

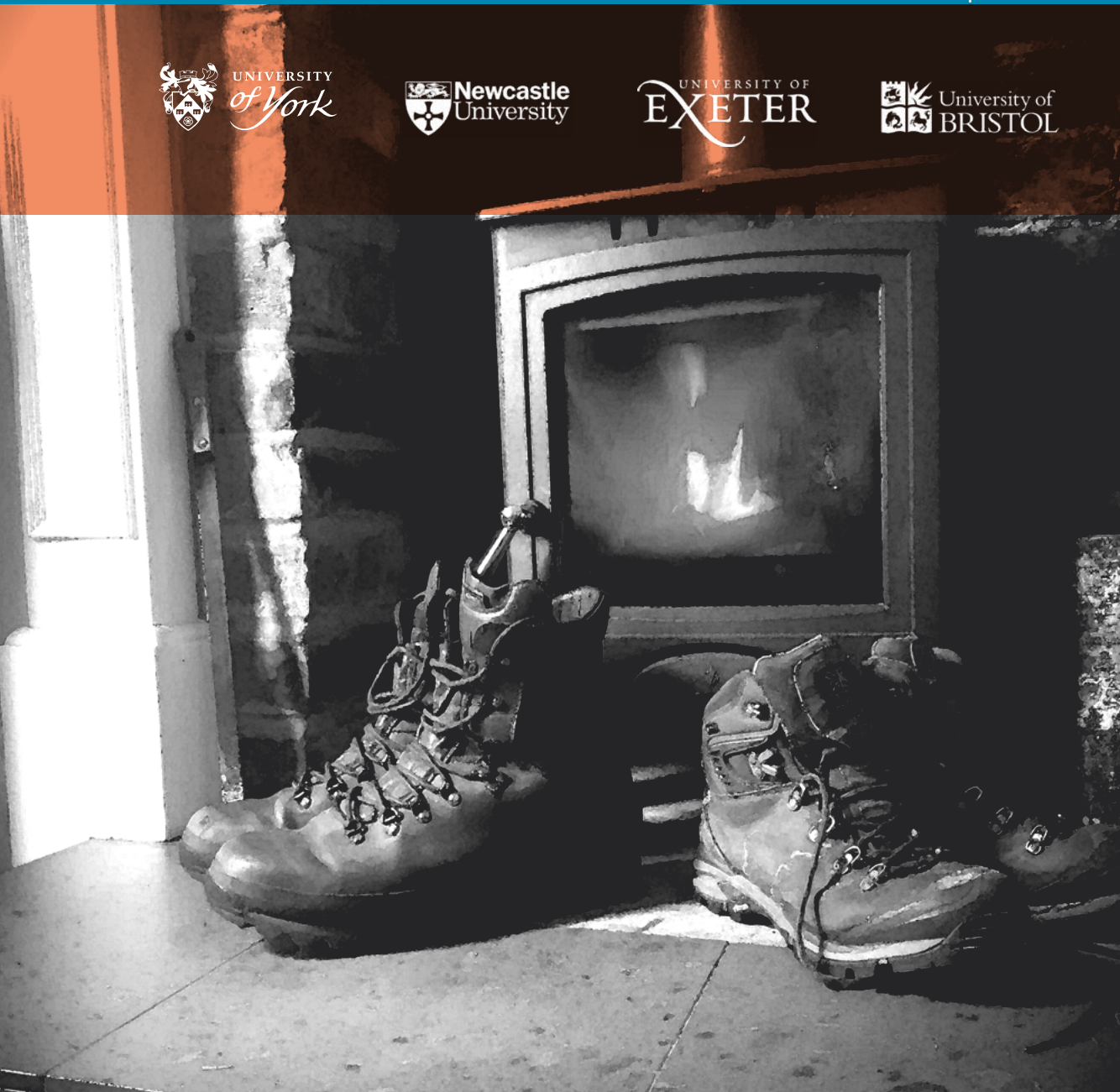
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Bringing the Homefront to the Forefront: UK perspectives on critical research with military spouses

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Introduction

On the 9th of July 2021, the Rethinking Military Spouses: Critical Research Group hosted a webinar titled 'Bringing the Homefront to the Forefront: UK Perspectives on Critical Research with Military Spouses'. This report provides some information about the event and includes an overview of the main points of discussion.

Whilst much of the research into the military experience and legacy of military service focuses on the serving members and veterans, there is a growing trend towards exploring the impact of military life on spouses. Previous research on military families has highlighted the unique combination of challenges faced by this population: lengthy deployments; frequent relocations; long working hours and unpredictable schedules; as well as relatively low pay and benefits. Within this rhetoric, the voices of military spouses can become lost. However, a growing number of projects have sought to focus on the experiences of spouses to further understand the impact that military service has on their lives. This webinar showcased some of this emerging research.

Speakers submitted recorded videos which outlined their primary research projects focused on military spouses. Representing the range of disciplines that can contribute to military research, the speakers adopted approaches spanning sociology, politics, history, geography, psychology, and law, with all placing the voices of military spouses at their centre. The contributions include research with spouses who have experienced the deployment of their serving partner, who live geographically dispersed (i.e. separately from their serving partner throughout the working week), who are carers, who have experienced domestic abuse, and others. The contributions also include research with spouses of serving personnel

(Regular and Reservist), veterans, dual-service couples, men and women, and those who have left their marriage or relationship with a serving person.

Shortly after the research videos were published, a live discussion event was hosted by Rethinking Military Spouses, kindly chaired by Dr Nick Caddick, Deputy Director and Associate Professor of the Veterans and Families Institute for Military Social Research (Anglia Ruskin University). Highlighting the challenges and opportunities that working with military spouses presents, the webinar discussion focused on four key themes:

- Seeking and Gaining Access to Recruit Military Spouses
- Hearing Military Spouses' Voices through Qualitative Methodologies
- Pursuing Impact Agendas: Who, What, Why
- Balancing Criticality with Military and Academic Expectations

This report outlines some of the different ways that speakers sought to better understand military spouses' and partners' lived experiences. Through doing so, they have been able to reflect on the entanglement of military spouses with military life, military processes, and forms of power. When conducting critical research with military spouses, researchers must consider a wide range of issues particular to this specific group.

These include:

- Challenges around gaining access and the implications that recruitment strategies might have on the voices that are heard.
- Choosing a methodological approach and associated methods which enable rich perspectives and experiences to be heard – balancing the needs of research objectives whilst also considering possible benefits to the participants.
- Balancing research objectives and activities with expectations of academic institutions, funders, and identified beneficiaries – considering what impact might be and how it can be achieved and accounted for.
- Navigating how the dynamics of criticality must be balanced against the need to attract funding, articulate impact, and gain ethics approval from the Ministry of Defence (MOD) – with there sometimes being tensions between these factors.

