

Reflections on being a civilian researcher in an ex-military world

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1 **Reflections on being a civilian researcher in an ex-military world: Expanding horizons?**

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Abstract

This paper provides a series of critical reflections on the tensions involved in researching the lives of military veterans. In particular, tensions arising when civilian researchers attempt to speak on behalf of veterans, combined with problematic attempts to achieve an academic ‘understanding’ of veterans’ lives generate concerns regarding the potential misrepresentation of their unique experiences. Following recent examples in critical military studies, these issues are brought to the fore through dialogue and critical debate with colleagues and research participants. The paper first introduces a theoretical backdrop to the tensions being debated. Following Gadamer, the concept of ‘horizons of understanding’ is then introduced to suggest how we might usefully consider and addresses these tensions. Horizons comprise that which we are able to understand based on prior knowing. It is argued that ‘dialogical’ research constitutes one possible means of expanding our horizons in work with veterans. Challenges to dialogical research are discussed in light of prevailing conditions within and beyond neoliberal academia, before concluding with practical suggestions of how dialogical research might generate more productive and responsible research with military veterans.

Keywords: veterans, civilians, narrative, dialogue, horizons

1 Introduction

2 In this reflective essay, I grapple with a number of tensions implicated when civilian
 3 researchers – like me¹ – get involved in research with military veterans. These tensions
 4 primarily involve the philosophically and ethically challenging process of ‘understanding’
 5 and producing ‘knowledge’ about the lives of veterans, coupled with the social and political
 6 context in which academic research on veterans takes place. Indeed, processes of
 7 understanding and of knowledge production are inseparable from the political realities of
 8 both academic life and veterans’ research and politics more widely (e.g., Flores, 2017), which
 9 for many researchers (e.g., Carreiras & Castro, 2016; Bulmer & Jackson, 2016) necessitates
 10 critical reflexive attention toward the research process. For me, the problem of
 11 ‘understanding’ veterans’ lives and experiences came to the fore during my doctoral research
 12 on surfing and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and continues to pervade my thinking
 13 about the work I do as a civilian academic and researcher (Caddick & Smith, 2017; Caddick,
 14 Smith & Phoenix, 2015a, 2015b)². My purpose in offering a series of critical reflections in
 15 this paper is to unpack some key tensions, and then to suggest how we might respond to them
 16 in ways that push critical military studies, and veterans’ research more generally, forward.

17 This paper follows both a recent history of engagement with the topic of reflexivity in
 18 military studies (e.g., Baker et al., 2016; Bulmer & Jackson, 2016; Carreiras & Caetano, 2016;
 19 Carreiras & Castro, 2016; Higate & Cameron, 2006; Enloe, 2015; Hockey, 2016; Jenkins,
 20 Woodward & Winter, 2008; MacLeish, 2016; Rech et al., 2015; Walker, 2016) and a longer
 21 tradition within social research of seeking dialogue and engagement with research
 22 participants in ways that are politically progressive; which highlight issues of politics and

¹ First author, Nick Caddick. While this paper discusses my personal reflections and thus is written in the first person, authors two and three contributed ideas and content that helped to form the arguments made and this is reflected in the authorship.

² This paper reflects on key issues which arose during and as a result of conducting my doctoral research with veterans, rather than on the research topic itself of surfing and PTSD, which has been covered elsewhere (e.g., Caddick & Smith, 2017; Caddick, Smith & Phoenix, 2015a, 2015b).

power in the researcher-researched relationship and which seek to provide real utility to those whose lives and issues are the subject of the research (e.g., Alcoff, 1991; Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; Freire, 1970; Merton, 1972). Reflexive accounts of military and veterans' research have highlighted, for instance, how status differences such as veteran (insider) and civilian (outsider) can influence processes of data collection and interpretation (Higate & Cameron, 2006), and that designating somebody in the category of 'veteran' or 'civilian' typically entails certain presumptions about the limits of knowledge they are capable of possessing about veterans' experiences (MacLeish, 2016). As Castro (2016) argues, it is therefore important to *denaturalize* these categories and their influence on research with the military. Furthermore, critical reflexive work asserts that because research with veterans or the military is always socially and politically *located* – at least to some extent – claims of objectivity and value-neutrality in research do not hold, and that transparency, honesty and openness are more appropriate values to strive for (Higate & Cameron, 2006; Walker, 2016). Accordingly, analysis of the conditions under which research is conducted is crucially important to understanding the context of that research (Carreiras & Castro, 2016).

