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BIG BOYS DON'T CRY?

**Emotionality, Masculinity and Psychological Wellbeing:
The Experiences of British Military Personnel and
Veterans**

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Aims

- Military Masculinities –
 - High levels of psychological vulnerability
 - Resistance to emotional expression
 - Acceptance of / resistance to psychological help
- Masculinity as contributor to this nexus

- This paper
 - Interviews with servicemen about their experiences of emotional life in the military
 - Explore HOW hegemonic masculinities might be implicated and resisted in these accounts

- Higate (2003) men as biologically predisposed to combat and war or socially and historically constituted as ‘born to fight’?
- Dominant discourses of masculinity within the military explicitly endorse stoicism and other ‘masculine’ traits associated with task effectiveness (Kovitz, 2003).
- Femininities function as a foil to this construction - antithetical to military masculinities
 - derogatory comments from instructors: “girls can do better” or “you bunch of girls are always at the back” (Hockey, 1986, in Higate, 2003, p.17).
 - Emotional expression as ‘feminine’ and therefore *unmilitary*; ‘water drops remain women’s weapons’ (Hodson, 1984, p. 110).
 - ‘real men’ do not show feminine emotions (Connell, 2005)

However....

- Contemporary ideas about masculinities are a little less rigid – new men are ‘in touch’ with their emotional side
- Are current military masculinities merely a rigid expression of hegemonic masculinities?

“Don’t Bottle it up...”

- Public stigma cited as a major reason that 85% service personnel do not seek psychological help when they need it.
- Campaign focuses very heavily on PTSD – is this an ‘acceptable’ form of psychological distress or the military?
- Seeking help for psychological issues within the military is widely perceived as having an adverse impact on career progression (Hall, 2008).
- Leaves veterans vulnerable to a range of psychological and social problems when they leave the military, including alcoholism, homelessness and violent offending (Richards, Goldberg, Rodin and Anderson, 1989; Anderson, et al, 1994; Randall and Brown, 1994 ;Gunner and Knott, 1997; Higate, 2000; Mumola, 2000).



method

- 6 male participants
- Personal contact and word of mouth
- Series of semi structured interviews with servicemen
 - 60- 180 minutes long
 - 'Emotional Wellbeing', 'Psychological Stigma' 'Post War'.
- Analysed thematically (Braun and Clark)

The Military Identity as a *Masculine Identity*

- As a closed institution, the military functions as a community of practice in which tacit and agreed social 'rules' are formed and re-formed, to constitute a clear masculine military identity.
- a general uniform expectation for men within the military to conform to traditional/classical messages of masculinity
- emphasis on emotional control, rationality (i.e. 'silent'), and physical endurance (i.e. 'strong') (Connells, 2005)
- *M: '...and I tell you what, climbing a rope with 30 pounds of weight is a fucking man test....'*

- *M: I mean anyone else would have keeled over but I ran (Takes a deep outward breath and pauses for a moment), nearly sixty miles in 72 hours with blood poisoning which, I mean septicaemia is dangerous it would fuckin' kill ya. ... ' And I ran nearly sixty miles with it. That's, that's not, and well yeah I was fit, but that was all in the head, that was me mentally going nah there's nothing wrong with you but your fucked. So that's the kind of erm, the mental determination that we have.*
- Toughness as a prerequisite for military identities
- 'Mental determination' as the hallmark of the successful recruit

- Unemotionality as integral to military identities, and inherently masculine

PA: 'When you say that do the military prepare you emotionally the way they prepare you emotionally Is to deaden your emotions, yeah and men can do that a lot easier than women.' (p.7)

R: 'it's not in a man to get upset like a woman anyway' (p.5).

PA: 'ooo broke a nail' am I bothered? You know see someone lose an arm and they end up screaming and you can't be like that. That's just the way women are, women are pink and fluffy and like roses whereas men like beer and farting and stuff you know what I mean. In that way there are not treated equally and they never will be as in my opinion emotionally they can't handle it.'

- The ability to 'handle' extreme situations, without emotionality as the bedrock of military identities
- Constituted as necessarily masculine

Inappropriate /appropriate emotional expression

- *P: 'If you're a little bit upset because you're missing your family you tend to keep that to yourself because end that's perceived as weak or, y'no, 'stop being a girl' sort of thing, or 'missing your wife arh your with the lads come on'. I suppose of something stressful happened on operation like your involved in when somebody got hurt, injured or killed or whatever then erh, then I suppose yeah they do look after you quite well.'* (p.3)
- *PE: 'And he was still cracking on with his job and again it was really a case of your letting down your opo's if you don't. I think the way that your trained that your looking after one another, so that even the people under the greatest stress you get on with it because of that.'*p.9 Peter
- *P: 'If you're at work doing what your meant to be doing and you stop to have a cry your seen as letting the side down so you create a weakness in that group that is not necessarily necessary.'* (p.8)