Registered attendees included academics, members of military charities, welfare providers, and others. The recordings of the research videos and resulting live discussion event can be accessed by visiting the Rethinking Military Spouses website. Each video includes a transcript and links to the speakers' related publications. Web address: <https://sites.google.com/view/critmilspouse/home>

This event was organised by Dr Emma Long (University of York), Dr Alice Cree (Newcastle University), and Donna Crowe-Urbaniak (University of Bristol and University of Exeter). The event and resulting report was funded by Dr Emma Long's Economic and Social Research Council grant: ES/V011111/1.

Meet the Speakers

This section provides some information about the speakers who contributed to the event, including brief abstracts of their research videos. If you would like to know more about their work and watch their videos go to this web address: <https://sites.google.com/view/critmilspouse/home>

Dr Sergio Catignani

Senior Lecturer in International Relations and Director of Education, University of Exeter, Politics Department.

Sergio is interested in how war preparations affect the daily lives of not only those who serve in the military but also of those within civil society who enable the perpetration of militarism within society by supporting morally or practically, whether consciously or unconsciously, the defence establishment's efforts at prioritizing the military.

Research video abstract: My presentation, like the article Dr Basham and I co-wrote in our recently published article in the Review of International Studies, explores our experiences of conducting feminist interpretive research on the British Army Reserves. As feminist interpretive researchers analysing an organisation that prioritises masculinist and functionalist methodologies, instrumentalised knowledge production, and very formalised ethics approval processes, my presentation recounted some of the challenges that both Victoria and I faced on how we were able to conduct our research, who we were able to access, and what we were able to say.

RELEVANT PROJECTS:

Sustaining Future Reserves 2020: Assessing Organizational Commitment in the Reserves. Dr Sergio Catignani was the Principal Investigator, and Dr Victoria Basham (Cardiff University) was the co-investigator (2014 – 2018).



Dr Alice Cree

NU Academic Track Research Fellow, Newcastle University, School of Geography, Politics and Sociology.

Alice is interested in critically re-examining the sites and bodies of military violence using creative research methods. Her current work uses online participatory theatre with military spouses across the UK to explore some of the ways that military participation and conflict impact upon home life and personal relationships.

Research video abstract (joint presentation with Hannah West): Creative and theatrical approaches to exploring the lived experiences of war and recovery have tended to prioritise images of heroic masculine soldierhood enacted in spatially 'faraway' wars. The voices of military partners and families are rarely given a platform. Our project uses online participatory theatre to centre the lived experiences of military partners and ex-partners to explore some of the ways that military conflict plays out in intimate spaces of the home and personal relationships. Together with participants, we are working to produce a piece of devised theatre to be performed at Newcastle's Northern Stage theatre in Summer 2022. In our video we outline the challenges of recruiting participants for online theatre workshops and how we structured our workshops. We then share some initial findings from each of our research themes: 'love, intimacy, home', 'body, identity, absence', 'power, secrecy, control', before outlining three important contributions. Firstly, our work offers a feminist intervention to destabilise the persistent framing of 'military conflict' as being in some way separate from what happens in the military home. Secondly, we illustrate the value of using creative methods when engaging with military communities and finally, we hope that our work sheds light on the power and agency of military spouses.

RELEVANT PROJECTS:

- Conflict, Intimacy and Military Wives: A Lively Geopolitics (2020 – 2022).
- The Military in our Midst: War Preparation and Community on Salisbury Plain (2020 – 2021).
- Dramatizing the Home Front: The Lively Politics of Gendered Militarism (2018 – 2019).
- The Hero, The Monster, The Wife: Geographies of Remaking and Reclaiming the Contemporary Military Hero (2014 – 2018).



Donna Crowe-Urbaniak

Senior Research Associate, University of Bristol, Law School. PhD Researcher, University of Exeter, Law School.

Donna is interested in the legacy of military life for ex-wives when they divorce – how military life influences and shapes negotiations, particularly around money and children.

Research video abstract: This work examines civilian women's experiences of being married to, and divorced from, servicemen in the British military and theorises vulnerability and dependency in this context. Drawing on qualitative research of 32 semi-structured interviews with recently divorced military wives, I argue that the socio-spatial boundaries between the public and private peculiar to military family life, and the institutional incorporation of wives within the military context, entrench women's dependency during marriage, and compound vulnerability post-divorce.

Military commitments limit the ability of serving members to contribute to the demands of family life; the effect being that many military wives become 'pseudo single parents', bearing the burden of domestic responsibilities. As such, opportunities for education, and career development are significantly curtailed. Whilst a marriage remains intact, such decisions are perceived as being in the best interests of the family, however, upon divorce, such decisions may significantly disadvantage one of the parties. This study illustrates that military wives' outcomes post-divorce continue to be framed, and limited by, this incorporation, compounding the disadvantage experienced in their post-divorce lives.

RELEVANT PROJECTS:

- 'Fair Shares': Understanding Finances upon Divorce (2021 – 2023).
- Structural Dependency and Compound Vulnerability: A Socio-Legal Examination of the Issues Faced by Military Ex-Wives post-LASPO (2017 – 2021).



Dr Hilary Engward

Associate Professor, Families and Communities Research Lead, Anglia Ruskin University, Veterans and Families Institute for Military Social Research.



Hilary is interested in developing awareness of veterans and their families in the primary and secondary care contexts.

Research video abstract (joint presentation with Dr Lauren Godier-McBard): Unpaid carers in the UK save the economy £132 billion per year, and provide

vital support to individuals with illness and disability. However, carers are found to be at high risk of poor mental health and wellbeing. The number of carers in the Armed Forces and Veteran community is unknown and there is limited research looking at the impact of caring on military and veteran spouses in the UK. The research that does exist suggests that the military context may exacerbate the impact on spouses' wellbeing. In this video we present the 'Caring and Coping' project, which explored the impact of living with limb loss on veterans and their families. We introduce the Living with Limb Loss Support Model (LLSM), which charts the five stages of the limb loss life course. We also examine the key concept of coping in relation to the coping levels of individuals with limb loss and their carers, detailing the relationship between coping and the limb loss life course.

RELEVANT PROJECTS:

- Caring and Coping: The Family Experience of Living with Limb Loss (2016 – 2018).

Dr Lauren Godier-McBard

Senior Research Fellow and Women and Equalities Research Lead, Anglia Ruskin University, Veterans and Families Institute for Military Social Research.

