

# Putting 'Insider-ness' to Work: Researching Identity Narratives of Career Soldiers about to Leave the Army

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## PUTTING 'INSIDER-NESS' TO WORK

### Researching Identity Narratives of Career

#### Soldiers About to Leave the Army

*David Walker*

Military research in the social sciences is often carried out by individuals with past or ongoing military service as well as by those who have no prior experiences of military life. Regardless of the kind of researcher you are, there are well-known challenges associated with researching the military. In this chapter, I shall draw upon my recent research on career soldiers who were leaving the British Army to explore some of the important methodological dynamics that I encountered (Walker, 2010, 2013). This qualitative research project began only months after I had ended my own lengthy Army career. As the work progressed, my professional relationship to the data and the topic of Army exit shifted from one of proximity to one of critical distance – or at least as critically distant as an ex-soldier-turned-researcher can possibly be. My aim in the chapter is to show that military insider-ness may be put to good research use if a professional and reflexive approach is adopted. During the course of this particular project, I found that the passage of time was a significant resource that I could use to the advantage of the work at key stages of the research process. For example, I wrote the research questions from a position of significant early proximity; then as I became increasingly distant from my Army career, and more critical of the process of Army exit, I found that I had new perspectives from which I could analyse the data and my own prior views – a process that reverses that of the traditional anthropologist who seeks to immerse herself in a foreign culture in order to report back to the academic community. Matters of positionality and reflexivity for researchers are certainly not new considerations, but as I go on to discuss they are less likely to attract the attention they deserve among researchers of the military, although this is beginning to change (cf. Castro and Carreiras, 2013; Soeters et al., 2014). In this chapter, my own contribution to this important body of work is made in the spirit of Amanda Coffey's notion of the researcher as an 'ethnographic self'. For Coffey, the researcher is 'thoroughly implicated

in the way we collect, understand, and analyse [. . .] data such that the researching self is often presented as a kind of “medium through which fieldwork is conducted” ’ (1999: 122).

I didn’t know it at the time, but an important relationship had been set in motion when I began this PhD research in 2007. This was between my ongoing experiences as a newly

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exited soldier and the focus of the research that I had designed. The work examined identity narratives among career soldiers during their last year in the British Army. It explored identity transition among soldiers and officers who, although still very much caught up in Army relations, were nevertheless relating differently to them as they anticipated new horizons in their future civilian lives. I designed the research project as a serving soldier in my last year of Army service and began the work a month after my retirement. In designing the project I had not fully foreseen my own routine and ongoing reaction to leaving the Army, nor had I anticipated how this would shape my relationship with the data in different ways and at different stages. Interestingly, one important finding of the research concerns the difficulty exiting career soldiers have in accurately projecting themselves forward into future lives devoid of the military social relations that were supporting the person they thought themselves to be. In this chapter I explore a number of issues associated with researching the military when a researcher has personal knowledge and experience of the service being investigated. In the next section, I review some relevant literature about insider-ness in qualitative research, and then in subsequent sections I discuss how insider-ness may be put to work in military contexts in general, and how in particular this happened in my own research on Army identity transitions in particular.

### **Insider-ness in Qualitative Research**

No longer can the researcher’s place in all stages of research be ignored (Atkinson, 1992; Mauthner and Doucet, 2003) since in qualitative research s/he is a ‘research instrument *par*

*excellence*' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983: 19) whose influence is pervasive and most pronounced during phases of analysis. But a loss of faith in objectivity and value-neutrality among qualitative researchers should not represent a retreat from systematic and stringent research strategies. Instead, well-designed and consistent methodologies ought to coexist with concern also to offer 'transparency, honesty, and openness' (Higate and Cameron, 2006: 223) about personal, artful and elusive aspects of research. One of the most important developments in qualitative research occurred in the late 1980s in what has been termed a 'crisis of representation'. This marked a point when a number of authors (Geertz, 1980; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983; Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Marcus and Fischer, 1986; Geertz, 1988; Haraway, 1988; Denzin, 1989; Atkinson, 1992; Hobbs and May, 1993; Denzin, 1995, 1997) challenged the possibility of completely 'voicing' (Hobbs, 1993; Pearson, 1993: xviii) the experiences of the researched. These authors took issue with a tendency to play-down – or worse – to conceal the effects of the researcher in a haze of professional mystique. For Mauthner and Doucet (2003: 416) 'the problem arises through recognition that as social researchers we are integral to the social world we study,' and this translates into a situation where the researcher's presence can be problematic or useful in all sorts of ways.