- Emotionality per se = weakness
- Ordinary emotions – missing the family, being stressed – these are constituted as ‘outside’ the acceptable range of emotional expression for servicemen
- ‘Arh, you’re with the lads, come on’
- Ordinary emotionality is positioned as a *problem* for the military - ‘letting your opos down’
- Operationally linked stress – in relation to a ‘serious incident’ is OK. (appropriately ‘masculine’ emotion?)
- Right vs wrong way to ‘do’ emotion – mediated by military masculinities (particularly the notion of ‘brotherhood’ and the ‘military family’)

- *PA: 'personally I can see why it's stigmatised I think if it wasn't lots of young lads would be crying their eyes out... It seems to me if you tell someone they are strong they are, if you say (in a small voice) "oh you alright mate do you wanna cry?" then they will.'*
- Emotions as a floodgate that the military cannot afford to allow to be opened.
- Permission to be emotional will cripple the military
- You *must* be tough

- The 'Don't Bottle It Up' campaign explicitly suggests that service men should disclose emotional distress and difficult personal circumstances.
- However, the tacit 'rules' that govern behaviour within the military community explicitly function to contradict this
- members are discouraged from talking about such issues unless it is perceived to be impacting on their occupational performance.
- To avoid stigmatisation, recruits are encouraged to internalise their distress and 'soldier on' and therefore are prevented from emotionally unpacking such issues. (Harrison, 2003)



- M: “and that’s why It can be dangerous because lads just push themselves y’no even with stuff going on at home. I had a, one of my mates his dad committed suicide before Christmas and he didn’t tell anyone, y’no, and we didn’t know anything was wrong with him. Until we were out on the piss one night and just fuckin, he had an argument with some bloke then he got in a fight and I took him aside and went ‘what the fuck are you doing?’ sort of thing and he just broke down and it all came out. That’s why, erm, it is horrible, it is upsetting, it’s like why do you feel that you couldn’t say and he was like ‘well I didn’t wanna tell the lads I didn’t wanna show any sort of like weakness’.”

The Brotherhood

- Traditional constructions of hegemonic masculinity tend to be associated with rationality, toughness, and an ‘absence’ of overt expressions of emotionality (Higate, 2003).
- However, the military environment, while highly masculinised is also one that is characterised by often intense and fraught emotionality.
- Physical challenges of training, the intensity of combat – heightened emotionality is inevitable.
- How is this managed, in an environment where overt emotional expression is ‘weak’?
- ‘

- The Military Brotherhood
- equips its members to deal effectively with emotional experiences, unpack emotional issues within a 'masculine' form.
- Shared experiences and collective responsibility
- Profound emotional bond, and an emphasis on looking out for one another's wellbeing
- *PE: 'That's the greatest part of the military, that brotherhood that you'd die for each other.'* (p.9)

- Contemporary constructions of hegemonic masculinity allow the acceptable expression of emotion within the 'safe' space of the family
- The notion of 'Brotherhood' provides recruits with an acceptable channel for the expression of emotional bonds but this is tempered by its location within a set of masculinised terms.
- The notion of the 'warrior brotherhood' is an established one, a sense of being bound together by an intense emotional connection, but one that is manly, that enables emotional expression without undermining hegemonic masculine constructions.



- this sense of belongingness has its boundaries.
- Ron* - if he had *'problems with stress'* he would *'keep it to myself as it's a sign of weakness because they obviously write your report'* (p.4).
- The notion of weakness as 'inappropriate' is built into the military community from day 1 of recruitment
- Suspicion that support offered is seen purely as purposeful and task driven – there to 'weed out the weak'

- ‘brotherhood’ with subsequent collective and individual responsibility vs emotionality
- *M: ‘It’s my little theory about it, you show any sign of weakness, Erm, we are a family but it’s very competitive at the same time and you show weakness you’re gonna get shit for it.’ (p.9)*
- Emotional expression within the military ‘family’ is mediated by the construct of “accountability” and “weakness”
- Brotherhood is conditional support based on military masculine ideology..

Conclusions

- It is not a simple case of 'no emotions' in military life
- The discourse of brotherhood and the military 'family' enables the activation of powerful emotionality – connectedness, belongingness
- Brotherhood as a construct builds cohesion, a feeling of the military family, and a sense of willingness to self-sacrifice
- feeling 'homesick', being weepy or 'inappropriately' emotional breaks down the sense of brotherhood and is seen as a problem for your peers.
- You can feel intensely, but you have to do so in the 'right' way: