

Maximising Operational Effectiveness: Exploring Stigma, Militarism, and the Normative Connections to Military Partners' Support-Seeking

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Abstract

Non-serving partners of personnel in the British military endure numerous challenges due to their association with the Armed Forces and complex systems of support exist to mitigate some disadvantages they might experience. Military research suggests that support-seeking can be stigmatised, limiting the effectiveness of existing support systems. However, it seldom engages with how stigma is produced, often obscuring reflection on normative and disciplinary power, rendering discussions politically anesthetised. Through the thematic analysis of welfare policy and provision, interviews with welfare-providers and military partners, this article develops understandings of stigma as a barrier to support-seeking, considering how it is produced and how it is productive of gendered militarised neoliberalism.

Keywords

help-seeking, militarism, military partners, military spouses, military welfare, neoliberalism, stigma, support-seeking

Introduction

Non-serving partners of serving personnel encounter numerous challenges when managing military-related demands, particularly due to deployments and other related separations. Challenges include, but are not limited to, taking sole responsibility for children and households, conflict when military and family routines clash, complexities when

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caring for their serving partner post-deployment, strained marital and familial relationships, and impacts on mental health (Centre for Social Justice, 2016; Dandeker et al., 2006; Gribble et al., 2019a; Hyde, 2016; Keeling et al., 2015). In recognition of some of these, there is a complex system of support facilitated through the military, public sector, and charities. However, partners might avoid support-seeking due to stigma (Gray, 2017; Walker et al., 2020; Williamson, 2012).

Through thematic analysis of military-organised welfare policy and provision, interviews with partners of service personnel in the British Army (referred to as partners), and individuals providing support to the military community (referred to as welfare-providers), I develop understandings of stigma as a barrier to support-seeking by critically engaging with how stigma is produced, by whom, and for what purposes (Tyler and Slater, 2018). I argue that whilst stigma may be perpetuated between partners, it is substantively (re)produced through gendered militarised neoliberalism, particularly through narratives of security related to the prioritisation of operational effectiveness which are evident within military cultures and embedded within military-organised welfare policy and provision.

Stigma, Support-Seeking, and ‘Gazing Up’

Since Goffman’s (1963) seminal text on stigma, there exists an extended portfolio across disciplines reviewing various forms of stigma. Stigma refers to a practice, behaviour, or attribute which individuals, groups, or wider society have attached a notion of disgrace; it is the outcome of situatedness within institutional and cultural contexts. Stigma occurs when human differences are labelled according to dominant cultural beliefs associated with undesirable characteristics, and stigmatised persons are ‘othered’ from ‘normals’ (Link and Phelan, 2001). Stigmas attached to perceived weakness of character can receive the highest levels of intolerance because ‘failure’ is rendered the result of individual choice, obscuring wider structural factors.

In the UK there is a paucity of research exploring military partners’ experiences of stigma and rarely do discussions draw connections to normative power (critical approaches are discussed in the next section). Yet, it has been indicated that partners might avoid support-seeking because they do not want to be labelled a ‘welfare case’, are worried about potential negative impacts on their service partner’s career, and the wider stigmatisation associated with mental health and domestic abuse (Verey et al., 2017; Walker et al., 2020; Williamson, 2012). Furthermore, stigma might be exacerbated by partners not trusting the training and confidentiality of military-organised providers, concerns about privacy in close-knit communities, and concerns about being judged by other partners assuming rank (Dandeker et al., 2006; Long, 2019; Williamson, 2012).

To better understand how stigma is made possible, it is important to closely reflect on the forms of power that might produce stigma, and those that stigma produces (Link and Phelan, 2014). Recent sociological debate, exemplified by the publication of formative *The Sociology of Stigma* monograph in 2018¹, critique applications of stigma removed from analysis of normative power: ‘the conceptual understanding of stigma inherited from Goffman, along with the use of micro-sociological and/or psychological research

methods in stigma research, often side-lines questions about where stigma is produced, by whom and for what purposes' (Tyler and Slater, 2018: 721).

Focusing only on micro-interactions can lead to conclusions that treat stigma as produced by individuals (Fine and Asch, 1988), potentially stigmatising the stigmatised. Critical researchers have called for an interrogation of how stigma, as a technology of control, (re)produces and justifies normative power by 'gazing up' (Parker and Aggleton, 2003; Tyler and Slater, 2018). Outside of military contexts, compelling accounts have explored the cultural, political legitimisation of anti-welfare common-sense (Jensen and Tyler, 2015), and state-welfare as a disciplinary technology of power (Cooper, 2021). Receiving state-welfare is stigmatised according to discourses of 'undeserving others', shame, blame, and neoliberal, personal responsabilisation of life outcomes, often related to employment, income, and productivity (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013). The stigmatisation of welfare-receipt is also highly gendered: women are disproportionately affected by austerity and crises, whilst being held accountable to idealised notions of good motherhood and citizenship by not 'exploiting' the benefits system which is associated with threatening national solvency (Dabrowski, 2021a, 2021b; Evans, 2016; Jensen, 2012; Jensen and Tyler, 2015).

