

‘Am I resistant to a military wife identity? Maybe not entirely’: Animating life history interviews as fictive diaries

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Abstract

In recent years academics have questioned how findings may be presented in ways that centre the complex, rich and nuanced reflections heard and felt in qualitative research – and if this is even possible. We are witnessing a creative turn as ‘data’ is being translated into art-forms to reach wider audiences in sensory formats. Such endeavours open opportunities to move beyond the confines of conventional practices of academic writing, creating space for rethinking how we might attempt to *show* the textured and felt stories shared by participants. In the spirit of these endeavours, this article explores the opportunities afforded by authoring life history interviews into fictive diaries. Through doing so, this article argues that research could be animated in this way to *show* the complex emotionality and temporality that underpins participant narratives, perhaps even evoking an emotional, empathetic, response in the reader as they are drawn into participants’ stories.

Keywords

Life history, narrative research, animating interviews, diaries, temporality, emotions

Introduction

It has long been recognised that presenting qualitative research is challenging and requires researchers to make various judgements about what to include, exclude, how findings may be represented, or if they can even claim to be representative. Qualitative researchers are increasingly looking towards more creative ways in which to disseminate their research, commending these approaches for their capacity to show and share complex, nuanced, and affective stories to their audiences (e.g. Chambers, 2023; Karcher and Caldwell, 2014; Rennolds, 2022; Wilson, 2018).

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In the spirit of this creative turn, this article reflects on the opportunities afforded by translating the narratives shared during interviews into ‘fictive’ diary excerpts, written by myself as the researcher. This has been informed by the challenges I encountered when considering how I might communicate the stories shared with me during life history interviews I conducted with civilian female partners of male (ex-)service personnel. The aims and scope of the research meant that detailing the multiplicity of interviewee’s reflections on temporal nuance between times was important, as was engaging with their deeply evocative stories pertaining to love and war.

By learning lessons from other projects which explore how qualitative research may animate rather than represent stories (e.g. those engaging with non-representational approaches), this article considers the opportunities afforded by authoring life history interviews into ‘fictive’ diary excerpts. It is important to state upfront that I am not suggesting that this form of sharing qualitative research is ‘the answer’, or that it is better than other formats. Indeed, the idea that there is a truth ‘out there’ that is discoverable and thus representable has been long challenged by many academics. Dewsbury (2010) tells us that research has always been about failing – failing to discover a truth, failing to comprehend what is known by participants, failing to thoroughly, or even partly, represent life-worlds. Yet rather than ignoring these factors, or eschewing them simply as limitations, performative, non-representational, and affect-based scholarship calls for us to lean into the idea that whilst there may be ‘no matter’ we should ‘try again, fail again, fail better’ (Dewsbury, 2010: 321). This is a worthy endeavour as it enables us to build critique and destabilise accepted practices of thought and move beyond the ‘know-and-tell’ approaches that underpin much research to-date (Dewsbury, 2010; Thrift, 2004).

This article starts by providing contextual information about the research background, highlighting the issues I encountered when deciding how to share my research in ways which aim to animate the complex, deeply emotional, temporally situated stories I heard and felt during interviews. It then engages with key debates around representation – here I explain that I am concerned with how life history interviews may be shared in ways which do not claim representation, but rather attempt to animate the ideas and feelings shared with and felt by me. Following this, I detail my decision to use fictive diaries as a creative format, meeting the project’s aims and objectives. I will then provide detail on how I created them, providing an example from one interviewee’s story. Finally, I will reflect on the opportunities and limitations of such an approach, focusing on issues of emotion, temporality and contributions this makes to military family scholarship.

Contextualising the research

This article has been informed by the challenges I encountered around how to share the stories I heard and felt during two inter-connected studies: my PhD and postdoctoral fellowship. In this section, I will describe the details of this research, paying attention to why my previous approach of representing key themes through discrete quotes (which is common practice among qualitative research) did not *feel* as though it was doing enough to reflect the deeply emotive and temporally complex stories shared with me.

During 2015–2019, I conducted my PhD research on civilian women’s experiences of the deployment of their serving partner to Iraq and/or Afghanistan since the early 2000s.

I conducted 26 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with partners of currently serving personnel in the British Army, asking them to reflect on their experiences of deployment. The interviews were audio-recorded, anonymously transcribed, uploaded onto NVivo, coded thematically, and analysed using a grounded approach. In all research outputs published so far, I selected discrete quotes from interviews to represent, engage with, and evidence the key themes identified (see Long, 2022a, 2022b). However, reflecting back, this approach to analysing and presenting the data limited opportunities to engage with the deeply affective resonance of what I heard and felt from military partners. Whilst I was able to share the overarching themes from my interviews in ways which suited standard formats of academic journal articles, this form of data presentation lost the emotionality underpinning many of the stories I heard. Many of the interviews I conducted were sensitive, emotive encounters as we explored issues of war, physical, mental and moral injuries, loneliness, love, and loss. Some of their stories continue to echo through my mind.