Lauren is interested in the impact of military life on women – including those serving, veterans, and spouses – particularly relating to their health and wellbeing.

Research video abstract: Delivered a joint presentation with Dr Hilary Engward – see above.



RELEVANT PROJECTS:

- The Impact of Social Media Communication During Military Deployment on Service Children and Families (2021 – 2022).
- Evaluation of the Impact of the Veterans Universal Passport in Supporting Veterans and their Carers Navigate Health and Social Care Pathways (2016 – 2018).
- Evaluation of the MOD Spouse Employment Support Trial (2016 – 2018).

Dr Harriet Gray

Lecturer in International Relations, University of York, Department of Politics.

Harriet's research interests include gender-based violence, militarism and militarisation, military families, masculinities and vulnerability, memorialisation, and feminist methodologies in the study of International Relations. Much of her work has revolved around unpacking, in various ways, the gendered processes through which various harmful acts come to be understood (or, do not come to be understood) as 'violence,' as 'sexual / gender-based violence' and as 'conflict-related sexual / gender-based violence' – and in the political implications of these definitional processes.

Research video abstract: It is widely recognised in the academic literature that civilian women married to servicemen find themselves positioned in liminal space on the borders of the military community; sometimes in, and sometimes out. This liminal positioning is compounded and complicated by the ways in which the divisions between the social spheres of public and private – which are always fluid, mutually constitutive, and politically and socially formulated – are further framed in the British military community through the needs of operational effectiveness. In the pursuit of operational effectiveness the public / private divide functions at times as porous, in large part through the military's provision of services such as housing, welfare and policing to personnel and their families and through the notion of a close knit military community, and at others as firm, bolstering operational effectiveness through recourse to militarised ideas of the private sphere as the fixed space of hearth, home and femininity which is to be protected by military force. In this presentation, I explore how military wives' experiences of seeking help in response to domestic abuse are shaped by these interwoven factors. Narratives of domestic abuse, I suggest, bring to light vulnerabilities that always characterise the lives of military wives, but may mostly remain unseen¹.

RELEVANT PROJECTS:

- 'We Deserve to be Bought a Beer Too': Labour, Love, and Space for Critique in the Autobiographical Accounts of British Military Wives (2020 – 2021).
- Militarism in the Everyday: Responses to Domestic Abuse in the British Armed Forces (2011 – 2015).



Dr Emma Long

ESRC Postdoctoral Fellow, University of York, Department of Politics.

Emma is interested in nonserving spouses' gendered experiences of deployment periods and the critical sociological analysis of welfare provision. She is currently exploring how Armed Forces families are framed within military welfare providers' policies and outputs and how these representations are interpreted, lived, and contested by spouses.

Research video abstract: The emotional cycle of deployment is often cited by academics to frame the experiences of military families from pre- to post-deployment. Some welfare providers share the model with military families to enable them to prepare for and thus manage the cycle better. Generally, the model frames deployment experiences as linear yet my interviews with army partners showed that these experiences are much more complex. In this presentation I show that by applying the concept of liminality, some of this complexity becomes visible, illuminating the in-between times experienced during deployments that are otherwise obscured. I discuss the ways that army partners move through and between deployments and deployment phases, living with the spectre of deployment where they are positioned within liminal states of 'what was,' 'what is,' and 'what if'. I reflect on how partners are entangled with a form of disciplinary power, as they continuously work towards self-improvement – 'doing it better this time' – where actions and perspectives are oriented towards making deployments run smoothly. I argue that whilst they maintain a state of readiness for future unknowns, deployment does not just happen as a singular event which punctuates their lives. Instead deployment(s) maintain presence within the home, beyond the cycle.

RELEVANT PROJECTS:

- Bringing the Homefront to the Forefront: Examining Policy through Centring Lived Experiences of Military Families in Welfare Provision (2020 – 2021).
- Living Liminal Lives: Army Partners' Experiences and Perspectives of Navigating and Negotiating Avenues for Support (2015 – 2019).



¹ Harriet was unable to attend the live discussion.

Dr Eleonora Natale

Lecturer in International History, King's College London, Department of War Studies.

Eleonora's research focuses on military experiences of war, violence, and post-conflict justice in Argentina and Brazil. Her ethnographic work addresses the military's self-perceptions and the 'everyday dimension' of military life, particularly the social and family spheres.



Research video abstract: Military populations embody a striking contradiction: while bound by strict humanitarian standards, they can commit terrible crimes when performing their duties. My ethnographic research addressed Argentine military families of the dictatorship (1976-1983) to analyse their standpoint on the widespread repression perpetrated by the military in that period. In this presentation, I focus on the experiences of military spouses whose husbands are currently being prosecuted for the crimes of the regime, decades after the end of active duty and their involvement in State violence. I explore the ways in which these women navigated a context of extreme militarisation and political violence in the 1970s, and how their everyday life in the present has been affected by the trials for crimes against humanity. By providing rich empirical evidence, I show how the system of reciprocal expectations that link military families with the armed forces can radically be transformed by processes of accountability and criminal conviction of the military. While context-specific, the ethnographic approach allows my research to generalize research problems rather than findings, highlighting issues and interrogatives that may be relevant to other contexts, such as the attempts of prosecution of British military personnel involved in the Northern Ireland conflict.

RELEVANT PROJECTS:

- The Military in Politics in Brazil (2021 – ongoing).
- Silenced Islands: Rethinking 'Malvinas' 35 Years After the War (2018).
- The Argentine Military, the Military Family and the Violence of the 1970s: An Ethnographic Study of Kinship (2014 – 2018).

Dr Alison Osborne

Senior Research Assistant, Northumbria University, Northern Hub for Veterans and Military Families Research.

Alison is interested in exploring the life experiences of military families, focusing on family separation, identity, and well-being.

Research video abstract: The family has always had a significant role in the wider functioning of the military. Historically, military families have moved around with serving military personnel – 'following the flag'. However, the perceived role and identity of the military family is shifting alongside the introduction of Government and MOD initiatives and policies, increasing flexibility, and encouraging stability of family life. Research has predominantly explored the psychological effects of operational deployments on military families; however, a gap remains in research pertaining to the impact of non-deployment related separations such as dispersal. For those living geographically dispersed, separation often occurs during the working week, with the military family member returning at the weekends. The length and duration of separation through dispersal can vary, but critically is often intermittent. This video explores the main findings from semi-structured interviews with spouses and partners of UK military personnel living geographically dispersed. The aim was to explore the psycho-social impact of intermittent separation on geographically dispersed military families and highlights the impact on identity, loneliness, well-being, familial relationships and accessing support. These findings are from Phase 2 of my PhD research.



RELEVANT PROJECTS:

- Map of Need (2017 – 2021).
- Intermittent Separation: Exploring the Psycho-Social Impact on Dispersed Military Families (2017 – 2020).

Hannah West

Research Assistant, Newcastle University, School of Geography, Politics and Sociology.

Hannah is interested in uncovering women's stories of conflict, whether as military partners or as combatants, in order to better understand how knowledge about war is produced and whose voices are doing the narrating. In her current project, this involves exploring the lived experiences of military partners to challenge the dominant narrative of the 'dependent' military wife.



Research video abstract: Delivered a joint presentation with Dr Alice Cree – see above.

RELEVANT PROJECTS:

- Conflict, Intimacy and Military Wives: A Lively Geopolitics (2020 – 2022).

Theme One

Seeking and Gaining Access to Recruit Military Spouses

At the live discussion, speakers were asked 'what are the barriers when recruiting participants and how did you overcome them?'. They were encouraged to also consider: 'what are the enduring problems with recruitment and this population?' and 'how do our insider / outsider roles affect access?'

Dr Alison Osborne:

Alison found that the most significant barrier to recruiting participants relates to gaining access. Whilst being a member of the military community might increase access, Alison's experiences of being from a dispersed military family meant that she did not have connections to other dispersed families. Instead, she found that engaging with organisations who work with military spouses including the families federations (e.g., the Army Families Federation, Royal Air Force Families Federation, and Naval Families Federation) helped. Additionally, she highlighted the importance of expanding recruitment-related attention beyond organisations working under the 'military-banner' because potential participants, particularly those living dispersed, might not identify with being a part of the military community or as a military spouse.

For Alison, building trust was vital and being an insider helped to foster this with organisations, gatekeepers, and potential participants. Not least because there was a sense of shared understanding. She found that snowballing was an effective method for recruiting dispersed military families to participate in her research.

Dr Alison Osborne:

The biggest thing is creating connections with the spouses, and then hopefully that snowballing technique, but also with organisations that can be used as gatekeepers for the research"

Hannah West:

Hannah explained that her research project with Dr Alice Cree required weekly commitment from participants for a 6-month period. They knew from the outset that this would be a huge challenge, exacerbated by potential wariness of taking part in a theatre project.

Hannah West:

Despite producing recruitment videos specifically focused on minority groups, it has been very difficult to access foreign and commonwealth, BAME, and LGBTQ+ groups. However, we have been fortunate in recruiting participants across the UK – and a group that includes veterans, wives, ex-wives, husbands, girlfriends, and widows – whose partners served across the ranks and services. So, we have some elements of diversity but unfortunately not all"

Because their research was interested in the violent impact of military participation on homelife and personal relationships, they wanted to maintain some critical distance between the project and diverse institutions that make up the military machine. They were concerned that their critical feminist approach might be compromised if they aligned themselves too closely with the MOD. Consequently, they didn't pursue the MOD Research Ethics Committee (MODREC), feeling strongly that the experiences of spouses' private lives should not be within the remit of the MOD.

So, they made the recruitment strategy a personal one – relying on Alice's contacts from previous research and Hannah's contacts as a veteran. They approached potential participants through social media and also contacted some small military charities by email. In order to demystify what participation would involve, they

prepared a participant handbook and website too and were pleased to receive over 90 expressions of interest!

Despite publicising recruitment videos focused on minority groups it was very difficult to access Foreign and Commonwealth, BAME, and LGBTQ+ groups. Nonetheless, their participant group includes veterans, wives, ex-wives, husbands, girlfriends and widows – whose partners served across the ranks and services.

Dr Emma Long

Emma considered how an insider or outsider status can be fluid, contingent upon others' rather than one's own perception of identities. In all communications regarding the recruitment of non-serving army partners, Emma clearly stated that she had grown up in a military family. She presumed that this would help to gain the trust of gatekeepers, enabling access to a diverse range of participants beyond her own personal networks. Because army partners are a small population, and not easily accessible, she decided to contact them directly through social media – knowing that partners sometimes use social media platforms to engage with their local military communities.

However, the assumption that her partial-insider status would help to gain access and trust was overestimated. Before posting publicly on social media she needed to gain consent from administrators. Some did not grant this access because she was not a military partner and she realised that her identity as a member of the military community was not something that she necessarily owned, but depended on the views of others. Additionally, the fact that she had to utilise gatekeepers enforced a sense of distance between herself and the participants. Furthermore, she found that even when access was granted, it was not always fixed, and that researchers must ensure that trust is maintained throughout. This can involve significant amounts of time if research becomes the subject of a Facebook debate!

At different points, to use Charles Kirke's terminology, through her interactions, Emma moved between being a 'researcher within', a 'researcher with familiarity', and an 'outsider'² – affecting recruitment in different ways.

2 Kirke C. (2013) Insider anthropology: Theoretical and empirical issues for the researcher. In Qualitative Methods in Military Studies: Research experiences and challenges (eds.) Helen Carreiras and Celso Castro. Routledge, London: 17-30.

Dr Emma Long:

I realised that my identity as a member of the Armed Forces Community was not something I 'owned' but was dependent on how others viewed me – and the fact that I had to utilise gatekeepers enforced a sense of distance between myself and potential participants"

Dr Hilary Engward:

Hilary's research explored families' experiences of living with loss of limbs. The project team found that potential participants did not think that researchers would be interested in their experiences, instead, presuming that the focus was on the veteran. The team had to emphasise that they wanted to hear the wider family stories. The team also wanted to move beyond the assumption that carers are women, and veterans are men, and targeted their recruitment strategy to reflect this. Whilst one male carer participated in the research, Hilary pondered which voices are still not being heard and encourages us to think of ways to speak to those who are not currently represented within research.

Hilary explained that the project team also needed to think through families' own identities, as they do not always consider themselves to be carers: there will be the veteran, the spouse or partner, and the wider family. Hilary discovered that the wider family were less likely to identify as carers and they needed to consider how to encourage those less confident to engage.

She also reflected on generational differences – that some generations might be more honest and open. Perhaps younger generations might be more critical than older generations which will impact the stories heard. She also found it interesting to reflect on what constitutes different types of families? Hilary said that more traditional families are much more represented in academic literature and it is important to think carefully about recruitment strategies that will capture a wider range of voices.

Dr Nick Caddick:

One thing that struck me was the tensions that are emerging here between issues like gaining access and gaining trust of the communities that we want to work with – and the points made by Hannah about wanting to highlight a critical feminist approach to research and viewing that as important. How can these elements be intentioned?"

Theme Two



Hearing Military Spouses' Voices through Qualitative Methodologies

Speakers were then asked 'why did you choose to conduct your research the way you did?', 'what did you learn?', and 'what were or are the implications of these decisions?'. They were encouraged to also consider: 'how do your methods and methodology help you to better understand or disrupt common understandings of the lived experiences of military spouses?'

Donna Crowe-Urbaniak:

Donna explained that researchers need to understand that military spouses are one of the most surveyed populations in the country by the MOD and families' federations. This has led to a sense of survey fatigue and spouses may be less inclined to participate in the future. She argued that it is important to consider novel and creative ways to engage with spouses so that research is not "just another survey".

Donna wanted to better understand the lived experiences of ex-wives in order to examine related law assisting military populations through divorce, and also the impact of the military institution and welfare. Her research adopted a co-creative approach which meant that the project was moulded and shaped by the participants – centring their lived experiences and interests. Additionally, Donna wanted to disrupt the notion that military wives are a homogeneous group e.g. the 'Penelope' figure who waits steadfastly at home awaiting their hero's return (see Alice Cree's work on this³). By using interviews rather than quantitative surveys, women participants were

3 Cree A. (2020) 'People want to see tears': Military heroes and the 'Constant Penelope' of the UK's Military Wives Choir. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 27(2): 218-238.

Donna Crowe-Urbaniak:

Because of survey fatigue, as researchers, we need to think about new and novel ways to engage with military spouses and understand more about their lived experiences"

in control of the narrative, and thus Donna could better understand the dynamics between the triad: military, institution, and partners.

Dr Alice Cree:

Co-creation is centred within Alice's research and her theatre-as-method approach offers an opportunity to explore messy and unruly feelings – less often acknowledged in research. Her weekly online workshops, organised with Hannah West, invite participants to revisit their feelings, thoughts, and experiences and how they might change over weeks and months, as they wrestle through unruliness in creative ways. For example, participants can use their bodies to explore feelings that can be difficult to verbalise. Exemplifying some of this richness, Alice and team asked participants to explore what post traumatic stress disorder looks like. Participants described trauma by likening it to a gunshot, an explosion, a screaming baby, or even silence. Theatre, Alice reflected, can offer a way to explore these difficult conversations and feelings.

These workshops will be developed into something that can be performed to a public audience, trying to change popular views about the sites and spaces of war, and the real, lived impacts of conflict on families. Their reflections on, for example, what post traumatic stress disorder might look like, has provided participants with a way of helping shape the way this topic will be addressed in the staging of the final play. One of Alice's participants said that the stories potentially uncovered during this research are very private and personal, possibly dark and upsetting, and the military might not want people to know about these experiences because it does not want to highlight bad things. But that is what makes this research all the more important – that these stories which are challenging and difficult are no longer hidden and are instead brought to the public.

Dr Eleonora Natale:

Eleonora's doctoral research is an ethnography of kinship focused on military families who lived through the years of political violence in Argentina. Her work considers how they constructed narratives about that time, their experiences of contemporary judicial proceedings, and how they interacted with a society that condemns them.

For Eleonora, who is not a member of a military family, ethnography allowed her to grasp and understand military families' point of view by using interviews and participant observation. She used kinship as a lens to observe and interpret the military sociability in order to challenge the traditional monolithic and masculine narratives of the military in Argentina. She interviewed military wives both on their own and with double interviews with their husbands, to understand the dynamics within military families. This enabled her to understand the continuities, ruptures, and nuances within their systems of values and meanings, and similarities and differences in their narratives. Her study showed that spouses' subjectivities are much more complex than one might expect: they do not just describe the violence, they insert themselves in the phenomenon by explaining how they got involved in the political conflict of the 1970s. Spouses lived both inside and outside the military community and developed a trajectory that is both aligned with but also independent to their military husband's. For example, with the trials for crimes against humanity started in 2003, some wives became activists and claimed a public space to defend their husbands who have been prosecuted, resorting to the social bonds established within the military community.

Eleonora argued that exploring ethnographically the experiences of military spouses allows her to show how narratives of everyday life are informed by social practices that are specific to the military environment. These practices are just as crucial to military identity making as the rules, symbols, and discourses that the military institution (re)produces over time.

Dr Alice Cree:

Theatre offers a way of understanding and actively engaging with, and in fact, prioritising [...] messy and unruly feelings, and experiences"

Dr Alison Osborne:

Alison's research focused on the intermittent nature of separation due to serving personnel being away from the family home during the week, instead of absence caused by operational deployment. She needed to hear from dispersed families, particularly spouses and partners themselves. She was aware that survey fatigue might limit engagement and instead wanted to hear their voices so opted for semi-structured interviews. This ensured consistency between questions asked whilst also allowing participants space to explore their own experiences on their own terms and topics not previously considered. It provided an opportunity to explore the similarities and differences across this group who are not homogenous. It also enabled Alison to highlight the ways that identity is fluid across the separation period – exploring identity in depth. It also enabled her to show that there was a conflict in terms of what support the MOD and military charities said was available versus what participants perceived they could access as a dispersed family, leading some to say that more and certain forms of support would be beneficial. This enabled Alison to develop a series of recommendations which kept the voice of the spouse and partner at the centre of the research.

Dr Nick Caddick:

Across all of the research projects [...] there is a real commitment here to understanding and honouring the complexity [...] of military spouse subjectivity and experience and developing a richer picture of the figure of the military spouse than we get from public representations of them"

Theme Three

Pursuing Impact Agendas: Who, What, Why

Speakers were then asked 'thinking about the implications of your research, who are the beneficiaries?', 'how did you achieve impact?', and 'what are the key considerations you have had to make?'. They were encouraged to also consider: 'challenges you might have encountered practically or due to your own alignment / politics.'

Dr Lauren Godier-McBard:

Lauren stated that there are many ways of looking at and measuring impact and she focused her response on a practical, applied perspective. Military spouses are the most obvious beneficiary but it can also be much broader. Lauren's research has resulted in practical recommendations for changes in policy and practice for the military and other organisations supporting families after transition. These recommendations aim to improve military spouses' wellbeing and / or remove barriers that military families might face. To achieve these changes, Lauren thinks more broadly about who the beneficiaries are and then being strategic about how recommendations are framed and targeted. Certainly, this involves consideration of who is in a position of power to apply these changes.

As an example, Lauren explained that she previously worked on a project with Dr Nick Caddick which evaluated the 'spouse employment support trial' – particularly looking at employment, support, and training provided by the MOD for military spouses. One of the key aims of the trial for the MOD was to improve retention as it had been identified that one of the main reasons for personnel leaving is the impact that the military has on spousal employment. The team had to think about the beneficiaries of this research as the spouses, the family, and the military. They had to keep this in mind when framing and targeting recommendations which could be uncomfortable because they wanted to create impact that primarily benefits spouses and



Dr Hilary Engward:

The learning I took from previous studies was the ability to keep checking that what I am saying, and asking from the research population and potential beneficiaries, is meaningful and relevant to them. So really embedding the idea of translating what we do and what we say into lay language right from the beginning"

families. From this work, the MOD agreed to some of the recommendations. Interestingly, they did not adopt the most favoured aspect of the trial – perhaps due to costs but also because it was difficult to link this recommendation to retention or employability outcomes (due to project timelines). Achieving impact can be frustrating but it helps to engage with organisations that can implement change and also consider ways to co-produce recommendations.

Dr Sergio Catignani:

Sergio explained that his earlier work tended to adopt an 'engineering approach'; identify the problem, conduct research with the military organisation, and make policy recommendations to improve military performance. In the last 4 years, having worked with Dr Victoria Basham, he became imbued with critical military studies and feminist research – asking "where are the women?" and "what is the role of women in international relations?".

Sergio worked on a project, co-funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), MOD and the British Army, looking at which factors affected recruitment and retention within the British Army reserves. He was interested to see that, when asked about families, senior military leaders suggested

Dr Sergio Catignani:

What the impact agenda has really done – particularly in relation to the knowledge economy – it has led to impact sensationalism"

that it was not that important – that reservists work during their spare time – and they were more concerned about employer engagement. However, Sergio explained that if there are heavy workloads it is hard to maintain a work / life balance which only gets more difficult if a third time-consuming activity is added e.g. training and deployments.

When applying for this grant, the ESRC required that he write a 'pathways to impact' statement. Sergio argued that the impact agenda has led to impact sensationalism, where researchers must promise the world, eureka moments, and be able to affect policy changes. He was able to write this into the application, but once the research started, it brought messy feelings – although there is talk about the importance of military spouses and families, actually spouses are the reserve-reserve labour of reservists. This has a huge impact affecting their wellbeing and ultimately their support of reservists. Although the proposed activities submitted in the grant application were centred on producing policy outputs and cooperating with the military, once these issues and associated recommendations were highlighted, it became clear that these might negatively affect UK defence's and particularly the British Army's public image. The MOD and British Army stakeholders instituted bureaucratic communications and media engagement protocols that severely stifled their ability to disseminate findings until after the project and, thus, stakeholder engagement, had terminated. Once research findings became controversial for MOD stakeholders, both researchers became "outsiders".

Donna Crowe-Urbaniak:

Donna explored the upending of what our impact could or should be, and the tensions with institutional ideas of what the impact should be. Donna's research is interested in the way family law operates. She stated that it is known that the current law is not working within the general population and these deficiencies are magnified in the case of military families. Her research highlights the deficiencies in the military as an institution with

obligations towards families by focusing on those who transition out through divorce.

Therefore, her work raises questions about what welfare provision should be available. However, UK military welfare provision is based upon deeply ingrained assumptions of how families should organise themselves and function – particularly that serving personnel should be absolved of domestic responsibilities. Additionally, it does little to acknowledge dual income households as the spouse's ability to engage in paid employment is constrained by their serving spouse's military service. Donna's work upends this, saying instead that these systemic assumptions about families does not work for modern families. Yet this argument makes it difficult to recommend changes at a systemic level – they are not very palatable for the military as an institution with deeply ingrained ideas about family functioning.

Donna also explained that amongst these tensions, she also needs to consider the politics of her message because her husband is still serving, i.e. fundamental systemic change, criticality, and the potential impact on his career. She has to be very constrained in terms of framing her research which serves to diminish her criticality when attending military events. Therefore, Donna has to balance the politics between her insider status and her critical feminist lens.

Dr Hilary Engward:

Hilary explained that her research is highly pragmatic and practical in terms of purpose and outcomes. Its purpose is focused on how to better support people and improve their wellbeing throughout the life cycle. Therefore, her impact strategy needs to be equally pragmatic and practical. This is achieved through a variety of mechanisms involving working closely with an involved organisation, a clear dissemination plan and who might be targeted, and a clear outline of how the findings might be relevant to particular audiences. Her research team started by identifying relevant organisations who might benefit from the findings, e.g. military support providers, and

also statutory services including policymakers and health professionals. These activities led to impact – notably findings have been integrated into a training curriculum.

Hilary said that it is important to consider language for particular audiences, so reach is wider than the academic audience, and impact can therefore be wider. Findings can be translated into snapshots and proofed by representatives of intended audiences, including military spouses and families, to ensure they make sense and are useful to them, e.g. translated from academic language.

Similarly, considerations need to be made about disseminating findings across the academic and professional settings. For example, she does not aim to only publish in journals which have a high Research Excellence Framework (REF) value which might be better for an academic CV, but also professional journals. This is important because it enables better access for professionals who can then potentially implement recommendations – a huge impact factor. It is important to differentiate between forms of impact and what this means for us as researchers, professionals, and the communities we do the research with. Indeed, if researchers prioritise career publications, impact on beneficiaries might be limited. Hilary reflects that it is important to ensure that research is meaningful to the beneficiaries, and that strategies to ensure this are implemented throughout the project.

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Dr Lauren Godier-McBard:

It can be quite frustrating to achieve impact. The key to us has been to engage with organisations that can enact changes to achieve impact from quite an early stage and try to co-produce recommendations from all beneficiaries – military spouses and also organisations that work with them to ensure that what you can develop and suggest can be applied in a practical sense”

Theme Four 🔍

Balancing Criticality with Military and Academic Expectations

Speakers were then asked ‘what is critical research within this topic / field and what does it mean to you?’ They were encouraged to also consider: ‘what are the barriers to conducting critical research – who has power and how is it exercised?’

Dr Eleonora Natale:

Eleonora’s current research focuses on Argentina and Brazil and thus can consider the question of criticality in global terms. In her response she focused on two aspects of criticality.

Firstly, she aims to develop a more critical stance on the study of military populations in Latin America. The violence perpetrated on the order of the State in many countries of the region, the impunity that followed, and then the judicial process, had the effect of crystalising stereotypes of the military as a separate entity – as something alien to society, a monolithic uncritical masculinist block. The Argentine military is usually approached by the social sciences as a state agent, an executioner of a repressive agenda, or a political actor moved by rigid ideological doctrines and political interests. Instead, Eleonora’s work aims to understand the military as a community and a social group, to highlight identity making processes and changing narratives that directly impact the behaviours and perspectives of military actors and military spouses – adopting similar approaches within critical geographies, feminist geopolitics, and critical military studies.

Secondly, she embraces the possibility of producing spaces to transcend national histories of war and the military – including national understandings and approaches to military populations. ‘Militaries’ are transnational institutions – exported globally by western nations through colonialism. And yet, studies on militaries tend to neglect the experiences of non-western, non-European soldiers and their families. Even when they share experiences of the same combat with western soldiers (e.g., the Argentines and the British in the Falklands War), or similar understandings of different conflicts (e.g.,

counterinsurgency in 1970s’ Argentina and Northern Ireland), these are hardly addressed as parts of a global trend of militarisation, conflict and violence. And the experiences of military families, even less so. By bringing these experiences and narratives from Argentina, particularly relating to what it means to be a military spouse, resonance might be found globally. Therefore, Eleonora encourages researchers to think more comparatively, more transnationally to understand and question military power, instead of keeping research on western and non-western militaries separate, or subordinate to one another.

Dr Lauren Godier-McBard:

Lauren ties in her reflections on criticality with the notion of impact that was outlined in the previous section. She finds it difficult to position herself in terms of criticality and does not consider herself to be an expert in critical military research. Instead, her background is in medical sciences and her work is focused

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Donna Crowe-Urbaniak:

The MODREC process raises interesting

questions about who owns military spouses’ voices. The MOD has taken the line that it owns their voices and it can restrict and limit their ability to take part in research – which under any other kind of employment, restrictions would not be allowed.”

on understanding and promoting health and wellbeing. Yet, she finds this work requires a level of criticality to understand the structures and processes that impact health and wellbeing.

The main barrier she has experienced relates to balancing the needs of organisations that are funding or commissioning research or those who have power to implement change, and the fact that critical findings might be uncomfortable or unpalatable to these organisations. Lauren referred back to Sergio's discussion of the need to demonstrate impact to funders. This can be particularly challenging for early career academics who can experience significant pressures to show that they can attract funding, which is ultimately incredibly competitive. Grant applications generally need to be tailored to meet the strategic aims of funders, and the pathways to impact can become over-sensationalised in terms of what is possible, whilst also being presented as beneficial to organisation, funder, and population being studied. The majority of funding that Lauren has been awarded comes from military and veteran organisations who have specific ideas of the outcomes they are looking for.

Therefore, retaining the level of criticality needed to do the research has to be balanced against funders who want evidence of tangible impact and change. Lauren also recognises that research which recommends discrete policy changes does not tend to lead to significant shifts in culture and attitudes that are needed to really make a change. It is the funders who have the power to determine what change matters and thus the sorts of outcomes researchers must pursue.

Hannah West:

Hannah looked at this in terms of positionality, reflecting on the impacts of an insider / outsider status. Hannah was a military partner but does not tend to generally identify with this, partly because her husband's last day in service was their wedding day! She considers herself as ex-military before being a military partner, so was nervous to meet the partners participating in her research project, as she remembers the sometimes uneasy relationship between servicewomen and other military wives.

Hannah considers herself to be an insider as an ex-military partner, but also an outsider as she is ex-military and also a critical scholar. Hannah explained that she speaks the language of the military which enables access not afforded to all, but brings with it a set of assumptions from others, based on her former service, that she must navigate. It also means that she comes with a level of understanding

which in turn are influenced by her own assumptions resulting from her military service. For her, this becomes particularly apparent when interviewing partners and she struggles to detach her own preconceived ideas of what their serving partner does and how this impacts on their lifestyle. This relates to Donna's discussion about personal politics highlighted in the section above – Hannah reflected on how important it is to reflect on conducting critical research and her own positionality.

Her previous research on female combatants has led her to question the assumption that military partners are an homogenous group, as Donna and Alison discussed in previous sections. In addition, it has led Hannah to question the extent of spouse's militarisation. In her current project, through workshops and interviews, she is seeing real diversity amongst spouses and partners. And yet, the power of being labelled a 'dependant' and the related constraints and stereotypes of being a military wife makes this diversity invisible. An example of this is male military partners whose voices are much less often heard – yet Hannah reflects that, like her, they are both insiders and outsiders to the military community because they are not the stereotypical military partner.

Hannah has found this research personal and sometimes uncomfortable. Yet she remains committed to critical and direct engagement with the military in order to challenge military control over knowledge production and the sustaining of the narrative of the dependent military wife.



Dr Eleonora Natale:

It is possible to learn from the experiences of non-western military families and to think more comparatively, more transnationally, to question military power in western or European contexts. Instead of keeping them separate or subordinate to the other."



Dr Sergio Catignani:

Critical research tries to challenge taken for granted assumptions underpinning militarism – and I would argue heteropatriarchy and ultimately racism which permeates not only our society but also the military and state security."

Dr Sergio Catignani:

Sergio reflected on the barriers to conducting critical research. Through interacting with the military, and therefore the security state, there is a high level of asymmetry in terms of power and influence that can be exercised over the military. Supposed security imperatives in particular enable the military to avoid scrutiny.

Sergio critically discussed the impact that the MODREC process has upon research. The first level of the review process is conducted by the Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC) consisting of clinical psychologists who have quantitative, positivist interpretations of what data is valid and therefore useful to the military. The key component that allows research to be approved is based upon its use for the military. In addition to this, ethics clearance is required, which includes a review of methodologies. Whilst methodologies have ethical implications, the choice between qualitative and quantitative approaches are not directly related to ethics. Generally speaking, critical military scholarship is based upon qualitative research (e.g., grounded theory, unstructured interviews, and creative approaches). When engaging with the SAC, Sergio found that qualitative methods were considered alien and not as valid – the project took months to get ethics approval even though it was funded by the MOD, the British Army, and the ESRC. In particular, the team was not allowed to use snowballing to gain access to potential participants, which is one of the best methods to engage with small hard-to-reach populations. Whilst ethical concerns were the official reason behind the SAC's request to remove such a recruitment strategy, subsequent discussions/correspondence led to members of the SAC and the MODREC to

admit that they were against such a recruitment strategy based on methodological grounds.

This made it incredibly difficult to recruit participants and Sergio stated that through these methodological disagreements, coupled with impact communications and social media engagement limitations (e.g., 28 days for the MOD to approve any media communications), the team were in effect gagged during the project's official duration. Although the team had promised impact the MOD were so sensitive about the findings that the dissemination of project research results was stifled – the programme stakeholder board was the perfect medium through which this could occur.