This article considers stigma-power (Link and Phelan, 2014) as more than micro-level interactions perpetuated among partners, but as a form of neoliberal governmentality that is (re)produced through organising principles of gendered militarism. It conceptualises stigma as a productive political apparatus, (re)producing subjects who (re)shape themselves to conform to norms, simultaneously justifying the exercise of structural power (Foucault, 1975; Tyler and Slater, 2018). It contributes to present sociological debate around normative and disciplinary discourse surrounding state welfare by exploring military particularities, speaking more to discourses of national security and the militarised, gendered ideals implied around this.

Gendered Militarism

It is well understood that militaries are deeply gendered institutions which value masculine characteristics including stoicism, rationality, and strength, limiting space for 'vulnerability' (Hockey, 1986; Woodward and Duncanson, 2017). These values are justified and normalised through organisational cultures and division of labour, and are (re)produced through recruitment, socialisation, and discipline (Carreiras, 2017; Carreiras and Alexandre, 2013). The articulation of desired masculinities requires the careful framing of the feminised 'other', and there is wide scholarship exploring the productive power of this binary. Notably, feminist research has explored the ways in which masculine, muscular protectorship is reified through the discursive framing of that which must be protected – women, home, and hearth (Basham, 2016; Cree, 2020; Horn, 2010).

Research on gendered militarism points to ways in which we might begin to understand how stigma is (re)produced within military contexts, highlighting the nexus of constructivism, power, and military processes. Although definitions vary (Stavrianakis and Selby, 2012), militarism generally refers to the 'multi-faceted set of social, cultural, economic and political processes by which military approaches to social problems and issues gain both elite and popular acceptance' (Woodward, 2014: 41). Centring gender

and the everyday, Gray (2016a: 150) defines militarism as ‘the normalized, everyday gendered social relations of the preparation for, and conduct of, political domination and control for which the use of organized violence is a viable option’. Indeed, focusing on the humdrum forms of gendered militarism that insinuate themselves within women’s everyday lives (Enloe, 2000).

There is much feminist scholarship exploring military partners’ entanglement with militarism. Enloe’s (1983, 2000) pioneering work traced the US and UK militaries’ reliance upon women’s labour, arguing that militaries have long manoeuvred femininities, moulding women into performing gendered roles for military purposes. For example, by providing emotional support to soldiers, cheap labour around bases, smoothing familial ruptures caused by deployments, and giving the military a less brutal public image (Enloe, 1983, 2000; Hyde, 2016). The ‘model military wife’ subjects’ labour is idealised, held accountable to gendered expectations organised around supporting their serving-partner, and subsequently military objectives (Enloe, 2000; Gray, 2017; Harrison and Laliberté, 1993). Additionally, partners are expected to be resilient, stoic, independent, resourceful, self-sacrificing, and loyal. Enloe (2000) asserts that the deliberate mobilisation of women’s femininity and labour, with historical legacy, by military officials and state authorities responsible for waging war, has been so effective that ideals are often internalised. Furthermore, military commanders rely on women being satisfied as unpaid loyal wives, and not being satisfied can become synonymous with not supporting military objectives. This article considers stigma as part of the toolkit holding partners accountable to gendered, idealised subjectivities. Thus, chiming with Link and Phelan’s (2014) argument that stigma-power is exercised according to the motives and interests of the stigmatiser which could be to ‘keep people down’, ‘keep people in’, or ‘keep people away’.

There are few examples of UK-based research which plainly focus on gender, militarism, stigma, and support-seeking. More often, this research focuses on (ex)serving personnel. For example, by examining military doctrine, McGarry et al. (2015: 362) explored service personnel, masculinity, stigma, and resilience, arguing that ‘inherent resilience is entrenched within the structural resilience of the military; an environment that maintains its own effectiveness by stigmatizing behavior that is easily identifiable as an outlier of the norm’. The expectation that soldiers should exhibit tough masculinities and resilience, as advocated in military doctrine and training, might limit their support-seeking. McGarry et al. (2015) argue that as soldiers are inculcated into the military institution they become aware of ‘stigma symbols’ (Goffman, 1963) related to ‘emotional impairment’ which might be perceived by others as signs of vulnerability rather than resilience. So, resilience which is advocated to protect soldiers from the harms through service, in fact undermines wellbeing because it limits support-seeking potential. Additionally, Cornish (2017) explored stigma, gender, mental health, and the military, arguing that military personnel navigate their emotional experiences within gendered discourses, drawing connections with wider societal stigmatisation of mental health challenges.

Focusing on military partners, Gray’s (2017) research with victim-survivors of domestic abuse explored the limitations of their support-seeking and connections to militarism. Gray (2017) argued that partners can be reluctant to seek help because of the

importance attached to stoicism and self-reliance in the military community. Failure to meet idealised expectations of the military partner subject, for example by seeking help, can be met with derision from the community, so partners policed themselves to avoid being associated with ‘failure’. This self-discipline could be considered, in Goffman’s (1963) terms, as a strategy to ‘pass’ as ‘normal’ (or ideal) to avoid the stigmatising label of ‘failed’. Gray (2017: 235) argues that partners’ experiences of support-seeking were ‘not only shaped by militarism; they were part of the ongoing performative construction of military gender identities’. Although this research did not consider stigma as a concept, implications are easily inferred, notably that stigma is produced by gendered militarism, and is productive of normative accountabilities.

Approaches to stigma taken by these studies are aligned with the call to not side-line questions of power. Through blending critical sociological conceptualisations of stigma with militarism, this article examines how narratives of operational effectiveness, embedded within welfare provision, substantively (re)produce stigma associated with support-seeking.

Methodology

These findings are based on research conducted between 2015–2019 exploring British Army partners’ experiences of deployment and their negotiation of various support options (ethically approved by Lancaster University). I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 26 partners and 26 welfare-providers, lasting between 60–90 minutes², enabling participants the flexibility to explore issues important to them. This research adopted a life-history approach (Yeandle, 1987), thus reflecting on multiple deployments partners had experienced, and their wider military-associated lives.

Partners were recruited through social media, adverts in welfare hubs, and peer referral. With over 90% of military spouses being female (Ministry of Defence [MOD], 2020) it is unsurprising that only women responded to the adverts. All were married to a male serving partner, except for one who was in a long-term relationship. At the time of interviewing, none were in the process of seeking formal support. All partners had experienced their serving partner’s deployment to Iraq and/or Afghanistan (since 2001) and many had managed multiple deployments and military-related separations. Most had children of various ages, some were unemployed, and others worked in roles related to teaching and healthcare for example. Their serving partners held a range of ranks, but I did not collect data on class-identities so cannot comment on these implications. All lived in the UK, the majority in England, mostly in military housing. Most were interviewed face-to-face in public spaces, others virtually. Although it was easier to build rapport face-to-face, conducting virtual interviews was beneficial as it provided additional insight into their lives. For example, I experienced how busy they were as they squeezed me into their tight schedules; one parked whilst driving home from work, another spoke to me whilst feeding her children, and some brought their children to the interview. A few were currently experiencing a deployment and commented that the interview was beneficial as it gave them someone to talk to about the challenges they were managing – some remarked that they were not acknowledged, heard, or valued by the military.

Welfare-providers were recruited from non-military organised charities by direct emails, and military-organised support organisations through referral. Developing trust from gatekeepers was essential for my being able to access the otherwise generally secretive military institution. Eighteen welfare-providers were military-organised, including advisors and community development-related roles. Another eight welfare-providers worked for charities supporting military-affiliated individuals. All names are pseudonyms, and welfare-providers are identified as military-organised or non-military organised to protect anonymity. Most interviews with welfare-providers were conducted in welfare spaces, some 'behind the wire'. In many cases, to gain access to military bases I had to hand over my passport to the armed guards at the gate and was escorted (either by the interviewee or an assigned soldier) to the room where the interview would take place – often this escort would be conducted in silence making the process feel very formal. I wondered how this might be different and would feel for a military partner coming onto base to seek support, as welfare offices can be situated 'behind the wire'.

It is important to highlight that I am a member of the military community – I grew up in a military family, and my partner currently serves – and so consider myself a partial-insider. This research benefited from my partial-insider identity because I had an understanding of military cultures and shared similar experiences, so was able to more easily develop rapport with interviewees. In recognition of the power differential between the interviewer and interviewee, particularly when discussing upsetting topics such as deployments, I shared my experiences too to reduce the imbalance. In this way, the interviews were a relational, co-produced product between myself and the interviewee's lived experiences. Indeed, 'sociology is a living, organic discipline and the crossover between our experiences and those of our participants adds depth, rather than dilutes our position' (Cooper and Rogers, 2015: 7). Discussion in this article is produced from co-constituted insider knowledges and experiences, rather than an attempt to uncover a singular representative point-of-view. To limit the appropriation of interviewees' stories, I regularly encouraged participants to speak to me as an outsider, asking them to expand on their explanations, especially when they said, 'you know all of this'. I also maintained a research diary exploring how my own experiences were entangled with the research.

Most interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, and in cases where the participant preferred not to be audio-recorded, I took detailed notes. Data including interviews and field notes were analysed thematically on NVivo (version 11) – they were organised into codes as they arose, and were refined in an interactive-process, working towards 'best-fit' (Arksey and Knight, 2009). Coding was grounded in the data, rather than being pre-set and applied to the data, allowing for exploratory analysis (Charmaz, 2000) and the emergence of themes relating to support-seeking, stigma, and identities. Data included here demonstrate key findings from interviews. I also thematically analysed selected communications provided to partners around deployment to establish context and add detail – those discussed in this article are two DVDs produced by military-organised welfare titled *Deployment – A Families Guide* (2011) and *Homecoming – A Families Guide* (2011).

The following sections outline key findings showing that whilst stigma may be perpetuated between partners, stigma is substantively (re)produced through gendered,

militarised neoliberalism – particularly through the narrative of operational effectiveness embedded within welfare policy and provision.

Operational Effectiveness

The Army provides a package of support mitigating some challenges of military life, notably through the Unit Welfare Officer and Army Welfare Service. Welfare Officers, considered first-line support, are often British Army Captains and their offices are based around military camps, sometimes ‘behind the wire’, close to military housing. They focus on integrating military communities, providing a confidential helping service, signposting to other providers, and supporting families during military-separations. Generally, they refer complex cases to the Army Welfare Service who offer personal, community, information, and housing support. Support is also available from military-chaplains, the Chain of Command, military charities and wider public sector.

Feminist scholars critique provision, saying it has not developed from benevolence, but instead to enhance militarism by maintaining wives’ loyalty to retain personnel and maximise deploy-ability (Enloe, 2000; Horn, 2010). Maximising operational effectiveness is centred within UK Army Welfare Policy: ‘This Army General and Administrative Instruction [. . .] promulgates Army Welfare Policy in order to deliver a key element of the moral component of fighting power and thus contribute to maintaining operational effectiveness’ (Army, 2016: 1–3). It states, ‘the needs of the Army come first but those of the individual come a close second’ and ‘the inclusion of entitled family members recognises that attending to their welfare concerns contributes directly to operational effectiveness’. These framings place operational effectiveness as the primary objective, and welfare is provided as a means towards this end, situating families’ needs as secondary to the military. Challenges encountered by partners are vulnerable to stigmatisation as they are treated as a threat to operational effectiveness and, subsequently, national security. Whilst family issues are framed as a problem for military objectives, alternative realities are obscured, for example, military objectives creating problems for families. Sociological debate identifies how civilian state-welfare recipients are stigmatised for threatening national solvency, exacerbated by capitalist and austerity logics (Jensen, 2012). Yet in military contexts, recipients can be stigmatised differently, for threatening operational effectiveness. Present policy renders families as integral, and thus partly responsible, for the state’s capacity to deploy and maintain security. Furthermore, partners are reminded to accept their issues are a ‘footnote to the national security interest’ (Horn, 2010: 62).

These narratives trickle into communications from military-organised welfare providing partners advice about how to manage their serving-partner’s deployments. This information is beneficial to partners whilst also benefiting the military because the support-framework aims to enable serving-personnel to focus on military objectives. I was given the two aforementioned DVDs, which are provided to families to help them manage challenges of deployment and homecoming. Each foregrounds the military’s interest, focusing on what partners can do to reduce their serving partner’s worries whilst they are deployed, echoing common tropes of the ‘happy wife, happy soldier’ (Gribble et al., 2019b), or ‘happy wife, happy military’. In both DVDs the military mobilises partners’

productive, gendered labour by offering advice about how to manage, adapt, and cope with each deployment stage. Partners are advised to discard letters criticising their serving partner and keep busy during deployment. Clips of a female partner locking doors and windows when inside and when leaving their home are shown, reminding them of expectations of their domestic responsibility. Post-deployment, partners are advised to relinquish some responsibilities gained during deployment, making space for their returned partner, accompanied by a clip of an unhappy man (the returned serving-partner?), watching a woman (the partner?), checking the oil in a car. This is reminiscent of previous insights about the military's mobilisation of, and reliance upon, female practical and emotional labour (Enloe, 1983, 2000; Hyde, 2016). Crucially, the communications gloss over the fundamentally disempowering, highly gendered, nature of military life, presenting a textbook of how one can cope.

Not only do these communications remind partners that the military's needs come first and foremost, but their labour is also framed as productive towards these ends, should they manage to cope. Communications perpetuate normative discourses that whilst military life is challenging, partners should be able to rise to this, and support is there if they cannot. These messages (re)produce neoliberal, idealised, militarised subjectivities, holding partners accountable to demanding military requirements (Enloe, 2000; Gray, 2017). Stigma is made possible on these terms.

Some partners explained that communications misrepresented their experiences, especially due to the focus on the serving person's (the military's) interests. The DVDs are highly gendered, focusing on what *she* can do to help *him* alleviate *his* worries. Welfare is offered to support partners to control and contain family issues and not interfere with the masculine military's objectives and national security. Some partners explained how this limited their likelihood of support-seeking:

I know welfare is paid by the Army to support my husband in his role . . . I don't want welfare to know my business, so I wouldn't go to see them . . . everything that might impede my husband doing his job I don't want to give them the idea that he might not be doing his job right. (Natasha, partner)

Though eligible, Natasha does not consider welfare to be there for her, instead existing for military purposes. She worried that her 'business' (read as welfare needs) would negatively impact her husband's deploy-ability and military career, echoing previous research (Williamson, 2012). This worry disciplines her into controlling her 'business', focusing on maintaining her serving partner's readiness, oriented towards anticipated, imagined future military-requirements (Long, 2021). Ironically, not seeking support may negatively affect operational effectiveness, as those who need it may not receive it.

The conflation of idealised, gendered subjectivities, partners' coping around deployments, and maximising operational effectiveness draws families into a space where their conduct becomes bound to militarised expectations. This conflation is partly made possible through military welfare provision which (re)produces normative ideals. Afterall, 'policies beget policies, which in turn, beget behaviour' (Horn, 2010: 59). The next section demonstrates how gendered militarised neoliberal expectations underpin partners' experiences of stigma.

Hierarchies of Deservedness

Whilst partners do engage with welfare-providers, many explained reasons for avoiding support-seeking. Their descriptions showed how support-seeking was subjected to strict criteria, where acting outside of constructed boundaries of deservedness could be stigmatised. Hierarchies of deservedness related strongly to narratives of security, operational effectiveness and the ideal, gendered, neoliberal, military partner (Enloe, 2000; Gray, 2017, 2016b). These constructs are not created by partners, instead they are made possible, in part, through normative ideals surrounding military and wider state-organised welfare receipt.

Exemplifying perspectives shared by partners, when asked in which circumstances she would seek support, Harriet [partner] provided a concise set of considerations: Is it an emergency? Is it worth being on a welfare list? Will negative impacts on the serving partner's career be worth it? Does my case deserve the resources? Although she would consider support-seeking, like others, she explained 'it's like admitting defeat'. She referred to her gendered, militarised role: 'to sustain the family at home, and your husband away, you need to keep plodding along', and hinted towards the need to be resilient: 'just keep swimming' and 'if you allow a chink in your armour, it all comes crashing down'.

Various themes are evident within Harriet's perspective orientated around deservedness, balanced against military imperatives. Citing Tyler (2011), Allen and Taylor (2012: 10) explained that configured motherly roles (re)produce hierarchies of 'good' parenting 'where maternal femininities can only gain value when they adhere to models of neoliberal femininity determined by economic productivity and flexibility – as opposed to young, lone and non-working/'workshy', welfare-dependent mothers'. Harriet's explanation relates strongly to ideas of productivity, but rather than being centred upon economic productivity, her reasoning is centred around militarised productivity. 'Good' mothering is understood to not only be necessary to sustain the family, it is also necessary to enable the deployment of personnel. Partners hope to be resilient to challenges caused by the absence of their serving partner and 'keep plodding along'. Like others, Harriet associated support-seeking with a lack of resilience and defeat – yet she also alluded to the significant pressures on her by stating that one chink will lead to her armour to come crashing down. This armour – her coping – is an important strategy enabling her to 'pass' and avoid stigma (Goffman, 1963).

Hannah (non-military provider) critiqued resilience narratives, explaining that 'the sort of resilience that we are supposed to have as military families' reduces the likelihood of support-seeking. Bolstering resilience within military communities is often cited in welfare programmes, yet perpetuating resilience risks framing military families as essentially resilient, individualising the transference of blame and shame if they are perceived to be vulnerable (Cramm et al., 2018). Furthermore, military cultures and doctrine (re) produce normative ideas of the resilient military subject, where problems are framed as challenges to overcome (Cornish, 2017; McGarry et al., 2015) or bounce-back from (Gill and Orgad, 2018). Pressures on partners to perform resilience were evident in many interviews and presented as incompatible with support-seeking.