Insider-ness is a key feature of this, and researchers are encouraged both to embrace and resist it. They might embrace their access to 'local and esoteric knowledges' (Coffey, 1999: 27) which for the 'standard fieldwork model' requires a research journey from 'ethnographer-as-stranger, progressing towards a familiarity and eventual enlightenment' (Coffey, 1999: 20). But the insider has an 'initial proximity' (Hodkinson, 2005) that resonates with Coffey's assertion that 'fieldwork always starts from where we are' (Coffey, 1999: 158).

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This is a statement about identity, and for the insider the starting position is one of personal immersion that brings for many a 'definite advantage' (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1984). In reviewing

this literature Labaree has divided perceived advantages into four areas: 'the value of shared experiences; the value of greater access; the value of cultural interpretation; and the value of deeper understanding and clarity of thought' (Labaree, 2002: 103). The bonuses of these areas, while apparently quite clear at one level, are also potentially problematic in a number of important ways. Consequently, making insider-ness work seems to depend on an adequate treatment of a range of well-documented pitfalls. For many, researcher reflexivity is the preferred means for achieving this since it 'expresses researchers' awareness of the necessary connection to the researcher situation and hence their effect on it' (Davies, 1999: 7).

Insider 'cognitive [. . .] predispositions' (Gergen and Gergen, 1991: 77) that affect how the world is apprehended can escape notice, and may limit what we might experience and the questions we ask. This is why the need to continually induce levels of 'strangeness' is sometimes advocated (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983) where familiarity either preexisted or has set in. In educational settings, researchers as teachers are often insiders, and Delamont (1992) calls for strategies to deal with this to establish a workable tension between 'strangeness and over-identification' (Coffey, 1999: 23) to avoid total absorption and maintain some degree of professional distance. For Hammersley and Atkinson (1983: 115) this is because 'feeling at home' must be avoided for a critical and analytical perspective to flourish. For these authors, too much familiarity can hinder analysis and inquiry. At worst it can produce uncritical work based on flawed analysis. Coffey (1999: 31) argues that this was the case for Willis's classic work *Learning to Labour* (1993), where he did not adequately consider his 'ethnographic self' and so failed to reflect upon his overidentification with the boys who were the focus of his study, undermining the work somewhat. This kind of unreflexive overidentification

is likely to disqualify a researcher from an area of work, since a nonreflexive stance rather emulates members of the subject group, producing work that is noncritical and perhaps based upon common-sense observations. Indeed, as Coffey notes, 'a researcher who is no longer able to stand back from the esoteric knowledge they have acquired, and whose perspective becomes indistinguishable from that of the host culture, may face analytic

problems' (Coffey, 1999: 23).

A more political criticism of interpretive research – and by implication, of insider-ness – is considered by Hammersley. This is the critical argument that 'ideological common sense' (Hammersley, 1992: 103) is reproduced by the approach and that this neglects 'the effects of macro-social factors on people's behaviour' (Hammersley, 1992: 103). For these authors, values ought to be explicit, especially those that motivate areas of study, since if value neutrality is unachievable, there must always be political or ideological implications of the chosen work. Inevitably, the position of an insider reflects a certain balance of power that may not be directly addressed. Other common insider pitfalls include self-indulgence and narcissism (Davies, 1999: 179) if they are given free reign. This seems more likely with autobiographical-style research which carries related perils of emotionality. This is a delicate and difficult matter, especially for researchers who approach projects from a position of 'knowing' (Coffey, 1999: 33) that draws to some extent on biographical experiences. Even so, 'emotional connectedness to the processes and practices of fieldwork, to analysis and writing, is normal and appropriate' (Coffey, 1999: 158). More than that, if done well it can produce

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excellent work such as John Hockey's *Squaddies*, an ethnography that draws on his own Army experiences for mediation (Hockey, 1986; see also Hockey, 1996). Coffey urges advancement beyond polarised accounts of familiarity and strangeness to embrace continually changing characteristics of self and identity, and to think about the researcher in terms of positionality. This allows for a range of researcher selves and interactional performances, including (hopefully fleeting) moments of self-indulgence or too much emotional attachment. Positionality draws attention to the process of research from phase to phase – even from person to person – and this has been especially pertinent to my research about identity at the point of Army exit. This requires from the researcher an awareness of the self as researcher and a willingness

to 'critically [. . .] engage with the range of possibilities of position, place and identity' (Coffey, 1999: 36). Insider researchers are part of the research process, and their sense of self is drawn into the work in different ways across the entire process. It is this process of being drawn into the research work in different ways that constitutes the focus of this chapter.

### **Putting Insider-ness to Work**

Putting insider-ness to work in qualitative military research involves making the most of specialist knowledge, but crucially at the same time striving for critical analysis. Charles Kirke gives us an example of insider-ness in military research (2013). He constructs three anthropological types: 'anthropology of the other' (the researcher can only very loosely be termed an insider); 'anthropology from within' (the researcher is a full member of the group being studied); and 'anthropology of the familiar' (researchers who are familiar but not full members). He locates his own research of the British Army in the middle type. Even though this kind of reflexivity among researchers of the military is becoming more common, there remains reluctance among many such researchers to recognise their own place in the research as a consequence of a number of factors. For one thing, the military is a challenging field of study largely because its component parts are closed institutions with unique roles and cultural differences, creating issues of access and understanding in a variety of different ways.

Moreover, a preference for statistical 'fact' still influences the norms for certain academic and policy-related outlets speaking to military audiences and readerships. At the level of individual research work, the chosen methodology and theoretical framework, together with the precise details of the research being undertaken, will determine the extent to which military researchers *do* incorporate or recognise their place in the generation of meaning and the extent to which they believe they *should* do so. Professional answers to these two key questions will vary, and the divide between research that uses qualitative or quantitative methods is noticeable because the validity and reliability of these methods are justified in very different ways (cf. Golafshani, 2003). As a researcher of the military who has used both qualitative (Walker, 2013) and quantitative methods (Walker et al., 2014), I can see the very

different ways in which credibility for that work has been justified. Now that I have outlined the kinds of issues that are at stake for matters of reflexivity and insider-ness among qualitative researchers I will focus in the remainder of this chapter on the context of my own research project that I introduced earlier. My hope is to ground some of the earlier more conceptual points about insider-ness in the context of this specific research situation and this specific researcher.

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### **Theoretical Framework**

As noted before, the theoretical orientation of the work will influence a researcher's stance on whether or not their place is acknowledged in the generation of meaning, and there will be differences of opinion about this. My own research about identity at Army exit took place from within a relativist ontology. This ontology emphasises local and specific coconstructed

realities (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008) as part of a wider constructivist paradigm.

From this paradigm, knowledge is partial, generated, and 'situational' (Haraway, 1988). As Finlay (2002) notes, research does not generate objective truth but instead something different emerges from the 'intersubjective relation' of research as an important dynamic. I did not take this to mean that there is not a lived reality; in trying to understand this, I drew theoretically on a combination of the work of Paul Ricoeur and George Herbert Mead. Ricoeur claims that the experience of being and acting in the world comes first (Ricoeur and Valdes, 1991) and that this should be the starting point for the analysis of identity. Although events and experience must come first, however, meaning was to be the only currency in a project such as mine. Drawing on Ricoeur's narrative theory of self that operates in the space between event and meaning, and accounting for the more general notion that life has an already storied quality (Somers, 1994: 613), my work could only explore the meaning side of this distinction – between what might be termed the soldiers' lived reality and what we or they can know,



think or say about it in a research or interview context. Temporality was key for my work in all sorts of ways. Not only is temporality a central feature of identity, but for soldiers facing a horizon of exit, the relationship between time and meaning seemed especially prominent. This dynamic brought together in the present moment, for the soldiers, changing constructions of their past and anticipated futures – their identities of becoming. During lengthy interviews about their impending Army exit, soldiers chose in the moments of the interview, and in the contexts of their present lives, what to talk about in relation to the questions I asked, the themes pursued either in my analysis or in our interactions with each other.

### **Negotiating the 'Swamp'**

What to do about reflexivity for this study? Some advocate a thorough exploration of every twist and turn in the research process in a kind of 'confessional' act (VanMaanen, 1988) intended to lay bare decisions made and routes taken so as to expose its dynamic. Finlay (2002) suggests five different ways to negotiate the 'swamp' of reflexivity (introspection, intersubjective reflection, mutual collaboration, social critique and discursive deconstruction) that are implicated in the researchers' aims. In a similar vein, Lynch (2000) develops an even more complex inventory of reflexivity (mechanical, substantive, metatheoretical, interpretive, ethnomethodological, methodological) to expose the endless diversity of the term. Both authors, however, warn against the simplistic idea that reflexivity is a process that alone can be conducive to good research. They seem to imply that there can be no final sense of getting reflexivity 'right' and that the endless pursuit of this is no guarantee of successful research. Indeed, for Finlay (2002: 227), researchers 'are damned if they do damned if they don't'. The challenge, it seemed, was for me as the researcher to negotiate the swamp in a way that best employs the undeniable processes of reflexivity for the project at hand.

