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CHANGING THE IDENTITIES OF YOUNG ARMY RECRUITS AND NEW WAYS OF LOOKING AT HEGEMONIC FORMS OF MILITARY MASCULINITY

This article is about the changing identities of young male recruits in the British army. The data is based on 60 in-depth, semi-structured, interviews that formed part of a major three-year longitudinal study (2008–11). The great majority of the recruits, were aged between 16–19 years old, and were in the infantry or other combat related units. The article explores the characteristics of the peer group culture, discusses the important function of role models, and considers the career point at which the trainees begin to regard themselves as being a “real” soldier. The idealised and hegemonic form of masculinity that the recruits aspired to was based on physicality and toughness and was encapsulated in the action image of the “warrior hero”. However, although the culture was highly competitive, the data shows there to be a more nuanced form of hegemonic military masculinity, which was also inclusive and egalitarian, and contained a number of more feminised associated qualities such as of collaboration and caring.

Keywords: identity, masculinity, hegemonic, army, military

This article is about the changing identities of young male recruits in the British army during the first three years of their basic training, and concerns issues around the construction, negotiation and performance of military masculinities. It uses testimony from 60 semi-structured interviews that formed a small part of a major three-year longitudinal study (2008–11), which set out to investigate (i) the relationship between basics skills provision and trainees’ operational effectiveness, and (ii) the professional and personal development of service personnel across the three armed forces.¹ This article concentrates on the second of these two main research questions and concerns young trainees in the army.

¹ The study was commissioned in 2007 by the UK Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) and the Ministry of Defence (MOD) and was set in the army, navy

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There has been little empirical research into the construction of masculinities in the early years of young male trainees' military careers, either in the British armed forces, or in other armed services in other parts of the world, particularly set within a socio-cultural framework (Hale, 2012). My main focus is the examination of how young recruits' masculine identities are constituted and produced during the transition period from civilian to soldier, and from adolescent to adult. The great majority of the recruits came from the infantry and other combat support arms, and although the idealised form of masculinity was based around the concept of the "warrior hero", data shows there to be a more nuanced form of the hegemonic masculinity than has been presented in other accounts of military masculinity within the literature, which generally treat it as monolithic. I see this as being one of the study's distinctive contributions to the field of military masculinities. I also discuss the important function of role models, and consider the career point at which the trainees begin to regard themselves as being a "real" soldier. Also explored are personal changes and developments affecting their identity, and the characteristics of the local peer group culture, including the resources that the young men draw on to gain peer-group popularity and status, and become leaders.

An extensive body of literature within social and cultural studies examines the armed forces throughout the world, including a number of studies that focus on the British military experience (e.g., Basham, 2009; Hale, 2008; Higate, 2003; Higate & Hopton, 2005; Hockey, 1986, 2003; Kirke, 2009; Woodward, 1998, 2003; Woodward & Jenkins, 2011, 2012; Woodward & Winter, 2004). The last 25 years or so have also seen an escalating corpus of literature interrogating the relationship between military life and masculinities outside the UK (e.g., Addleston & Stirrat, 1996; Agostino, 1998; Barrett, 1996; Connell, 1989; Godfrey, 2009; Godfrey, Lilley & Brewis, 2012; Hearn, 2011; Klein, 1999; Kovitz, 2003; Lahelma, 2005; Lande, 2007; Messerschmidt, 2010; Morgan, 1994; Poster, 2013; Sasson-Levy, 2003). There has also been a burgeoning literature about the formation of identities in the British army, to which the present article makes a contribution (e.g., Duncanson, 2013; Hale, 2008, 2012; Higate, 2003; Hockey, 1986, 2003; King, 2007, 1996, 2003; Kirke, 2009; Woodford & Jenkins, 2011; 2012; Woodford & Winter, 2004; Woodward, 1998, 2003).

SAMPLE AND METHODS

The study used mixed methods in a longitudinal design. Fieldwork took place between 2009 and 2011. There was a quantitative study and a parallel, and complementary, qualitative study, which is the focus of the present article. It began with a sample of 26 individual case studies (22 males and 4 females), and this article concentrates on the young male recruits, the majority of whom were 16–19-year-olds at the beginning of the fieldwork. All of the participants were assessed with relatively low literacy and/or numeracy skills, which meant that the great majority in both the quantitative and qualitative cohorts attended basic skills classes in English and/or mathematics during the early part of their training.

and royal air force. The research was conducted by the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC), and the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) (Vorhaus et al., 2012).