The stigmatisation of support-seeking, underpinned by articulations of deservedness, also occurred through comparison to the 'neediness' of others, drawing on normative ideals:

There's always going to be two types of Army wife, you'll always have the ones that sit around and moan. . . my friend, she's 24, has three children under five and she's moaning 'cos her husband wasn't here, it's like well you know, I don't like have a go at her and put her down, I say I understand exactly how you're feeling but there are millions of women doing this. . . there are always somebody worse off than you, don't be afraid to ask for help, but it isn't as bad as you think. (Rachael, partner)

Rachael later explained that partners are 'in it together' and whilst she would support someone, she worried that their struggle might negatively affect the wider community who are also trying to cope with deployment. This resonates with Harriet's reflection about avoiding chinks in armour, but rather than focusing on a personal perspective, Rachael relates this to the community. Rachael does not condemn those who seek support, but in the account of her friend's experience, she does not consider the issue to be deserving because 'there are millions of women doing this'. The idea that someone else might have it worse was a common theme in the interviews, and emotions of fear and overt displays of upset could be stigmatised: 'it's always like you can't be scared because there's worse off. . . they'll go well what are you crying about?' (Olivia, partner). Indeed, these emotions, including Rachael's reflection on her friend's 'moaning' are not synonymous with valued militarised behaviours (Cornish, 2017; Hockey, 1986; Woodward and Duncanson, 2017). Partners drew boundaries of inclusion based on shared experiences, but if one is considered to not be coping, differences were highlighted, separating themselves from perceived deviance.

Linked to the stigmatisation of neediness, perceived over-use of resources was also criticised for the impact it might have on trust: 'there are so many people. . . that take advantage of [formal support] and can make [welfare-providers] more worried about who to trust, who's being genuine' (Rachael, partner). 'Taking advantage' of support provision is considered worse during deployment because the whole community is deemed under pressure, exacerbated by the 'in it together' narrative. This narrative resonates with Jensen's (2012) argument that families, particularly mothers, are responsibilised to live within their means to achieve national solvency. Yet in this case, partners are expected to live within their (and the military's) means to ensure national security, echoing the previously identified narrative that whilst *he* sacrifices himself on deployment, *she* sacrifices herself at home (Cree, 2020; Horn, 2010). Further cautioning against over-use, some suggested the community should be grateful because this support is not available to civilians:

To me it's not normal having these people do this job 24/7 for us. . . I've heard some right stories of them asking the welfare guys to go and cut the grass. . . it's money wasted to be honest on a good handful or more men being paid to sit around at the beck and call of wives with silly little things that need doing. Then on the other hand I had the extreme obviously of our daughter being really poorly, they stepped up and they were amazing, and I couldn't fault them. (Bonnie, partner)

Bonnie suggested that support available to military communities is unlike, and much more than, wider state-organised welfare. She was concerned that offering 'too much' might foster dependency among partners and criticised those whom she considered to be

seeking support for the wrong reasons. Wider political discourse holds individuals, particularly mothers in families, accountable for exercising ‘good parental values’ of thriftiness and temperance, to reduce the burden on the welfare state (Jensen, 2012). However, within military contexts, it seems these values might be tied less to economic thriftiness and are perhaps more closely aligned to other forms of frugality around emotions, military-resources, and the prioritisation of military needs. It is also important to highlight the gendered interplay Bonnie hints towards by suggesting military men’s time, focus and attention are being wasted by ‘silly’ women asking for unnecessary things in contrast to masculine military business. Again, positioning military needs above female partners.

Many were also concerned about being judged negatively by the wider community, for example by being marked by the stigmatising label ‘welfare case’, identifying them as ‘other’ to a successful partner (Link and Phelan, 2001).

If [other partners are] like me they probably wouldn’t want to seek help because they don’t want people thinking oh here’s another wife that can’t cope, ‘cos you do hear about some wives completely going to pieces and they’re in the welfare office every week crying. (Matilda, partner)

Negative judgement is exacerbated by the close-knit communities many Army families live in, and partners often described difficulties around privacy as confidentiality is not always maintained, and rumours were rife: ‘I think it’s all just gossipy, bitchy. . . and although it’s made to look like everyone’s welcome that’s not actually the case’ (Josie, partner). Gray (2017) argued that narratives of failure subjects individuals to self-policing themselves to avoid the circulation of shame around (un)worthiness of sympathy and support. Failure, in this context, is associated with being perceived as unable to cope with deployment challenges, and particular forms of support-seeking are subjected to stigma, previously discussed, around neediness and emotionality. Being labelled a ‘welfare case’ is regarded as the product of one’s own pathology, rather than the outcome of challenging military demands.

Resistance

Stigmatisation of support-seeking was recognised amongst most welfare-providers, and many described strategies to counter perspectives by attending groups and moving support from behind closed doors. Many, particularly in community roles, emphasised being personable so partners might discuss issues before they become complex, aiming to normalise support-seeking:

Not everyone likes coming to welfare, because they think welfare’s a dirty word. ‘Oh I’ve got to go to welfare, I’m going to be such a burden now’, but they’re not a burden, and this is the type of influence that I’m trying to get them out of, you know the concept of that welfare is not a bad thing, welfare is here to help. (Rick, military-organised provider)

This well-meaning work is hindered if initiatives do not address the prioritisation of operational effectiveness embedded within welfare provision. Furthermore, ignoring the

stigmatising effects of militarised norms places responsibility for stigma production onto partners:

[partners] stereotype, and they get stereotyped so quickly, it's like 'oh wow you've been to welfare', hmm 'you've been to welfare but you've had a cup of tea, you've had a cake and we've just chatted about random stuff, to get you out the house', how is that becoming a welfare case? (Rick, military-organised provider)

This perspective, echoed by other providers, obscures the disciplinary, normalising, stigmatising effects of military cultures prioritising operational effectiveness. Through not considering how stigma is made possible, partners are pathologised as primary producers of stigma, arguably stigmatising them further.

Whilst most welfare-providers considered ways to overcome stigma associated with support-seeking, a minority perpetuated stigmatising tropes. For example, two stated: 'the wives think everybody owes them something', 'mine are needy, but [another welfare-provider's] are more needy' and 'the wives expect everything don't they, and the more you give them the more they want'. Through these descriptions, stigmatisation of support-seeking is (re)produced, framing partners as needy and seeking too much, hampering strategies towards tackling stigma.

A minority of providers were critical of the prioritisation of the military over partners' needs. For example, describing a case when a serving person was undergoing rehabilitation from injury, Hannah [non-military provider] said their partner picked up all the pieces, looking after him and their family. She eventually approached her doctor for support and was told to 'drink a mug of hot chocolate before you go to bed and it'll be fine'. Hannah criticised this approach as she thought it was 'more of a cry for "I am feeling in a pretty dark spot here"' concluding the support system was all about the soldiers. This prioritisation of military needs is a form of stigma-power where partners' needs are relegated.

Some partners actively resist stigma associated with support-seeking. For example, military charities, often comprised of military partners, encourage others to seek support if needed. Some regularly inform the MOD of discontents reminding us of Enloe's (2014) argument that military policies can and are tweaked over time, as women change their understanding of themselves and organise. Furthermore, there are 'wives committees' working with military-organised providers to build networks, supporting partners to manage pressures. Yet impact is limited if adaptations do not change the way bases are run (Enloe, 2014), or shift focus from operational effectiveness. Indeed, 'below the surface of the military's family programs is the constant awareness that the military is designed to fight wars, not provide social welfare' (Horn, 2010: 67).

Discussion

Although research has identified that British military partners' support-seeking might be stigmatised, it often side-lines questions of production and perpetuation, thus de-politicising lived experiences. There are some exceptions (e.g., Gray, 2016a, 2016b, 2017) and this article contributes to these works by blending recent sociological conceptualisations

of stigma with feminist debates around gendered militarism, showing that normative ideals at both macro- and micro-levels (re)produce the stigmatisation of support-seeking. Additionally, it contributes to the wider research programme within critical military studies exploring ways in which militarism is (re)produced and justified – for example, Higate et al. (2019) argued that reservists might avoid celebrating their stigmatised militarised identity in civilian workplaces, neutralising possibilities of debates around the legitimacy of the military. This article has demonstrated how the stigmatisation of support-seeking (re)produces normative ideals, embedded within welfare policy and provision, positioning partners' labour as key to supporting military operations. Therefore, military-organised welfare might be considered as a form of governmentality, reminding partners of their militarised positionality (Foucault, 1975).