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As a new ex-soldier and postgraduate researcher, I straddled at least two communities and

had to communicate in both. Being reflexive meant grasping this dynamic. I belonged neither to the Army nor the academic community. Dick Hobbs makes the same point about the working classes of the East End of London that he had come to call home. His challenge was in getting to know the academic community into which his work would be received, but he discovered he could not present a world he knew so well into an appropriate academic format. He goes on to say: 'in my attempt to perform an ethnographic ventriloquist act (Geertz, 1988: 145) I was using two dummies, and the voices were getting mixed up' (Hobbs and May, 1993: 56). This happened to me, and was also related to my ongoing attempts to adjust to a new role completely at odds with my last. My initial proximity to soldiering was soon consumed by an ongoing need to adjust to a university environment. Not only did this affect my relations with the data but it also significantly shifted interactions with my own prior career and disturbed my interpretive capacities, shattering what I came to see as a prior comfortable sense of belonging. This is why Hobbs's work resonates; I believe that by the time my data reached written form the voices of the soon-to-be-leaving soldier and the veteran-researcher had become thoroughly mixed up, and I think this is a good thing, for it entwined the leavers' own personal experiences of the pre-exit period with my own experiences of postexit life, together with a professional and sociological critical analysis informed by the literature. The idea that something new and different emerges from the 'intersubjective relation' (Finlay, 2002) of the research offers one passage through the swamp. In the same way, Corbin and Strauss suggest that 'the constructivist viewpoint that concepts and theories are *constructed* by researchers out of stories that are constructed by research participants who are trying to explain and makes sense out of their experiences and/or lives, both to the researcher and themselves' (2008: 10) is a useful one.

### **Positionality and Reflexivity at Different Phases of the Research**

In addition to a general and ongoing interplay between my veteran researching self and the data, there are quite specific features of the work that might have been different had it not been for insider-ness. During the period of proximity many such matters were beyond my notice and took on a different significance as the work progressed. Some of these kinds of

processes are discussed later in relation to key phases of the research.

### ***Topic and Sample Selection***

It is possible that I intuitively knew the difficulties I might cause for myself by researching Army identity because I was very tempted by nonmilitary topics. But sometimes the 'selection of a setting for study hardly arises at all because an opportunity presents itself' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983: 36), and this was the case for me: I realised that something of sociological importance was occurring in the pre-exit phase because I was experiencing it myself, and I could see that friends and colleagues were similarly affected. Paradoxically, my topic selection resolved my own attempt to leave the Army and was for me at least the surest way to attract funding. In terms of sample selection, the most noticeable insider benefit I had was access: I knew key people who could help. In gathering my sample, I used internal Army categories (for example, corporal, Royal Artillery, twenty-two years' service) as a basis for differentiating people, but later realised how unquestionably

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I had divided individuals in this way. Paul Higate notes that in military settings, research subjects might be 'captive' (Higate and Cameron, 2006: 222), unable to resist the researcher who is perceived as more powerful. I had little problem with access, but again with hindsight I could see that I was using without question the 'wilco' (will-cooperate) attitude soldiers have towards each other. Researchers I knew in other fields had a much harder time negotiating access.

### ***Face-to-Face Interviews***

On the whole insider-ness brought me easy rapport with the leavers, but this cannot be guaranteed, as Paul Higate found when his Royal Air Force background afforded little purchase with a veteran sample (Higate and Cameron, 2006: 228). Moreover, the manner or demeanour of the interviewer will shape the image created of him by respondents who will 'use that image as a basis of response' (McCall and Simmons, 1969: 80). Along with other factors, differences of gender and rank might influence face-to-face interactions in ways unnoticed by the researcher, perhaps

sustaining local power relations of gender and subordination (Higate and Cameron, 2006: 222). For McCall and Simmons, 'observer's data are conditioned by the basis upon which subjects respond to him' (1969: 82); interviewers, too, may find themselves reacting in unforeseen ways. For the last eight years of my own Army service I interviewed (or managed those who interviewed) hundreds of soldiers and officers as part of my role. Before this, I worked close to senior commissioned officers. This meant that I had established ways of communicating with all types of soldiers and officers, compatible with the various roles I had. During the subsequent research interviews, I capitalised on my background and presented myself with a 'just-left-the-Army' story. Indeed, on one occasion this went too far when I was placed into my previous Army role by a passing captain who recognised me and requested advice about an ongoing personnel situation. Connection was eased by my knowledge of local personalities, places and events. Most of my sample seemed able to place me in Army terms. One or two knew me a little. Most were bursting to talk about leaving the Army, but a few had little to say, and I noted at the time that I found interviewing commissioned officers most challenging – a factor perhaps implicated in my more limited analysis of this group. I connected most easily with full-career noncommissioned leavers who like me joined the Army in the mid-1980s. But, soon I was beginning to see how many of my questions had been framed from within the Army community, motivated by my shared concern about exit. From the analysis phase of the research I looked back on my interviewing self, thoroughly at home there. In early writing, I contemplated an interview with Don. Don occupied a senior commissioned role that had been significant to me as an 18-year-old soldier, but I struggled to connect this and my familiar sense of what a major might be to the person periodically unravelling before me in interview, under the shadow of exit. After the interview I wrote in my research journal:

Met Don for interview – very odd experience talking to him – he seemed so military and (I was) strangely nervous about interviewing an officer in a position I remember as important and senior (he had a role in the same headquarters I worked in as a private soldier), and occupied by a man of a very different lifestyle – he kept convincing

himself he is a top bloke and that he had lots to offer (civilian life).

*(Research Journal, 10 January 2008)*

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The temporal aspects of this are important. There are signs I had disconnected a little from the Army ('he seemed so military'), but overall during this face-to-face encounter I connected to him in keeping with the effects of my past, because following the interview I also wrote:

Don tells me that humility is central to leadership, and I believe him. As he talks I am in his world. I know what he means. I draw on the same social relations for meaning. I can see that I latch on to his talk of service, his notion of giving-back, and his idealised, embedded speech about community and team.

This was an early veteran researching self reflecting on the face-to-face interview, attempting to understand how embedded knowledge that bound us together during the interview seemed now to be problematic. Paradoxically, too, internal know-how also separated us due to the officer/soldier divide. This was further complicated by his reaction to me. As a public school-educated officer he reacted to my new role as a PhD researcher by saying in a surprised tone: 'well . . . , but that will make you middle class!' Eventually I conceived of this interview and others like it in terms of Wittgenstein's notion of 'seeing-as' (Ricoeur, 1978: 251), because increasingly I could see how my biography was implicated in much of my understanding because 'seeing as' is 'half thought and half experience' (Ricoeur, 1978: 251). I went on to write: 'I don't receive Don's words as an empty receptacle takes water. I hear and experience Don's words at the same time.' Two years later, I could see that the interviewing period featured for me both deep personal understandings of Army exit and increasing distance, as numerous postexit encounters forced strangeness onto the past. In addition, each time I entered a barracks or location I did so as an outsider. This was often disagreeable, but

usefully gave me a sense of incongruity now that my rank and belonging were gone. Denied the interactional comfort I had previously enjoyed, on one occasion my veteran (lack of) status meant that I had to stand outside of the guardroom in a manner reminiscent of my recruit days. I noted this at the time:

Interview: Nigel – had to meet outside guardroom; long time since I had waited outside a guardroom – lots of young lads in and out of uniform small boy racer type cars passing by and young soldiers mostly. Got on to camp no problem – just had to wait for someone. Car parked across the way – someone (of my prior status) coming into camp in car asked who I was.

*(Research Journal, 19 February 2008)*

At the time, I searched these kinds of incident for insight, but in preparing an account of the work two years later, I was surprised to come across the following journal entry about another interview with a provost sergeant:

I felt the despondency of the guardroom – provost sergeant polishing pace stick – he will be out (of the Army) mending heating systems in a few months – the pointlessness of polishing a pace stick! [. . .] I hated going there – in the cells.

*(Research Journal, 19 May 2008)*

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Separation from Army life increased for me as the interviews ended and I began a lengthy and intensive period of analysis and writing. By now, I was quite envious of those I had interviewed because all the signs were that they had moved on, but I was to remain trapped in the process of Army exit for another two years as a consequence of my selected research topic.