These earlier formats of presentation also made it difficult to highlight the temporal complexity and multiplicity of the partners' experiences; they associated differently with military life at different times, and these narratives significantly differed and were personal to each partner. Linked to this, as I was analysing and writing up the research, it became increasingly clear that I had made a huge assumption when designing the project: that military partners associated themselves with 'the military' and that this association was stable. Specifically, during my PhD I identified an undercurrent within their stories which suggested they did not always (or at all) associate themselves with a military identity, life, or community. This undercurrent became *felt* and thus more recognisable to me when my long-term partner joined the Royal Navy in 2018 and I found myself resisting such identifiers too¹. By combining multiple interviews into illustrative themes, I felt that I was producing a sense that there was a shared perspective or narrative amongst partners, that there is such a thing as a shared military spouse identity that can somehow be discoverable and represented. For me, the act of producing a narrative that suggests there was something generalisable about military partners (as an identity or as a community) started to feel violent – as though I was obscuring their stories behind a series of sub-headings and themes.

These issues inspired me to pursue a postdoctoral fellowship during 2020–2021 in which I conducted further research to foreground this complexity, contradictory, and changing (dis)association with military life and identities. I aimed to explore what it means to *be* a military partner and how this is experienced and constructed across their life histories – starting with the moment they became a military partner through to the transition of their serving-partner out of the armed forces, to the day of the interview. Furthermore, I aimed to gain an understanding of their self-presentation during the interview as they reflected on what being a military partner means to them. I interviewed six partners of veterans, drawing on narrative methods, inviting participants to share their experiences chronologically. By taking a life history approach I was able to explore the participants' subjective reflections, whilst also gaining rich insight into what was important to them (Smith, 2012). My sample was small because I was not seeking to identify key themes from the research, nor was I aiming to claim, or pursue representation. Instead, I wanted to move away from these more positivist ways of thinking and focus on participants' unique and individual life stories as they moved through their military-

associated life-course, foregrounding the multiplicity of these life stories. Narrative methods typically explore a small number of stories in depth, foregrounding their context to understand the meanings and connections participants ascribe to provide a rich account of social phenomena.

During the semi-structured, in-depth interviews I encouraged military partners to reflect on their life histories, from meeting their service partner (becoming), their military-connected lives (being), their partner transitioning out of the military (leaving), through to the present day (post-service). Narrative methodology enabled me to engage with the complexity of their temporal (dis)associations with military life and military identities in order to develop a fuller understanding of the stories I had started to hear during my PhD but was not able to explore in more detail because of its different aims and objectives.

The remainder of this article focuses on how I intend to share these emotive stories in affective ways, rather than an analysis of what was discovered empirically. Importantly, the following discussion contributes to my own accountability in sharing the stories I heard and felt.

Beyond representation: Animating stories

I am concerned with how life history interviews may be shared in ways which do not claim representation, but rather animate the ideas and feelings shared with and felt by me. Representational approaches have long been contested by scholars because they infer that a discoverable truth exists ‘out there’ and can be authentically represented (Dewsbury, 2010; Vannini, 2015b). Non-representational scholarship troubles conventional styles of sharing research, and instead seeks to ‘cope with’ our multi-sensual, temporally complex lifeworlds (Lorimer, 2005; Vannini, 2015a). Non-representational approaches attempt to deal with the ‘crisis of representation’ by inviting researchers to reorient their aims towards animating rather than mimicking, rupturing rather than accounting, evoking rather than reporting, and reverberating rather than resonating research (Vannini, 2015b). Such efforts may enable us to move beyond a ‘know and tell’ approach, opening up possibilities to explore alternative ways of *showing* research (Vannini, 2015b). An example of this potential is in Vannini and Taggart’s (2013) sensorial research ‘doing islandness’ – their writing style and use of images enables the reader to imagine and perhaps even feel a sense of place as the authors invite readers to ‘visualise...’, ‘picture yourself...’, and ‘imagine...’, drawing them in.

Whilst non-representational scholarship varies significantly in its approaches and outlooks (and not all who engage with non-representational approaches describe their work as such), as an ‘open-ended’ endeavour, it is generally committed to engaging with affect and the complex messiness of life and knowledge as it is produced, and rendered recognisable (Dewsbury, 2010; Thrift, 2004; Vannini, 2015a). This approach aligns with a broader turn towards more creative ways of sharing qualitative research as researchers explore ways to produce more affective, empathetic, understandings across academic and non-academic audiences. For example, qualitative research has been translated into poetry (Chambers, 2023; Richardson, 2012), play-scripts (Rennolds, 2022), descriptive walking tours (Haanpää et al., 2022), creative stories and sociological fiction (Barbosa Neves et al., 2023; Watson, 2022). Other projects have explored more sensory formats of disseminating research such

as through film (Wilson, 2018), cartoons, illustration and graphic stories (Bates et al., 2023; Galman, 2009; Meer and Müller, 2023; Priego, 2016; Vigurs et al., 2016), theatre (Cree and West, 2023; Philip et al., 2021; Shah and Greer, 2018), and dance (Karcher and Caldwell, 2014). It is also important and exciting to highlight that creative outputs are increasingly being incorporated within military research too (e.g. Cree, 2023).