The research was designed to interview trainees at three time points, or stages, with each corresponding to the first three phases of army training. The purpose of the army Phase 1 training units is to develop basic soldiering skills. Following this intensive training programme (of between 14 to 42 weeks), recruits move to Phase 2 training schools to undergo their specialist, trade training (e.g., as an engineer, medical technician or infantryman), before joining their work unit in Phase 3 as a trained soldier in the field army. The programmed time from joining Phase 1 training, to joining their work unit varies (in general, from 6 months to 2 years), according to the particular Army trade and the complexity of the associated training.²

The first stage of the study was set in three Phase 1 training units: 11 of the 26 trainees (with an average age of 19) were “soldiers under training” from the infantry and the other 15 were “junior soldiers” (with an average age of 17), the majority of whom were from other combat support arms. Twenty-five of the participants were White British and one was “Black British”. Due to natural attrition the size of the sample fell from 26 to 20 in Stage 2 of the fieldwork (Phase 2 of the army training), and to 14 in Stage 3 (Phase 3 of the army training). Sometimes the reduction in numbers was because recruits had decided to leave, but there were also a number who were on active service in Afghanistan. Indeed, all of them knew that they were highly likely to experience operational service within their first few years of their army careers.³

The main method of data collection was individual in-depth interviews, which lasted between 45-90 minutes and were carried out by a team of five researchers at the training units. As interviews were semi-structured, and follow up questions were left to the discretion of each interviewer, not every trainee was asked exactly the same questions. The author of this article conducted 30 of the 60 trainee interviews.

All the trainees took part in the research on a voluntary basis and signed a consent form prior to the interview. During the first phase of interviews four participants exercised their right to withdraw from the research and were replaced to make up the agreed number of twenty-six. Schedules centered around a number of themes including early family life, schooling, reasons for enlisting, experiences of outdoor training, indoor life in the barracks, education and military classes, and recruits’ tales of career progression over a three-year period. They provide a set of narratives about the practices through which their identities are constructed and developed through time against a background of the army’s institutional structures. The collection of these data were supplemented and cross-checked by testimony from the recruits’ line managers, trainers and senior Officers from their chain of command, as well as from education staff. The study employed an element of phenomenological methodology, which analyses social reality from the subjective view of those who live within it (Geertz, 1973), and the interviews. Thematic analysis (see Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to search for patterns, which were then

² At the time of the study, the Combat Infantryman’s Course of 28 weeks was combined over Phases 1 and 2.

³ The deployment of UK troops to support UN/US-led operations in Afghanistan started in February 2006 with numbers increasing to 9,500 by April 2011. As a result, more than the anticipated numbers of personnel were on operational service during the last stage of fieldwork.

grouped under “family” themes. Although some themes were known in advance, as they were grouped around the interview questions, many others emerged inductively through engagement with the data.

Like Sasson-Levy (2003) the research about the military was subject to constraints as the army does not admit many civilian outsiders to “look inside”. One of the limitations of the study was that the army did not permit the research team to carry out any pre-arranged observations. However, when researchers arrived to conduct interviews, and were escorted around the site by senior personnel, they were able to carry out some informal observations of military classrooms, parade grounds, canteens and recreational areas.

THE PRODUCTION OF NEW IDENTITIES

For the trainee recruits in this study life in the army was a key stage of transition (Elder, 1986; Hockey, 1986; Lahelma, 2005; MacLean & Elder, 2007), not only from civilian citizen to military soldier, but also from adolescent boy to man (or from adolescent girl to woman). Like many individuals arriving at the recruiting office, the majority were at a particularly impressionable stage in their lives: some came from relatively troubled homes; many had a poor experience of schooling and had left with few qualifications; some were involved in comparatively low levels of crime and had worked, or were currently working, in a series of poorly paid and uninteresting jobs. The army appealed to these disadvantaged young people and offered them experiences and the resources to open up new career trajectories. For some of the young recruits, who perhaps lacked self-confidence and self-esteem, the army provided the chance to become a person of note, even a hero (Elder, 1986).

At the heart of the present article is the development of the recruits’ identities—how they see themselves and who they think they are. As with the concepts of masculinity and femininity, which I will expand on further below, I am using a social constructionist framework where identity is not viewed as an innate and unitary quality that individuals possess, but rather as something they do (West & Zimmerman, 1987); in other words, as Mendick (2005) argues, identity should be seen as a verb rather than a noun. Identity is also multiple and we should therefore talk about identities which are socially constructed, negotiated and performed. Holland et al. (1998) write that identities do not just come into being without a great deal of work from the person involved. They also emphasise people’s biographical past, and they refer to identities always forming as “history-in-person”, which gives their identities a foundation and durability to improvise and develop. A key point also to make is that identities are unfinished and in process; as Hall (1992) writes, identity belongs as much to the future as to the past for it is a matter of “becoming” as much as “being”.

Although the recruits are viewed as active, “skilled and knowledgeable agents” (Giddens, 1984, p. 291), capable of articulating their experiences and perceptions, they also found themselves in a regime that Goffman (1961) refers to as the “total institution”, which he argues is essentially a “forcing house for changing persons” (1961, p. 22). Phase 1 training consists of a programmed series of activities, which provide the new recruit with a series of new involvements, new meaning, new values and a new self-image. A main objective is to produce new identities—military identities—and to create a sense of belonging and conformity; it is designed to erase the recruits’ civilian self-image so that the army can start to fashion the identity of

the soldier on a blank piece of paper and transform them into a knowledgeable member of the military organisation. The environment is highly structured and recruits live in an enclosed “formally administered round of life” (Goffman, 1961, p. xiii) that is cut off from the wider society. While they are not simply passive subjects, or “cultural dupes”, their agency, or capacity to make choices that can determine how their life should be run, is tightly controlled and drastically reduced, certainly compared with the civilian world they have been used to.

THEORIES OF MASCULINITY

Drawing principally on the feminism-inspired theories of Raewyn Connell (1995, 2000), I am arguing that masculinity is not an *a priori* ontological fact that is universally understood but is a set of social, cultural and material practices. As according to the theories of identity alluded to above, it is something people *do*, rather than *have* or *are* (West & Zimmerman, 1987). As such, these practices are always open to contestation and/or the possibility of being expressed and performed in alternative ways, depending on circumstances and context. Masculinity is also an inherently relational concept, and only makes sense when placed in relation to femininity: in other words, masculinity is defined by what femininity is not. In Western culture at least, these are commonly represented as the following dichotomous pattern (see Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998, p. 143, and Francis, 2000, p. 15):

<i>Masculine</i>	<i>Feminine</i>
Rationality	Emotion
Strength	Weakness
Aggression	Care
Competition	Co-operation
Activity	Passivity
Independence	Dependence

Although these brief examples are a set of notional social and cultural constructions, and nobody is going to exhibit all the associative attributes listed above to the preclusion of others, these core values lie behind all constructions of masculinity or femininity and, indeed, it would be impossible to recognise or talk about any discernible masculinity or femininity without them (see Francis, 2000; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). Of course, this is not to say that these traits are not sometimes contradictory or blurred or overlapping, nor that gender identities can be constructed differently by different people in different settings or cultures. Moreover, men can display qualities of feminine conduct and be bearers of femininity and vice versa (Francis, 2010; Paechter, 2006).

However, patterns of military masculinity are generally seen in the literature as being more monolithic, excluding any feminine qualities or attributes. Similar to other military forces, the army is recognised in the literature as being a masculine institution. This is not only because of the organisational structures, practices and rules of the formal culture, such as the system of ranking and competitive testing, but also because it is still populated by men, is a main arena for the production of masculine identities, and it plays a prime role in creating specific images of masculinity (and what it means to be a man) in wider and popular society. Thus the

army is not only a gendered institution but is also a gendering institution (Barrett, 1996; Godfrey, 2009).

Barrett (1996) was one of the first researchers to deconstruct the image of a single, monolithic, universally uniform type of military masculinity. He proposed that there were a series of identities constructed and performed around job specialties or cap badges: for example, the engineer, medic, air support corps, helicopter pilot, etc. Rather than a single and highly embodied model of masculinity, I am arguing that we need to see the military as a site where there are multiple possibilities of meaning-making, and therefore there will not only be a plurality of masculinities found within the army organisation, but there will also be individual soldiers exhibiting a variety of masculine identities at different times and in different contexts.

However, despite the fact that recruitment advertising and literature now stress the chance to gain educational skills and qualifications, or learn a skill or an occupational trade (particularly in relation to technical corps such as signals or engineers), a number of authors (e.g., Connell, 1989; Hedges, 2002; Hockey, 2003; Kovitz, 2003; Morgan, 1994; Woodward & Winter, 2004) have argued that it is the image of the “warrior hero”, which is still *the* key symbol of military masculinity, and central to how the army portrays the infantryman and other combat support arms (Hockey, 2003), which the majority of participants in this study served in. The figure of the warrior hero refers to a highly active form of masculinity defined through action and achievement, and can be seen represented and reproduced in heroic paintings, comic books and posters of action films: the stance, facial expression and the high-tech weapons signify toughness, aggression and the capacity to inflict violence (Morgan, 1994). It was this representation of manhood that had the overwhelming influence on the identities of the young male recruits in the present study, setting the blueprint to which they aspired and attempted to enact.

This was the hegemonic form of masculinity that was the most “culturally exalted” (Connell, 1995, p. 77) or “the most honoured way of being a man” (Schrock & Padavic, 2007, p. 629), that was presented to these young recruits everyday in the barracks and training ranges. The concept and use of the term hegemonic masculinity has been subject to a number of critiques (e.g., Beasley, 2008, 2012; Coles, 2007; Donaldson, 1993; Hearn, 2004, 2012), and the notion is further complicated because it can apply to the *gender order* in society (where male power tends to oppress women and subordinate certain types of men), and/or to a specific *gender regime* (Morrell, 1998) operating in a particular context (including institutions and organisations). There is not always an easy alignment between these two levels. However, the concept works well in this particular military context, and in this article I am regarding hegemonic masculinity as a set of particular cultural ideals, a set of enacted practices and individual character qualities/traits and behaviours that become “essential markers” (Morrell et al., 2013, p. 11). The hegemonic regime of military masculinity is usually presented in the literature as being exclusively masculine; it sets the ideal standards of successful masculinity and other types of masculinity are seen as peripheral, marginalized, or second best. It has its own set of values that have currency or legitimacy that lay down the rules of how individuals should act and behave, think and aspire to. It bestows power and privilege on those who espouse it and claim it as their own and are able to enact it. It gains its legitimacy by consent but at its heart it is always about dynamics, contestation and hierarchies of power.

Within this localised context the ingredients or resources to construct the hegemonic form are already in place, and if the recruits do not already know most of it

features or characteristics at the beginning of their training they quickly find out what they are during the first few weeks, as the oppressive and powerful process of army socialisation quickly takes hold. One of the difficulties with this idealised form of masculinity is that very few men are able to attain this model of manhood, let alone sustain this ideal for very long in the face of competition, injury, or failure, and yet all the recruits are required to work towards gaining these attributes or qualities and perform particular practices, even if some attain more of them, and are able to perform some of them better, than others. Of course it is never assumed that such character attributes are permanent, and the army creates structures and routines that regularly test and retest these qualities to ensure they are maintained. Moreover, if it was possible to realise all the attributes of the hegemonic form, its power and allure would become attenuated.

Associations of Masculinity and Femininity within the Hegemonic Form

Although as I have written above, the warrior hero is portrayed in the literature as the personification or epitome of aggressive masculinity, particularly for the infantryman, with its attributes of aggression, endurance and so on (Hockey, 1986, 2003; Morgan, 1994; Taber, 2011), I wish to argue (and this point will be expanded when I present data below) that this form of hegemony contains a number of other features or characteristics, which may be regarded as having more feminised connotations such as equality, collaboration and caring (as stated in the list above). I do not see there being a tension between these qualities and practices, but rather consider them inherent features of the military hegemonic form. I am certainly not arguing that this is a form of the “inclusive masculinity” outlined by Anderson (2009) and Anderson and McGuire (2010) for it was still predicated in opposition to femininity and homosexuality. However, as Anderson (2010) writes, a degree of caution needs to be applied when making generalisations about even the most seemingly well-studied cultures.

One of the embodiments of the hegemonic masculinity is the role model. These individuals, whom are generally Officers or NCOs (Non-Commissioned Officers) and come from outside the peer group, are positioned by the recruits at the top of the gendered hierarchy, rendering them as successful and envied, and therefore, powerful and highly influential. Carrington and Skelton (2003) have pointed out that the concept of a “role model” originates from role theory in the mid-1950s (Parsons & Bales, 1955), and although perhaps less prominent in contemporary sociological (or psychological) literature, it has nevertheless influenced a number of sociological perspectives such as symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Denzin, 1992).⁴ The recruits’ perception of themselves is formed by what they think they should be like and how they should come across in the eyes of others—they ask themselves questions such as “what should a real soldier look like?”, and, “how should I act and behave?” In other words, they become what they think others peers think they should be. The term is used here to mean a representation of “the exemplary soldier”.

⁴ It is also important to distinguish this from the social determinist sex role theories, which Connell (1995) argued failed to take into account the agency that men can play in the construction of their masculinities.

FINDINGS

This section presents and discusses findings about role models, trainees' definitions of what make a "real" soldier, personal changes to their identities and the culture of their immediate peer group, and all these themes are connected to the quest to inhabit and perform the role of the warrior hero.

Role Models

The topic of role models was explored during the Stage 2 interviews with 18 out of the 20 recruits, when the majority of them had been in the army for less than a year. The key characteristics of these role models was their age, authority, knowledge, expertise, experience, and the ability to be able to talk about their active service on deployment gave them an added charisma and stature. This was a time in the recruits' life when training cuts them off from communication with their family and neighbourhood, and so makes for a particularly impressionable period of development. These influential figures become "significant others" and act as an embodied and exemplary form of the hegemonic form; they are the source of incentives and sanctions and are deeply respected; they help the trainees to interpret the realities of their new lives and provide the necessary guidelines for effective performance. As one of the senior Officers from the higher chain of command argued, "It's only if their [the trainees'] role models say this is important, this is necessary, take an interest in it, that you will get people actively engaging". And so, if, for example, NCOs suggest that there is little merit in having good basic skills, it becomes much more difficult to persuade recruits of their value.

Informal conversations with Officers and NCOs led researchers to believe that almost every recruit had a role model whom they admired, or even adulated, and it was therefore slightly surprising to find that only two-thirds (12) of those who were directly asked about role models confirmed that they had a particular person whom they looked up to, which was usually their section or platoon commander. Six were clear that they did not have any particular individual, or group of individuals in mind, from within their personal army experience, although three of these cited a family member as a role model such as a father or uncle who had been, or still was, in one of the services. The other three trainees were insistent that they did not have any role models; this was because they felt they had not been treated with any respect, and so it was impossible to look up to any NCO or Officer. This was one of the findings from the research: that the NCOs/Officers who get the best results from their recruits, and who were afforded the highest esteem, were the ones who were perceived to be "hard but fair", and did not abuse the power of their rank.

What Makes a "Real" Soldier?

Another question asked to five recruits in Stage 2, and to all of them at Stage 3, was whether they regarded themselves yet as "real" or "proper" soldiers; in other words, whether being a soldier had become an indivisible part of their personal and professional identity. Whereas they all started as raw trainee recruits at the beginning of Phase 1, all the interviewees in Phase 2 felt they were now well on the way to becoming a knowledgeable member of the army organisation. One inter-

viewee spoke how he regarded his time in Phase 1 as an apprenticeship and that he was now training to be a “proper” soldier. At this phase of their army careers, only two of the five trainees at Stage 2 were prepared to say they were “real” soldiers (although they admitted they would gain more respect once they had completed a tour), and the other three felt they were still preparing to become one. As one guardsman recalled:

I am officially a trained soldier but, as a person, I think it’s when you do a tour, you know, when you’ve been there and you’ve been in action, you’ve been beside your mates and stuff like that. I think that’s what you can call a soldier.

By Stage 3 the proportion had increased to 10 out of the 14. Three had already completed a tour of duty in Afghanistan and said they felt “complete”, while the four who were still in the process of “becoming” agreed with the trainee above, and said they would not become a “proper” soldier until they had seen active service. It seems, then, that many of the recruits regarded their time in the army as enhancing their skills and practising for the eventual combat that was bound to eventually materialise, and that their professional and masculine identity was not complete until they had been involved in action, not just as an individual, but as part of the whole unit, alongside their peers.

Personal Changes and Developments

During the interviews at Stage 2, the trainees were asked further questions about their identity and whether they thought they had changed as a person since they had been in the army. Seventeen of the 19 trainees who engaged with this question felt that they had personally developed and changed in a number of positive ways. One of the 19 claimed that, although he had changed, it was for the worse: he had become depressed and moodier and aggressive; another felt that he had not changed, although he admitted that his partner and family thought he had grown up a lot. When the cohort of 14 was asked the same question during the Stage 3 interviews, all 14 categorically stated that they had become different people, and all of them agreed that it was the army that was largely responsible for this.

Most of the changes cited by the recruits were not specifically connected to gender. The most commonly reported difference was an improvement in the level of confidence, particularly in terms of developing social skills, including being able to talk in front of large groups, and communicate with a wide range of personnel from a variety of backgrounds, including those from the higher chain of command. A great deal of personal development is also likely to stem from the numerous (e.g., scholastic) skills, and aspirations for future career and personal development, that they gain from both the educational and professionally related courses they take throughout their army careers. Included in this, for some, will be acquisition of qualifications, which can make them more employable, both within the army and when they leave. Other changes that the recruits mentioned included having a more positive attitude and becoming better organised, disciplined, sensible and responsible. Although some of these may be seen as a general part of natural maturation, the process is accelerated in this environment, partly by the amount of responsibility and self-discipline that recruits need to acquire and display in their everyday duties.

The differences were noticed by families and friends at home, and around a third of the trainees during the Stage 2 interviews specifically mentioned growing apart from their original friends, whom, they perceived, had not developed as much as them and were “the same as ever”.

Researcher: So do you think you've changed since you've been in the army?

Recruit: Yeah.

Researcher: Tell me in which ways you've changed?

Recruit: Before I joined the army I wasn't [always] getting into trouble, but I was with the wrong group of people.

Researcher: Yeah, at school or outside of school?

Recruit: Yeah, from school to outside. It's more of the mates I had around the area, I was not exactly following them, but I tried to fit in, just doing the stupid stuff they was doing.

Researcher: Yeah.

Recruit: But I always knew that it wasn't for me, because when they was doing it and they was enjoying it and getting some sort of kick out of what they was doing.... I was always the one worrying, or thinking I don't want to do this. So that's why I joined the army actually.

Researcher: And when you go back now, home, have you grown away from your mates, in a way?

Recruit: In a way, yeah. I still associate with them, I still ... I think when I go back I don't want to fall back into the same person, but certain habits come up when you go home, when you are around them people ... obviously, I don't act different, but you have to act a certain way to fit back in with them, because if I speak like I spoke to somebody in the army ... because being in the army, you can speak, being in the army to your mates, that I've got here, they know me inside out now. My mates back home, they knew me, but they didn't, they didn't know me, if you know what I mean. Here I sleep with them. That sounds bad, but you know, I sleep in the same room as them.

Researcher: I know what you mean, yeah, yeah, sure.

Recruit: You are doing everything together. They start to know what you are like, and what you are like as a person. And I think my mates here in the army, I've known my mates back home for like fourteen, fifteen years, but I think I prefer the lads I've got here and I've only been here a couple of months.

Researcher: Yeah. Why are they better friends, because they know...?

Recruit: You can trust them. They are not judging you on what bad things you are doing, they are judging you on good things.

Researcher: So at home you get on and you get popular by doing loads of bad things.

Recruit: Oh, yeah, definitely ... especially in the area I grew up in, I grew up in Manchester, and it was quite tough around there, if you don't act a certain way then you get treated badly.

Researcher: Right, so you just have to act in that way?

Recruit: Definitely, definitely.

Researcher: Yeah. So in a way you've grown a little bit apart from your mates.

Recruit: Yeah, definitely. I grew apart from them, but I won't forget them, because at the end of the day.... I think half of them made me join the army, so ... I'm thankful for that.

Researcher: They persuaded you to?

Recruit: Not persuaded me, but it was just the way they was going, I thought I don't want to go that way...

The exchange above shows how much this young recruit feels he has changed. He has moved away from his friends at home and within a comparatively short period of time feels a closer affiliation to his army peers. This is due to the intensity of the relationships that come from sharing a common world in close proximity for long periods of the day, and the organisation's emphasis on collective endeavour ("doing everything together"), including the essential element of trust. He is also judged on what he does now, rather than who he is, or was. He mentions the compulsion to "fit in" with the peer group, and that in order to be accepted at home he also needed to behave in particular and contrasting ways, even if this did not make him feel comfortable. Although he has agency, and was able to take the decision to enlist (which he did in order to leave his home life), the power of the peer group and the need to act, or perform, in a particular way and belong, is clearly palpable.

He talks about not wanting to "fall back into [being] the same person". Although this suggests an awareness that his self has different facets, which can be performed to different people at different times and in different contexts, he also talks about how his army friends know what he is really like ("they know me inside out"), which suggests he also feels he has an inner or core identity, which he thinks is the "real" him (person). However, although he says he feels different, and agrees he is more grown up, and more responsible, what we are unable to know is whether he feels more secure in his emotions and how enduring they are.

The Peer Group Culture

The informal peer group culture is a crucial area of army life and recruits have to quickly learn and adapt to its unwritten codes and rules. The culture is one of both inclusion—those that pass the military tests—and of exclusion—those that fail the tests (or get injured) and are back-squadded to try again (which many trainees admitted as being their worst fear). To put it another way, the culture is set up to highlight the competence and incompetence that separates the masculine attributes of strong from the weak. However, there is also an emphasis that begins from day one on building friendships, and identification with, and a sense of loyalty to, one's immediate peers is fostered by a collective existence of living and working together in a small section or platoon. The aim is to create a sense of camaraderie and equality, and recruits soon learn the need to work together and the more traditionally feminine qualities of supporting, and indeed, caring for one another through mutual and reciprocal cooperation and interdependence. What I am arguing here is that these feminine qualities are a constituent part of the warrior hero but are seldom highlighted or discussed in much of the literature in the field of military masculinities.

Recruit: Everyone's like, the whole ... in your platoon you all help each other.

Researcher: Can you give me an example?

Recruit: Just by giving encouragement and helping out. So when you're sort-of ... if someone can't do something then you ... if you're ... then you give them a hand to do it because there's always something ... there'll be something you can't do that they can so you just help each other out.

Just as recruits need to learn and adopt the rules and mores of the official, or formal, army culture, so they also quickly have to learn the unwritten codes and conventions of the unofficial, or informal, army culture. One of these is that it can be precarious to align oneself too closely to the NCOs and Officers of the formal regime, and that loyalty to one's peers takes precedence, as the need of reciprocal collaboration is paramount.

Recruit: He kept going to tell the Officers; I think he was trying to score Brownie points more than anything, but I don't think he realised the army don't like grasses. At the end of the day if someone is doing something wrong honestly you'd be thinking, "That's wrong, I'll go and report it," but I don't think he ... I think he failed to realise that in the army everyone is a close-knit family because at the end of the day he could be grassing on the lad he could be fighting next to in maybe six months' time and he might just turn around and think, "Well now you're a fucking snitch bag", um, do you know what I mean?

The interviews uncovered very little bullying, at least within the peer group culture, although recruits spoke about how "banter" and humour (discussed further in the section below) was a constituent part of life in the barracks and on the training ranges. Hockey (1986) has also written how nicknames are commonplace and sexual potency amongst the trainees is reaffirmed constantly by the practice of swearing, which also reinforces their new status of soldier and accentuates the differences from civilian life.

Two of the main elements and conventional markers of hegemonic masculinity, at least in the literature, that I have not mentioned are homophobia and misogyny. Other studies (e.g., Basham, 2009; Hockey, 1986; Kimmel, 1994; Levin, 2011; Silva, 2008; Taber, 2011) testify that they are a prevalent part of military life, but although I heard anecdotal evidence from both trainees and line managers that they were part of the army culture at the training units, in this study there was no time for these areas to be investigated as part of the formal interview schedule. As I have already written, one of the limitations of the research was that researchers were not allowed to carry out any observations; moreover, interviews were conducted individually, which meant that there were very few occasions to observe peer group interactions as part of the collective peer group culture.

Leaders

One question that was explored towards the end of the fieldwork at Stage 3 was about leadership amongst the peer group, a key trait in the hegemonic masculinity of the warrior hero. Although this theme was only explored with seven of the 14 interviewees, it is interesting that only one soldier (as recruits had become by then) thought there were any natural or popular leaders amongst his colleagues. The other six all stressed that there were no hierarchies and everyone was regarded

as an equal member of the group: not only were they all at the same rank (the same level), but they all knew the importance of teamwork and, as I have written above, the need to look out for each other was deeply ingrained.

Although the warrior hero refers to an outdoor form of masculinity and it is the active physical exercises on the training ranges that transform the gendered body into a soldier, the attribute of physicality/athleticism did not seem to play a major part in gaining peer group status or becoming a leader, and a soldier did not appear to have to be exceptionally physically strong, have very high levels of endurance or, say, be readily liked. These traits may have been admired but there was no automatic link between possession of physical capital, and peer group popularity, and popularity was not necessarily synonymous to being a dominant character. Perhaps this is because everyone needed to have a fit and strong body and so this resource for gaining status was diminished. As in other institutional contexts, such as in schools, the most important attributes for popularity were good interpersonal skills, a strong sense of humour and the ability to make people laugh. The capability to generate a laugh is a key constituent of the many peer group cultures such as in schools (e.g., Francis, 1998; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Mac an Ghail, 1994; Woods, 1976). I have already alluded above to the “banter”, which was an everyday and integral part of the peer group. Humour played an important part in affirming and reaffirming the collective identities of the trainees’ peer groups and was used as a strategy to foster and confirm camaraderie (Godfrey, 2014). Indeed, in many ways, humour was actually “constitutive” of identities (Kehily & Nayak, 1997, p. 70), and it not only consolidated the bonds of the friendship, but was used as an organisational and regulatory device, testing out who could “take it” and who could not.

The popular recruits also possessed the qualities of sociability and being able to engender camaraderie, which in this context ranks above masculine qualities of individualism and independence. The conversation below took place in Stage 1 of the research.

Researcher: Are there any people in your platoon who you would, like, look up to? Anyone who is a particularly fantastic soldier, in the sense that he helps everyone, he’s really fit, strong, whatever?

Recruit: Well we are all, just now, we are all at the same level. In my room and stuff, obviously you get people that are a bit slower than you, or not as fit as you, but that’s just a case of working out for them really. You can’t really...

Researcher: Yeah. So it doesn’t really matter?

Recruit: No, no, it doesn’t matter, because if you are the same rank you can’t really boast about any issue.

Researcher: No. But are certain people more popular than others?

Recruit: Oh yeah, definitely.

Researcher: Why? What makes them popular?

Recruit: Because some people have got ... some people are funny, some people are shy, some people... you get all different personalities in the army, you can’t get ... in this job, this job is funny, because even though you might not think that person is great, or they are the nicest person, you won’t diss [disrespect] them in this job, you get on with them, this job makes you get on with them.

[...]

Researcher: So there is no, one sort of leader that everyone looks up to amongst the 30 [in the platoon]?

Recruit: No.

Researcher: So are the guys, er, looked up to, the ones that are strongest, as the best?

Recruit: Not necessarily. I get looked up to, um, a lot of people, purely because of my mouth because obviously I'm outgoing.

The recruit makes the point that as all his immediate peers are at the same rank, they are therefore all equal, although this does not mean that some are not more popular than others. The seven recruits were also asked to comment on whether there were any subgroups with the platoon based around friendship groups who had perhaps particular interests, came from similar backgrounds or behaved in particular ways. It was interesting that only a few of the interviewees seemed to recognise these groups and is very different to when the same question has been asked to people in other institutions such as schools (e.g., Frosh et al., 2002; Mac and Ghail, 1994). In the extract below the young recruit says he recognises five or six different friendship groups, although he only categorises three, which analytically can be viewed as different types: the "loud lads", the "clever lads" and the "posh lads", indicating that there was a diversity of identities within the informal peer group.

Recruit: In our troop you've got like five or six little subgroups and there's about 30 of us that ... there's not enough of the same personality for everyone to be in one big group, if you know what I mean, there's about eight or nine of us, um, that I knock around with constantly, um, we're the outgoing loud boys, do you know what I mean? But like I say, the ones who grew up with my background, the football hooliganism type of things and doing stuff that's daft, and then there's like the three or four clever ones that keep themselves to themselves, sit in their room at night rather than sit and watch a film quietly, stick the music on nice and loud, get the lads in the room, do you know what I mean, have a laugh, sit and just joke around.

Researcher: And do the clever and quiet ones get picked on at all?

Recruit: No, not really, like there's one lad, he's a very posh lad this lad but people take the piss out of him, la-de-dah this and la-de-dah that, would you like to come into the library and take the piss, but at the end of the day he's one of the best soldiers in the troop.

Researcher: Right, so you respect him?

Recruit: We do respect him, yeah.

There is a suggestion here that some of these groups are based on background interests and practices (e.g., in the case of the interviewee above, football and misbehaviour), but there is also tolerance and a type of equality, as they really are *all in it together*. Peer group respect, and therefore status, is gained by *doing*; in other words, an individual's social and/or economic background, personality or personal interests—who they are—takes second precedence to what they do. However, although there is a diversity of identities, it is important to note that these will be

masked and become subsumed under their identity of the warrior hero, particularly in the face of combat.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Researchers including Haltiner and Kummel (2009) and Woodward and Jenkins (2012) note that it is rare for research to focus on the micro-level of the lived experienced of individuals in the armed forces, as the present study does. My main focus has been on the changing identities of young men in the army during their transition from civilian to soldier and from adolescent to man, and contributes to ongoing debates about the nature of military masculinities by revealing a more nuanced type of the monolithic form often portrayed in the literature. Gender identities are central to the construction of the soldier (Woodward, 2003). The very process of becoming a soldier involves the construction, negotiation, performance and reproduction of gendered identities, and the identification of a particular construction of military masculinity—that of the warrior hero—remains a powerful draw in the recruitment literature, particularly for those seeking to join the infantry and other combat support arms. It was only when they completed a tour of duty abroad that many of the participants were prepared to acknowledge that they were “real”, authentic soldiers.

Although the present study showed that recruits arrive in the army with a variety of personalities and interests, they grow up fast and their identities change and assume a greater homogeneity as the need to conform to the army mores, and to perform the identity of the warrior hero, takes over. The army structures and processes set out to change their identities by socialising them into the official and unofficial military culture, and the organisation is highly effective in achieving its objective. The early phases of training are about the creation of new identities—military identities—and in the case of the young men cited in this article this means the military form of masculinity of the warrior hero. The army also creates a sense of belonging; the recruits had a need to conform, fit in and become part of the group, and I am arguing that this seductive quality is a crucial part of the power of the hegemony. By the time they had reached the field army, all of the soldiers claimed that they had become different people, which is a testament to the power of army culture. They had been transformed into skilled and knowledgeable members of the organisation, and had become more confident, more socially adept and more responsible. Further research is needed to see how enduring these changes are.

The warrior hero acted as the template of how to be a soldier and it gained its influence by consent. It was there for all to see: it was reproduced and embodied in the recruits’ role models, and it suffocated all other forms. Although the military is generally thought of as a very hierarchical organisation, the opposite of “equal”, it is of interest to note that this hegemonic form of military masculinity was more nuanced and is at variance from the narrow, stereotypical, form often portrayed in the literature. The main argument of this article is that an integral part of the warrior hero also contains qualities, which can be described as being associated with feminised qualities and practices of, for instance, friendship, empathy, caring, collegiality, teamwork and equality amongst combatants, which is so essential in many team environments such as organised sport.

If a recruit wanted to build an army career, they had no choice but were com-

pelled to aspire to, imitate, and enact this particular form, and it seems that there is little social space available for any particular form of contestation. The hegemonic form does not have to work hard at marginalising or subordinating other types because no other forms were able to survive. It is so powerful that there are no alternatives: in other institutions or organisations an individual has a choice to conform, resist or negotiate a compromise but if a recruit was to attempt to practice even a slight deviation from the hegemonic form, they would not be tolerated for very long, either by their peer group or the organisation. They would be quickly subordinated and, as life became more intolerable, they would almost certainly try to leave the army at the earliest opportunity.

This type of idealised form of military masculinity is just this: it is an aspiration of an idealised type, which for almost everyone is unattainable, and, as I have argued, it would lose its power if it were ever possible to perform all of its characteristics. The point is to reach towards it and to try and enact as many characteristics as possible, but although this form of masculinity is all-encompassing and powerful, it is also fragile and precarious, and needs to be continually demonstrated, confirmed and legitimised in day-to-day interactions. Although certain recruits were more popular than others, there were few leaders within the peer group, and the culture of equality and collaboration, and of “we’re all in this together”, seemed to override and prevent within-peer group hierarchies developing. Certain individuals were more popular than others, particularly those with good interpersonal skills, and were able to induce “a laugh”, suggesting that, in certain spaces, these attributes can be more important in gaining peer group popularity and status than performing the more masculine qualities usually associated with the warrior hero, particularly in contexts unconnected to combat. Some recruits also organised their social relations around common interests and practices, and there seemed to be an absence of power relations. Although army culture is based on competitiveness, and soldiers have to demonstrate competencies on a daily basis, in many ways individuals are competing against themselves and it does not matter so much who a person is, what background they come from, who is the fastest or strongest, as who can achieve the standards prescribed by the army regime and imitate the characteristics prescribed by the hegemonic form. In other words, in the army (and the military) these young men are not judged for what, or who they are, but on what they do.

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