### ***Data Analysis***

As already stated, the researcher's influence is most pronounced during specific phases of analysis (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983: 19), but attending to this should not preclude systematic

and stringent research strategies. The structured features of this particular research project are outlined in the original work (Walker, 2010, 2013), including, for example, the organisation of transcribed interviews into codes and categories close to the data. In terms of positionality and insider-ness, however, a number of unforeseen factors combined to influence my approach to the analysis. First, I was reading a good deal of literature about self and identity; second, I adopted a broadly symbolic interactionist approach that emphasises the temporal conditions for identity, especially the 'hypothetical' properties of the future and the revisable properties of the past, apprehended by the person during the present moment. This was an orientation that also made sense for me in terms of post-Army situations in which I found myself, particularly when social relations were at odds with my prior self. Trying to unpick all of these sorts of issues would be a poor way to negotiate the reflexive swamp even if it were possible; but still, I could see that my own pre- and post-Army experiences were feeding into my reading of the literature in different ways and at different stages. They also reinforced my understanding of the temporal and situated dimensions of identity about which I had been reading so much. Similarly, I began to observe connections between identity, self and social relations in other settings – insights that I am sure fed into my treatment of the data. For one thing, the contrast between the two organisations I frequented – Army and university – seemed extreme and granted me special insight into their respective organisational needs for different kinds of personal identity that often passed unnoticed among those involved.

As I developed the analysis, I learned how identities are granted or denied in social relations and that there are clear limits for personally anticipating, noticing or incorporating this into a personal narrative – at least for exiting career soldiers. Overall, throughout the research there was an underpinning process for me as researcher that is best described as a movement of position from Army insider, to partial detachment and alienation, towards critical analysis. I began to acknowledge more fully the force of Army social relations on individual soldiers' identities – something I was prone to underestimate because it challenged

my starting emphasis on personal agency and the narrative capacity of the individual as a consequence of my starting position and identity. In these ways, the emergent emphasis of the research project – that identity is a (vulnerable) becoming – was somewhat mediated by my veteran-researching-self, although this was obviously the only route or basis for such a conclusion. Overall, in the thesis, I argue for the presence and importance of a concrete, ‘real subject’ (Denzin, 1992: 2) compatible with an interactionist position and with the theoretical basis of the work, not to mention the perspective of the soldiers themselves. I argued for a middle way between poststructural and essentialist treatments of the self, and to do this

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I read a lot about poststructural treatments of identity. This reading was especially pertinent to the experiences I was having as a newly exited soldier and caused me to think very hard indeed about the work and about identity in general. Although a retreat from my interactionist perspective was unnecessary, I nevertheless steered a middle position that was much closer to contingent views of identity than I had expected or intended. This shift in the work reflects the journey that I suspect most Army leavers personally encounter as they come to recognise the extent to which their sense of self can or cannot be continued in the absence of Army relations; at least, that is, for those who do not seek out and find lives and jobs that closely emulate the ones that they were leaving.

### **Conclusion**

My research focused on leavers’ narrative attempts to construct and project a continuance of self across the anticipated social rupture of Army exit. Eventually this brought to the fore during analysis, ethical and moral principles that are given worth in Army relations but not always beyond. Personal attributes encouraged in Army relations – especially those concerned with nonindividualistic attitudes – became more peculiar to me as the work progressed and this enhanced critical analysis of these data. In this chapter, I have argued



that if researchers of the military who are also insiders are sufficiently reflexive about their connections to the military then their insider-ness can be put to good research-related use. However, precisely how – and even if – this should be done will depend on many different and often complicated dimensions, especially the kind of research being undertaken.

I started the identity research project with a personal determination not to talk about my own relationship to the Army and although this clearly changed I still contend that processes of self-reflection, positionality and insider-ness have serious limits and should never take centre-stage in any research work. I agree with Corbin and Strauss when they claim that ‘something occurs when doing analysis that is beyond the ability of a person to articulate or explain’ (Corbin and Strauss, 2008: 9). For Paul Ricoeur, our actual and complete lived experience is only known fully by those present at that specific and individual moment, and beyond this the generation of meaning is forever a partial construction. It is true that researcher reflections on the research process benefit significantly from the passage of time, but they are also markedly hindered by it. I believe that I found a pragmatic balance in the original research work for putting insider-ness to work but contrary to what this chapter might imply, I did not spend much time on endless introspection, but instead I tried adequately to acknowledge my own changing place in the generation of meaning and to use this to good critical effect.

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