This article furthers sociological debates on stigma. Whilst it focuses on military-particularities, it is important to consider how discussions relate to broader sociological research, not least because partners do not just exist within military contexts. The idealised military partner subject (Enloe, 2000; Gray, 2017) is not dissimilar to wider normative, gendered, expectations of women and motherhood: that she is best placed to raise children, will sacrifice her own needs, wants, and interests for the sake of the children, and that 'good mothering' supports neoliberalism (Allen and Taylor, 2012). Across numerous contexts, feminist scholars have explored how constructed social problems are conflated with 'failed mothering', made possible through the stigmatisation of subverting idealised expectations. Stone (2020: 2) states that 'norms and demands crowd in on mothers from all sides, as embodying the particular form of power that Foucault [1975] calls disciplinary power, operating as it does through normalising judgement and internalised observation'. Stone argues that mothers are ranked and judged, compared to idealised expectations, constantly scrutinised by authorities, experts, other mothers, and individuals. Military partners are implicated within this form of gendered, disciplinary power, yet rather than supporting economic forms of neoliberalism, expectations are underpinned by a militarised form of neoliberalism.

This article contributes to sociological debates on the relationship between women and state-welfare, which often focuses on economic disadvantage. Indeed, military-organised welfare functions differently to wider state provision as it is less concerned with capital and instead focused on maintaining operational effectiveness. Previous research on state-welfare has identified neoliberalism and austerity politics as central to stigma-power, but this article highlights different implications oriented around 'security' and thus stigma is lived differently by military partners. In times where security narratives are increasingly threading through the social imaginary (e.g., terrorism and disease), future research on both military and non-military organised state support would benefit from considering stigma, militarism, and (in)security.

It is important to articulate how stigma is also made possible through ideas of responsibility. Neoliberal logics were evident in many of the partners' reflections on how they manage military life, particularly around deployments, where they aimed to 'just get on with it'. They aimed to be resilient to military demands, and many welfare providers talked about bolstering resilience, but resilience is a 'regulatory ideal' (Gill and Orgad, 2018), holding individuals accountable regardless of structural implications. This is not

disconnected from wider societal discourse of the idealised neoliberal female subject who ‘bounces-back’ from adversity, re-framing vulnerability as opportunities for empowerment (Dabrowski, 2021a; Gill and Orgad, 2018). These discourses ‘other’ those who do not ‘bounce-back’, calling into question their character, making stigma possible, whilst obscuring structural inequalities.

Sociological research with economically marginalised individuals shows that they disassociate themselves from perceived ‘subordinates’, instead aligning themselves with a perceived ‘ordinary’ (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013). Support-seeking is articulated in similar ways by military partners – whilst they did not speak of financial challenges, they were keen to align themselves with the militarised idealised subject of the military partner (Enloe, 2000; Gray, 2017). By doing so, they contrast their practice to those who are perceived to not be managing – warning of the negative consequences of underserving support-seeking in terms of need and resources. The stigmatising power behind the good military partner, or the good wife, is made possible through the imagined ‘failed’ other and politics of disgust are materialised by the wider stigmatisation of state-welfare receipt. Indeed, concerns about being labelled a ‘welfare case’ bear many similarities to other degrading terms outside of military spheres, grounded in classed stereotypes (e.g., ‘benefit scroungers’).

Conclusion

Support-seeking is stigmatised through constructed hierarchies of deservedness which are intertwined with gendered, militarised norms and expectations of partners’ roles which are produced, partly, through operational effectiveness narratives embedded within welfare policy and communications. Stigma associated with deservedness is perhaps inevitable because it is associated with the politics of coping, resilience, national (in) security, and military resources. Whilst this research has focused primarily on military-particularities, it has indicated connections with broader stigmatising logics across state-welfare. Future research should seek to engage with these connections at a deeper level. Furthermore, it would be useful for intersectional approaches to explore connections relating to class, ethnicity, and sexuality which are seldom considered within military partner research.

This discussion is timely because the recent MOD-commissioned review of welfare provision recommended that support should be provided to military families without stigma or fear (Walker et al., 2020). To destabilise stigma, we must look at how it is (re)produced from normative structures of power. Whilst welfare-providers try to encourage partners to seek support, approaches that do not engage with the effects that militarised cultures and expectations have will limit success. Whilst constructions of deservedness are based around formulations of maintaining operational effectiveness, rendering partners’ status secondary to the military, tackling stigma will be challenging. Welfare-providers perpetuating beliefs around ‘over-use’ and ‘taking advantage’ hampers this further. Continuing attempts to disrupt stigma through bolstering community networks and educating partners of the benefits of support-seeking is only partially effective when stigma is inherently intertwined with militarism, operational effectiveness, and welfare policies. Solutions may not exist within policy, but rather demand a

more complex shift away from an ethos which prioritises military aims and objectives, therein lying an overwhelming challenge for improving support-provision.


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Notes

1. Published by *Sociology*, Volume 66 Issue 4 in July of 2018.
2. Three were both partner and welfare-provider so I asked questions about their familial and work experiences. Identification in this article depends on the context they were speaking.

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