Arguably, these creative approaches enable research to be shared and shown to audiences/publics in ways which embrace affective sense produced from their methodologies. For example, to share their research about HIV service work experiences of African immigrant women, Chambers (2023) retold participants' stories through poetry. Chambers explained that during interviews they witnessed the 'emotive, emphatic, embodied, expressive being-ness of oral narrative' in participants' oratory performance, and they suggested that poetry, as a medium, can respond to the emotive ways in which sense-making of the world may be shared. Concerned with how they might best present the complex voices and stories of people experiencing loneliness whilst living in Australian care homes, Barbosa Neves et al. (2023) worked with a fiction writer Josephine Wilson to produce creative narratives which sat alongside their sociological narratives. These different narratives enabled the reader to understand these experiences from different angles, whilst the authors recognise that these accounts can only ever be partial. Barbosa Neves et al. (2023) commented that the creative narratives presented participants and their stories in ways which emphasised sounds and embodiments, whilst maintaining a sense of (dis)continuity between the past and present, all of which are important aspects of the experiences of loneliness and ageing. Furthermore, Watson (2016) advocates for creative sociological fiction/novels, convincingly arguing that these formats may help to produce more 'panoramic social worlds', bringing the sociological imagination to life through affective communication.

By drawing upon and engaging with creative forms of writing, one can explore new ways in which sense can be crafted and shared (Dewsbury, 2010; Vannini, 2015a). It is important to note that non-representational scholars 'do not claim to be able, or even interested, in reporting on [research] in an impersonal, neutral, or reliable manner' (Vannini, 2015a: 318), instead they may be more concerned with how creative styles might animate multisensual worlds. It is within this creative spirit that I chose to explore the opportunities afforded by animating military partners' complex, sometimes contradictory, incomplete, deeply emotional stories through fictive diaries. Whilst what it means to animate research has varied in its usage across scholarship (e.g. Gorman et al., 2023; Thorpe and Rinehart, 2010; Vannini, 2015b), for the purposes of this article I use the concept to refer to an approach which aims to evoke rather than explain, to show rather than tell, the affective stories shared by military spouses. Through this, I hope to evoke an emotional, perhaps even empathetic, response in the reader, drawing them into the analytical process. In the following sections, I will outline why I chose diary excerpts as a suitable fictive format, explain how I created the excerpts, and provide an example of one output.

Animating stories through fictive diaries

As previously stated, my primary focus when deciding how to disseminate what I heard and felt during interviews related to how I might bring participant's stories to life, inviting

the reader into their stories. A creative approach to disseminating research is appealing because it aligns with my aim to produce 'texture that brings the fullness and richness of the experience to the reader so that it is alive' (Wertz et al., 2011: 2), whilst paying careful attention to not isolate participants' experiences from their complexity, nuance, and context (McElhinney and Kennedy, 2022). Furthermore, 'working with fictional texts offers great potential for developing how we conceptualise and approach efforts to engage with audiences/publics in creative and affecting ways' (Watson, 2022: 339). Fictive diaries, as a creative format, could enable the communication of complex personhood and feelings as the individuals involved are 'not reduced to an inanimate object of academic analysis but [speak] directly to [...] audiences' (Wilson, 2018: 1220). Diaries as a format have a long history in fiction, where the fictional narrator claims the status of an observer and the reader is offered insight via this fictional world (Alaszewski, 2006). Whilst not the only creative option available, the format of the fictive diary lends itself well to my research aims for the following reasons.

Firstly, diaries are social objects in which emotion and unresolvedness become entangled with personal biography, everyday intimacies, and mundane practice (see White, 2023 for discussion on this), and thus have potential to evoke liveliness. Hence, the diary format seems well suited to my aims to show the emotions underpinning participants' experiences of military life. Furthermore, the diary format, which by its nature is entangled with the temporal, lent itself well to being able to *show* some of the myriad ways in which participants associated with or resisted the idea of 'being a military partner' in multiple, complex ways across long periods of time.