Sergio reflected on what critical research might mean. He explained that Highgate and Cameron (2006) distinguished between an engineering and enlightenment approach to studying the military⁴. An engineering approach is about fixing a problem (e.g., how do you reduce civilian or one's own casualties during counterinsurgencies?) whilst an enlightenment approach is more to do with understanding how organisations work, who are the members of organisations and what are their assumptions (e.g., is nation-building through military force morally and practically feasible?). Generally, critical research tries to challenge taken for granted assumptions underpinning militarism, hetero-patriarchy, and racism which permeates society, the military, and state security.

⁴ Higate P. & Cameron A. (2006) Reflexivity and researching the military. *Armed Forces and Society*, 32(2): 219-233.

Conclusions

This section outlines the key conclusions from the topics of discussion. Whilst not intending to provide solutions to the challenges identified, the purpose of this report is to highlight some of the experiences that researchers have encountered and the considerations that they have made when conducting their work. We hope that these reflections are useful to other academics conducting research with military populations.

Recruitment

Whilst military spouses are a hugely surveyed population in the UK, they have historically been difficult for qualitative researchers to access. Researchers must consider ways to overcome the barriers associated with recruiting spouses including creating engagement, gaining trust, and overcoming 'survey fatigue'. Furthermore, prior to recruitment, researchers often need to gain ethics approval from MODREC. This can contribute additional challenges, particularly for qualitative researchers adopting critical approaches. The speakers discussed how developing relationships with organisations working with spouses can help develop trust and gain access, and how researcher's insider / outsider status can be both a help and a hindrance. Difficulties engaging with hard-to-reach populations, such as dispersed military families, who might not necessarily identify as being a part of the military community, can be overcome, but need to be carefully considered. Speakers also reflected on how to actively target historically underrepresented demographics which is key to hearing and thus acknowledging multiple voices and perspectives – moving beyond homogenous representations of military spouses.

Methodology

Each of the researchers adopted qualitative methodological approaches to gain insight into the rich and detailed experiences and perspectives of the participating spouses. Qualitative research, including semi-structured interviews, was considered beneficial because it gave spouses an element of control over the stories that they shared – enabling them to discuss issues important to them. Additionally, ethnographic methods enabled insights into the nuances in values and meanings spouses associated with what they 'do' (their practice) and how this produced what we might

understand as 'military identities'. Furthermore, employing novel and creative methodological approaches might overcome issues relating to 'survey fatigue', potentially increasing engagement from spouses whilst also providing a richer picture of their experiences. For example, the benefits and opportunities were highlighted from using theatre-as-method to explore the sometimes messy and unruly feelings and thoughts experienced by military spouses. Speakers also considered how employing a co-creator ethos can be a powerful way to give control of the narrative to the spouses themselves.

Impact

There are many ways to understand the impact of research. Certainly, the balancing of the objectives and expectations of researchers, funders, and beneficiaries is key when considering the impact of any research. Whilst research outcomes can have the capacity for policy changes to better improve spouses' wellbeing (an 'engineering' or 'problem solving' approach to research⁵), practical challenges around communicating these recommendations can limit these impacts. Furthermore, policy improvement may be limited due to potential beneficiaries' other priorities e.g. the MOD and its priorities relating to operational effectiveness. For some researchers, the envisaged impact might be to understand more about the nuance of experiences of military spouses and challenge assumptions that underpin literature (an 'enlightened' approach⁶), rather than policy recommendations. Yet approaches which do not seek to produce policy recommendations might struggle to gain funding due to the impact agenda.

⁵ Higate P. & Cameron A. (2006) Reflexivity and researching the military. *Armed Forces and Society*, 32(2): 219-233.

⁶ Ibid.

Criticality

It was clear that the researchers contributing to the discussion position themselves at different points along the 'criticality continuum'⁷. Whilst some maintained a critical approach to military research, others found identifying their positionality more difficult, instead suggesting that in order to understand spouses' wellbeing, a critical understanding of military structures was necessary. With a focus on critical research, the speakers considered how the dynamics of criticality must be balanced against the need to attract funding, articulate impact, and potentially gain ethics approval from the MOD – with there sometimes being tensions between these factors. Additionally, linking to the section on 'Impact', policy changes do not necessarily shift values and attitudes within military spaces – so how can impact actually be traced? Researchers need to consider their own positionality as insiders / outsiders, as well as power dynamics between militaries, funding bodies, academic institutions, and researchers. At times encounters with the military can be personal and uncomfortable and these experiences are worth taking seriously to further understand military power, processes, and lives. Additionally, there was a call to think more comparatively in terms of national contexts to explore military power – instead of keeping national contexts separate.

⁷ To read more about some of the speakers' reflections see: Long E., Cree A., Godier-McBard L. & West H. (2021) Considering criticalities: Reflections from academics interested in military spouses and partners. Available at: <https://defenceresnet.org/considering-criticalities-reflections-from-academics-interested-in-military-spouses-and-partners/>

Final thoughts

When conducting critical research with military spouses, researchers must consider a wide range of issues particular to this specific group. These include:

- Challenges around gaining access and the implications that recruitment strategies might have on the voices that are heard.
- Choosing a methodological approach and associated methods which enable rich perspectives and experiences to be heard – balancing the needs of research objectives whilst also considering possible benefits to the participants.
- Balancing research objectives and activities with expectations of academic institutions, funders, and identified beneficiaries – considering what impact might be and how it can be achieved and accounted for.
- Navigating how the dynamics of criticality must be balanced against the need to attract funding, articulate impact, and gain ethics approval from the MOD – with there sometimes being a tension between these factors.

Research which centres military spouses is needed in order to understand the impact of military life, power, and processes beyond more obviously militarised phenomena. The Rethinking Military Spouses Critical Research Group seeks to engage directly with these challenges and looks forward to discussing these further in the future.

If you would like to get in contact, please email critmilspouse@gmail.com or follow us on Twitter [@CriticalSpouse](https://twitter.com/CriticalSpouse)

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About the Rethinking Military Spouses: Critical Research Group

We are a group of researchers focused on developing novel critical insights pertaining to military spouses. Broadly we are interested in the critical analysis of:

- Military spouses' lived experiences of, for example, deployments, communities, welfare provision, and divorce.
- The ways military spouses are represented and understood across different social, cultural, and political contexts.
- How military spouses' practical and emotional labour relates to military objectives.
- The relationship between military spouses, the military, and the wider state.

We are particularly interested in exploring the challenges and opportunities relating to:

- Rethinking homogenous framings of military spouses.
- Creative methodologies, maximising impact, and related implications.
- Our encounters with the military community.
- What it means to be critical.

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