different types of injury, with a *factual* register used for reporting of non-combat injury and a *dramatic/heroic* register used for combat. We also highlight the political work undertaken by this moral separation of military injury. Firstly, it reinforces the valorisation of combat injury, and with it, combat itself as "an imagination of martial violence that is privileged, powerful, and strongly normative" (Millar & Tidy, 2017; p. 150). Combat thereby becomes reified as an idealized form of violence, a form held up as heroic and masculine,

indeed, a form that is *celebrated* (Millar & Tidy, 2017). Secondly, it leads to the over-determination of ‘combat’ as the source of all military injury in the eyes of the public. As the most revered element of military service, the notion of ‘combat’ gives perhaps the ultimate and most significant meaning to the identity of ‘soldier’; the telos of a soldierly identity. Extending this line of argument to injury in war, we contend that it is through becoming injured in ‘combat’ that soldiers may seal their reputations as heroic warriors. That the risk of grievous bodily injury – which every soldier accepts, on some level, when they join the military – has been actualised seems to cement their privileged and heroic status.

Throughout this paper, we aimed to demonstrate that media framings of military injury and hierarchies of wounding – far from being benign – are tangible mechanisms through which hegemonic militaristic ideologies are reinforced in social discourse. Paradoxically, the injurious consequences of war are glossed over in favour of triumphant, ‘conquering’ rhetoric. We have also highlighted how critical discourse analysis (e.g., Fairclough 2010) can be used to critically deconstruct the ways in which ideology invests language use, and thereby privilege certain frames of reference for military injury over others. Understanding how and why certain frames get privileged over others, and with what consequences, underpins our ability to give critical scrutiny to the notion of war injury.

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