Secondly, diaries, as a form of prose, document first-person perspectives and reflections on life experiences. In many ways, this style of reflecting on one's experiences echoes the standard structure of an interview and I found that I was often able to weave together direct quotes from across the interviews, sometimes writing fictively to compliment this, to produce a story. Therefore, the diary excerpts I crafted are grounded closely to the stories shared and the language used by participants. Whilst non-representational scholarship might argue direct quotes are not necessary to animate research, for this project it felt appropriate as it enabled me to maintain the patterns and rhythms of speech from each participant, maintaining a sense of their character in the resulting stories. Furthermore, completely rewriting their sentiments into this more 'personal' format felt inappropriate.

Thirdly, prose within diaries is not assumed to be stable as they are spaces in which authors may reflect on their perspectives of subjects, engaging in a process of sense-making. Cottingham and Erickson (2020) explained that diaries are spaces in which individuals attempt to make sense of their experiences as authors revisit and reimagine associated meanings, implications, and their sense-of-self. In their study using diaries methods, Cottingham and Erickson found that nurses who contributed audio-diaries to their research detailed a range of different reactions to events, showing their changing reflections and relatedly, their multi-faceted, always emerging, senses of self. The unfolding of this emerging sense-of-self came through in the participants' uncertainty as they uttered phrases including 'I don't know' (p. 555). Across the interviews I conducted, participants regularly said 'I don't know' and you will see that I decided to finish the final illustrative excerpt with this statement to foreground the uncertainty and unresolvedness that underpins military partners' reflections of their life-histories.

Relatedly, diaries are spaces in which individuals reflect on their lives and are not necessarily written in a way which the author anticipates when they pick up the pen. In a way, this is similar to what occurs in interviews. The participant may have a strong sense of the issues they want to discuss given the topic of focus. However, new realisations may be made and reflections occur as the interviewer prompts them to think about different aspects of their stories. We could think of this as aligning with what (Bøe et al., 2023) referred to as ‘unresolvedness’ – that narratives can never produce complete and final versions of reality, that they can be incomplete, messy, and contradictory. Through using diaries as a fictive format, I hope to foreground this unresolvedness, that participant reflections are in a state of *becoming significant* to them, rather than a series of stabilised perspectives.

Creating fictive diary excerpts

Galman (2009) argued that qualitative researchers should be committed to maintaining the integrity of participants’ voices, and that presentations should be faithful to the stories, experiences, meanings and understandings shared. Faithfulness infers a sense that sharing stories and meanings is something the researcher will strive to do, rather than something that is necessarily achievable (see previous discussion on non-representational approaches). In this section, I will explain how I created the fictive diaries excerpts, reflecting on some of the key considerations I made when translating interviews into fictive diaries, and how I sought to remain ‘faithful’ to participants’ stories.

Firstly, I separated each interview’s transcript into three temporal categories: becoming a military partner, being a military partner, and leaving the military to present day. In some instances, participants talked about multiple time periods at once, so these data were duplicated into each temporal category they related to. Then, I coded each individual interview, within each temporal category. This process identified three key themes: (1) how the participants (dis)associated with being a military partner, being a member of the armed forces community, being a part of the military as an institution, and feeling a part of their wider civilian communities, (2) how different life stages impacted these reflections of (dis)association, and (3) the ways in which they saw themselves as being *more than* a military partner. After identifying these key themes, I looked at the transcripts again, and interview by interview re-authored their words into three temporally situated narratives, aiming to incorporate how each participant engaged with each of the themes. From these lengthy descriptions I created diary excerpts. I did not attempt to clean up contradiction in their stories of sometimes associating, sometimes disassociating with military life, instead I aimed to show this.

To maintain grounding in the participants’ own reflections and vocal rhythms, I used direct quotes as often as was appropriate and feasible. Rather than changing the tense of the interview to fit the diary format, I added fictional stories about why the participant was reflecting on their life in such a way. These fictional additions were informed by encounters military partners have with others which were shared with me during the aforementioned research projects, enabling me to show the ways they come to reflect on their association with military life. After I wrote the three temporally situated diary excerpts, I returned to the transcripts to check that the excerpts bore similarity to their overall story and sentiment.

A key issue encountered when considering how to present this research was how to maintain participants' anonymity and the richness of their deeply individualised and personal stories. I was concerned that by sharing their narratives, even with names pseudonymised and identifiable information like dates and locations removed, they would still be identifiable. Furthermore, I was concerned that anonymisation would lose the richness and singularity of participants' stories and realities (Kolankiewicz, 2021). Further compounding these concerns, researchers have questioned whether anonymisation is possible or desirable (see Nespor, 2000; Tilley and Woodthorpe, 2011), posing a significant challenge for life history research where more intimate and storied details are shared by interviewees.

In response to these challenges, some researchers have turned to composite narratives which combine several interviews with multiple participants into one story. In McElhinney and Kennedy's (2022: 222) overview, they state that in all works using composites there is a commitment to 'remaining authentic to the experiences of the individuals involved [...] and, crucially, the desire to protect participants' identities'. There are some compelling examples of such practice in projects that aim to maintain a distinction from narrative and fiction (e.g. Willis' (2019) production of composite narratives derived solely from the research data) and those that engage with more fictive-forms of presentation (e.g. Cook's (2013) trilogy of stories which were informed by composite characters from ethnographic research). Each approach is committed to foregrounding their data, rather than producing fictional scenarios. For example, Willis (2019) aimed to increase the trustworthiness of the composites by ensuring that each composite was based on transcripts from the interviews, all quotations came directly from the transcripts, and no motivations or feelings were assumed. Cook (2013) coded interviews, fieldnotes and related documents to produce a thematic story and wrote narratives for each participant, reflecting their words and sentiments as well as personalities and histories. Cook (2013: 190) cites Solórzano and Yosso (2002: 36) stating that 'we are not developing imaginary characters that engage in fictional scenarios. Instead, the "composite" characters we develop are grounded in real-life experiences and actual empirical data and are contextualised in social situations that are also grounded in real life, not fiction'.

I wanted to foreground the significantly varied stories I heard about what it means to be a military partner in my outputs and was keen to produce diary excerpts on each interview. Thus, protecting participant anonymity occurred in two stages. Firstly, I removed obviously identifiable information such as the service person's role or rank, too much about the participants' employment, and I changed their names and locations referred to. Secondly, I adopted a fictive storytelling approach, altering (and removing) elements of key stories where too much of the original narrative might render the participant identifiable. To do this, I produced small composite narratives which were informed by the wider stories I heard throughout my PhD and postdoctoral research, as well as my experiences of being a military wife. Through this, I worked carefully with transcripts to strike a balance between writing stories in a way which shows their affective qualities, whilst removing or changing deeply individualised accounts, reducing the likelihood of the interviewee becoming identifiable.

An example of a fictive diary is shared below, showing three temporally situated excerpts. The interviewee has been given the pseudonym Sarah, and her partner who had previously served in the British Armed Forces has been given the pseudonym Josh. The three excerpts are of different lengths reflecting the focus the participant

paid to these periods of time in the interview. As the participant in the example met her partner towards the end of his service, she reflected mostly on what life was like post-military, hence that excerpt is much lengthier than the other two. By referring to the key below, you will see how I translated Sarah's interview data into fictive diary excerpts.

- Standard font: Includes quotes and summaries from stories shared during the interview, edited for clarity (for example adding 'the', 'and' and omitting 'umm'). Data which risks rendering the participant identifiable (e.g. names, locations or detailed stories) have been removed or changed.

- *Italics*: Fictive storytelling to adapt interview to diary format or where elements of their stories have been altered to protect their anonymity.

(i) Becoming a military partner:

My friend has been dating this man in the Navy and asked me for some advice – there's not much I could tell her as everyone's experience of military life is so different. I met Josh, my partner towards the end of his time with the Army. We met on an online dating site and we lived close by for a bit but had to go long-distance when *he was sent abroad for half a year or so*, and then when he got back to the UK he was posted far away. So we just kind of started up a long-distance relationship and we'd take it in turns to travel up and down the country. We did that for *four years* with him having to work various weekends and stuff so we just kind of worked around it really. It was all pre-pandemic, so I used to travel to *Portsmouth* for work quite a lot so I'd tie in a visit whilst down there. Life changed as I realised that things can get cancelled at the drop of a hat. So work can come up and you can have tickets booked for things, and then it's like 'oh no sorry got to work now'. I had to get used to the fact that things might not happen like you think they're going to. But I never felt like I had to make any huge compromises when getting to know him and working things around this job. I think I was just quite open to it and quite flexible and happy to do it, *like having come from another relationship*, I was happy just to see how things went and because I was older, I suppose I was just in a different headspace, but then I suppose when you look back and you think wow the money we both spent on fuel and eating out – 'cos when you get to where you were staying on a base you have to eat out for every meal basically – it was incredible.

I never felt like my identity changed, that I was becoming a military partner, but you do build your understanding of what military life is all about over time. Before meeting him, I thought it was just a job, like any other. But the longer you're around people the more that you learn, the more you grow, the more I kind of understand I suppose. I went to functions, we've been to museums and stuff ... Regardless, I don't think my sense of who I was changed when I met Josh. I didn't feel like I was becoming a military partner at that time as I had my own job and was doing my own thing.

(ii) Being a military partner:

Today my friend asked me what it was like when Josh was in the Army, what it was like to be an army girlfriend. I guess Josh did serve in the Army, but he was getting towards the end of his service when we met so I wasn't sure how to answer! I don't think I necessarily

earn that right after *these few years* to identify or describe myself as that thing. I've never lived on a base and I've never had that sitting at home, waiting for a phone call. *He only went away once when we first got together*, but otherwise, he was not sent away whilst I knew him. You can't possibly understand what it's like to go abroad for long periods of time, what it's like to be away from your family, and your friends, and your life. I am naïve to the whole thing I think. I haven't had that waiting for bad news or waiting for something awful to happen or watching the news and thinking oh my god, something terrible's going to happen. I see it from my friend – her husband would call and have five minutes and that was it. The heartache of that compared to being able to talk everyday.

From what I've heard from the other women I've met through Josh I think I'm quite different to other military partners. I have my own career and it sounds like many of the other girlfriends and wives don't necessarily have jobs or careers because they have to look after the kids and move around for his job all of the time. They become very much attached to their husband. And a lot of the girlfriends in my husband's final posting were younger, so I had nothing in common with a lot of the people who were at the military do's I went to. I didn't really meet many people who I necessarily connected with. The military bit is the bit we've got in common but there's only so much I can say about that because it's not my career I suppose.

I think as far as the Army is concerned I don't exist. I'm kind of a nothing because we're not living together and we're not married, the Army doesn't recognise me as being a thing I suppose. His colleagues and stuff were always very welcoming but I knew that my role wasn't necessarily like a formal one, because we weren't married. I'm not sure that I would ever want to be a part, or be seen to be a part of the armed forces community. But it's hard for me to answer because I've never been in a position where he's been on a deployment and, I imagine, it would be really good to be connected to people in the same position. Perhaps if we'd been together for much a much longer period with him serving, I might feel like I could describe myself as a military spouse but I don't and I think, although my husband describes himself as a veteran, I don't think he's defined by that label and so I don't feel like I am either.

(iii) Leaving the military

Our anniversary is coming up and I've found myself thinking about how so much has changed! Things changed quite a lot for us a few years into the relationship. Josh left the Army because he had completed his service. This was massive because when he left, he moved in with me, where I had been working. I suppose sharing our space was quite hard after having never lived together. We'd been together for quite a long time I suppose, but sharing space, getting used to each other, our habits and stuff ... and for me personally it was about having someone in my space that I could find quite difficult and I was probably quite irritating, because I was probably quite possessive. He was used to communal living on camp, having to look after one room, to now being in a house. I can't really remember when I stopped feeling like 'will you not put that there', 'cos I think he was trying to make it his space and I was trying to keep it my space at first. We've both just kind of relaxed into it. It just takes time.

I suppose the transition period is much more recent and raw and that's probably what I identify more with. That's what I know more about than living on the base. I mean I think I was probably very naïve when I first met Josh in terms of what it meant to be a military partner. I met him when he was at the end of his career so I suppose I was coming in at the end. When you first meet someone, on the first date you're not talking about *things they've found hard in the military*. What they go through comes out over time, it's not just like a 10-minute story – 'Oh you'll never guess what happened in 2005!'. It comes out over time as you build up a relationship and trust with each other, so I'll never fully know exactly what happened *when he was in the Army*, but I know a lot more now than I did five years ago. So I suppose there's more to becoming a military spouse than just living on camp and seeing him go on deployments, things reveal themselves as you get to know somebody, as with anybody. I don't think these are issues that civilians would go through, and *I think it is hearing these stories* and seeing their affects that make me feel like I might be a part of military-life.

So it was hard. As he left the Army *he really seemed to be struggling*. He looked for support from *military charities* but they were unable to help him and I felt very helpless and incredibly stressed. *This wasn't helped by the fact I was working throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, so its been incredibly intense, like so intense, it's just not let up, at all. I'm knackered, and I think it's a whole mixture of things, burnout from work, stuck inside the house 24/7 because of the pandemic type thing.*

I'm so annoyed that the Army hasn't supported him more, all they wanted to see was that he had got another job, a tick-box exercise. And it wasn't acknowledged by them how much it was me and the family who helped him to write his CV, to apply for jobs. So yeah, it did feel like alright fine we've ticked a few boxes, we've done our part, off you pop, which when 24 years of your life has been taken up by that ... yeah I felt quite resentful about it and I felt quite resentful that he'd been left a wreck. And I think this might be part of why I don't see myself as a military partner, I have seen the outcome of 24 years' service. But life has become more, I don't want to say normal, but that's what I mean you know. He's in a normal job and so I suppose as time progresses we'll move further and further away from it. It will always be part of him, always, I don't want to rub it out, life just moves on doesn't it and I think that's just moving on, and the memories I suppose of the military service will become, they won't fade but they'll just become different I suppose, less raw and recent. I don't know.

Reflections

This section discusses the opportunities and limitations I encountered, arguing that the diary excerpt is a useful, but in some ways limited, format for *showing* the stories, focusing on issues pertaining to emotion and temporality.

Emotion

Diaries are materials that individuals create for various, sometimes personally driven, purposes. It is well understood that, for some, they are sites in which their authors seek to untangle their feelings in response to everyday intimacies, personal histories, and hopes for the future. Throughout the interviews a similar pattern of exploration

occurred, producing deeply affective conversation; participants reflected on feelings of isolation, loneliness, loss, dis/re-orientation, fear, anger, injustice, betrayal, grief, as well as belonging, love, purpose, pride, and strength as these entangled with experiences of their intimate relationships, military deployments, friendships, employment, parenthood, care, mental health, bereavement, and their shifting identities. By producing diary excerpts I aimed to animate participants' stories in ways which foreground the emotive richness of their histories, hoping to evoke an emotional, perhaps even empathetic, response in the reader, drawing them into the analytical process. By producing fictive diary excerpts, I hope that the reader feels drawn into the participants' world, seeing into their world through narrative. Personally, I found that through rewriting their accounts into this format I was drawn deeply into their individual stories, raising some interesting questions around writing-as-method.²

The sociological study of emotions is an established specialism, widely researched since the late 1970s (Shilling, 2002), and there remain ongoing debates around how emotions may be defined, what causes them, and their effects. Such literature is too extensive to engage with closely in this article, however the synthesis provided by Bericat (2016: 493) is useful to refer to in this context: 'emotions constitute the bodily manifestation of the importance that an event in the natural or social world has for a subject'. Thus, the *feeling subject* is not an isolated body, but instead a relational subject, entangled with the environment and how they make sense of it (ibid.). Through presenting the research data as fictive diaries, the reader is invited to see and perhaps feel these entanglements and the ways in which *feeling subjects* make sense of their environments. Furthermore, through taking seriously emotions, we may also gain insight into how social relations produce emotional affects upon military partners as they navigate a liminal position between military and civilian life for example Sarah's frustrations with the army for the lack of support provided to her partner in the aftermath of deployments and service.

These efforts to produce evocative accounts of feeling were not without challenges. By trying to use direct quotes from interviews as much as possible, I was limited by the words participants used to describe their feelings; what they chose or were able to express in that social interaction with myself as a researcher. The challenge of attempting to show emotion in these excerpts was no surprise as scholars have long drawn attention to the 'non-discrete, ephemeral, and ineffable qualities' of emotion (e.g. Cottingham and Erickson, 2020: 549), rendering them in many ways unlanguageable. Furthermore, MacLure (2013, 2017) have critiqued qualitative research's reliance on language, arguing that this investment in spoken and written word obscures entanglements with the body³, producing 'bloodless angels' (2013: 665). Certainly, in the interviews where participants became audibly upset (e.g. by changing their tone, sniffing and stumbling on words as they held back tears, or by holding silence), their emotions did not appear in the words they used. In my attempts to show this emotion I found it awkward to write what I was hearing and feeling into words they did not say. Through this I encountered the limits of language as I could not adequately describe this 'sense' (MacLure, 2013), and I still wonder whether the participants would also struggle to put these feelings into words too.

Perhaps this limitation could be better managed by adapting my methods to work more closely with participants to explore wider forms of communication. Options are endless, but I could have incorporated life history mapping alongside interview methods; enabling

the participant to draw their histories, and the researcher can then encourage them to discuss in further detail what different stages felt like (see Flaherty and Garratt, 2023). I could have incorporated more sensory ways to engage with participants. For example researchers have explored how candid emotions may be heard within audio-diaries (Cottingham and Erickson, 2020), or (re)performed in diary-interviews (Spowart and Nairn, 2014). Of course, it would also be fascinating to conduct longitudinal research which traces the transitions of joining through to leaving military life, asking participants to create their own written or spoken diaries. Lessons could also be learnt from Cree and West's (2023) theatre-as-method research, working with military spouses to explore emotions felt around war. They adopted various methods to facilitate the communication of deployment experiences, for example they invited participants to create 'static non-verbal images' and 'moving silent mimes'. They also organised paired exercises to create short scenes of conversation between military couples during deployments, then inviting a third person to ask questions about how they felt. By combining these stories with other methods they produced a deeply affective play titled *Magnolia Walls*.

It should also be kept in mind that no matter the amount of care put into presentational format, the audience will interpret and feel it in their own subjective ways too. Indeed, if emotions are, at least partly, socially constructed (Turner and Stets, 2012), then there is an element of unruliness to them and how they may be understood and felt by different people when tethered within written word. Perhaps this matters less to a project that does not intend to represent military life, but instead attempt to animate it. Overall, I think that there are some real opportunities for sharing a sense of emotionality through fictive diaries, hopefully producing a lens through which reader may encounter an empathetic response as they make sense of the words and the stories in their own subjective way.

Temporality

Highlighting the temporality of experience was an important research objective. Not only do diaries offer opportunities to show emotionality, they also entangle these emotions with temporal situatedness, showing how pasts, presents and futures live with the participants in deeply affective ways. The diary excerpts show how events, thoughts and feelings can reverberate across time-periods, manifesting in different forms. Due to the life-history methodology used – the types of feeling likely evoked in the outputs may include short-term reactions to realisations during the interview (reflex emotions such as anger, sadness), lasting effects that are not easily attached to a particular event (moods such as a sense of familial progress), affective loyalties (reflexive emotions linked to love, trust, dislike), and feelings of moral approval/disapproval (moral emotions linked to a sense of justice) (Jasper, 2011). The diary format has enabled me to show the ways that experiences and perspectives of the past impact partners' understanding of their present and their future – an area I have previously written on regarding deployment cycles (Long, 2022a), as well as their shifting emotionality in response to these overlapping times. Furthermore, the diary excerpts show the complexity of participants' life histories, how perspectives change or are different within and across different periods of time, and how particular contexts may affect forms of (dis)association with military life. In this way, the diaries embrace participants' material contexts, fusing their

perspectives with these contexts in more nuanced ways. Presented alongside fictive diaries produced from other participants,⁴ this project intends to highlight the multiplicity of these temporally situated experiences.

Perhaps this format relies too much on the idea of chronological time to organise participants' stories. Critique has been raised around forcing life stories into chronological formulas across all stages of research, from design, to the interview, to the resulting write-up (Bøe et al., 2023); producing the sense of a linear narrative which does not resemble 'reality'. Succinctly put, 'the narrative casts the reality of life with its complexity, unresolvedness, contradictions, indefiniteness, and myriads of connections and interruptions into the dark' (584). Whilst I aimed to embrace the complex inconsistencies and contradictory perspectives across different times, the semi-structured interview guide I used was framed around chronological time-periods, (re)producing this constructed ordered meaning across the stories explored. Moving beyond the chronological linearity that is embedded within the telling of life stories and narratives is an extremely difficult challenge as it is how individuals often make sense of their life-worlds. I do not think this is a challenge I need to be too concerned about as this project's primary aim was to explore if and how participants relate to their military-associated identities across different times and contexts, and to attempt to show this movement and change across times. However, it is important to recognise that the design, conduct of interviews, and resulting write-up of the diary excerpts might be overlooking wider temporal complexities and 'myriad connections and interruptions' (Bøe et al., 2023) that occur within participants' life-worlds.

Contributions to military sociology

Before concluding I will briefly reflect on how sharing stories in this way contributes to military partner scholarship, focusing on a U.K. context. In recent years, civilian partners of (ex-)service personnel have received increased attention from academics, focusing on a range of issues, for example, aiming to better understand their lived experiences, welfare concerns, entanglements with military power, and (dis)identification with social constructs and stereotypes (e.g. Basham and Catignani, 2018; Doncaster et al., 2019; Gray, 2022; Gribble et al., 2019; Hyde, 2024), as well as a turn towards more creative approaches to explore military lives and disseminate these accounts (e.g. *Creative Methods in Military Studies* edited by Alice Cree (2023)). The research upon which this article refers to will contribute to these works, seeking different ways to share and show the emotive, temporally situated, life histories of military partners. By producing a range of diary excerpts, this research intends to foreground the multiplicity of experiences encountered, challenging homogenous representations of who military partners are, and show the myriad ways they might move into and through affiliation with military life. These contributions will be explored in more detail in future publications.

Conclusion

This article is an attempt to render myself accountable for the knowledge I seek to produce about military lives by detailing the 'why' and the 'how' I plan to animate the

temporally and emotionally rich stories shared with me by military partners through fictive diary excerpts. Indeed, Galman (2009: 197) explained that when:

working with rich, descriptive data sets, qualitative researchers must [...] be both “artists” and “messengers” [...] as artists, researchers develop the contours of their craft, creatively designing and implementing inquiry models and framing their own interpretative “story”: as messengers, researchers simultaneously audit their subjectivity and attend to participant stories and experiences.

Whilst I am not claiming that fictive diary excerpts are ‘the best’ or ‘only way’ to show temporal and emotional complexity, I hope to have shown that they offer an opportunity to evoke an empathetic response in the reader. I will finish this article with words by Vannini (2015a: 324) who stated that non-representational research is ‘borne out of a disorderly will to experiment and to fail’ and they ‘urge readers and writers keen on transcending the limits of representationalism to break rules and to think, feel, and write differently’.

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Notes

1. My social positioning as a military partner has informed the decision to conduct this project and share these stories in this way – these dynamics will be explored in further detail in a future article.
2. There is not space to engage with this point closely in this article.
3. It is recognised that affect occurs within and across the body, and not just in the mind, however it would not be possible to engage with these debates in the space afforded in this article.
4. As a work in progress, it is intended that these excerpts will be published via a platform that allows for high word counts.

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