Such calls for reflexivity within military and veterans' research dovetail with efforts to promote more dialogical forms of scholarship including the "necessity of engagement and co-inquiry with research subjects" (Rech et al., 2015; p. 47). A need to engage more collaboratively with veterans partly derives from the recognition that there is a complex politics regarding claims to 'knowledge' about veterans' experiences made by researchers, policy makers, and the media (Bulmer & Jackson, 2016). As Caddick and Smith (2017) argued, "Various cultural narratives circulating in the press, among veterans' charities, in government, and among veterans themselves make competing claims to tell the truth about veterans' lives and experiences post-conflict." (Caddick & Smith, 2017; p. 26). Within this complex political landscape, veterans are variously depicted as 'heroes', 'victims', or

‘villains’, depending on whose interests are served by a particular characterization at a particular moment (McCartney, 2011). Veterans’ own voices and perspectives, however, are often left out of the picture or are appropriated in ways that limit their active participation in the research process (Bulmer & Jackson, 2016). Consequently, the public image of veterans is often defined by *others*, leading some researchers (e.g., Bulmer & Jackson, 2016; Jenkins et al., 2008; Rech et al., 2015) to call for greater engagement and dialogue with veterans as a key part of the research process.

In this article, my aim is to extend reflexive discussion about military and veterans’ research by elaborating on the benefits a dialogical approach (Frank, 2005, 2010, 2012) might bring to the politics of veterans’ research and to the thorny issue of ‘understanding’ and representing people’s lives. There is much at stake in how academics and veterans deal with this issue, primarily because relations of power within the ‘field’ of veterans’ research are always at play and always influencing dominant perspectives on veterans’ lives and concerns (Bourdieu, 1990). Noting that power determines whose voices are heard within and beyond this field, Bulmer and Jackson (2016) argue there is a pressing need to think critically about how veterans are represented through research and *whose* representations these are. They ask the reader explicitly, “How do you do your academic work?” and “Whom or what do you do that work for?” (p. 27). Further questions might be added thus: who holds the power to speak about veterans’ lives and to define their realities in the public view? And, what might the consequences be when misunderstandings and misrepresentations of veterans’ lives are perpetuated by academic others?

To acknowledge and contextualise the position from which I speak (one of the concerns of this essay), I find it necessary to briefly introduce myself to the reader. I (Nick) am an early career researcher and ‘civilian’ academic with a background incorporating physical activity and health, psychology and sociology of health and illness, qualitative

research, and military/veterans studies. I have been conducting research with veterans since 2011, and now work at the Veterans and Families Institute (part of Anglia Ruskin University, UK). The work I do – in line with the aims of the Institute – is broadly aimed at influencing policy and service delivery to improve the support networks available to veterans and their families. In line with my critical and social constructionist perspective on the world and on academic research, this work also often includes a critique the dominant narratives and discourses which shape the lives and experiences of veterans in society (e.g., Caddick et al., 2015b). Like many of my academic colleagues (Duarte et al., 2015), my work is shaped by broadly liberal values and I tend to favour a critical approach to issues related to military and political power.

In what follows, I firstly provide a background introduction to the problems this paper will address. The concept of horizons (Gadamer, 1960/2012) is then introduced in order to clarify the nature of the tensions involved in ‘understanding’ veterans’ lives and to begin to outline how these tensions might be engaged with productively and creatively. Possibilities for making research *dialogical* (Frank, 2005, 2010, 2012) are then considered in light of challenges to dialogical work emanating both from within and outside academia. In the final section, the key benefits which dialogical research might bring to critical military studies are discussed alongside examples of what such approaches might look like. Woven throughout the paper are two critical threads of argument regarding the broader context in which veterans’ research currently sits, and the political economy of academic work under the prevailing neo-liberal ethos (e.g., Sparkes, 2013); both of which are important for contextualising the core issue of ‘understanding’ and representing veterans’ lives. A number of sources are drawn upon to stimulate critical reflections throughout the paper. These include my own experience of doing doctoral research with veterans experiencing PTSD, and subsequent reflections on this research from one of the veterans who took part in the project. Following Baker et al.

(2016) and Bulmer and Jackson (2016), this paper also utilises ‘conversation’ as methodology by drawing on excerpts from a recent recorded conversation between the first and second authors regarding the purpose and practice of veterans’ research. Finally, a growing literature on reflexivity in critical military studies (e.g., Dyvik, 2016; Macleish, 2016) provides further resources with which to highlight commonalities between my own and others’ experiences of conducting research with veterans.

Researching, understanding and representing veterans’ lives: Core tensions

The truth about a man [sic] in the mouths of others, not directed to him dialogically and therefore a *secondhand* truth, becomes a *lie* degrading and demeaning him.
(Bakhtin, 1984; p. 59; original emphases)

I use the above quote from Bakhtin – with echoes of its use by Arthur Frank (2012) – because it captures usefully an ethical dilemma concerning what can be said about veterans participating in research studies, how it might be said, and by whom. Frank’s Bakhtin-inspired form of research praxis (dialogical narrative analysis)³ practices what Frank refers to as an obsessive concern with what can be said about someone “in the mouths of others” (p. 34). This issue of what can be said about others is especially pertinent in current debate in critical military studies (Baker et al., 2016; Bulmer & Jackson, 2016; Rech et al., 2015). As Rech et al. (2015; p. 56) point out, there are “issues of visibility and voice at play”, both within scholarly communities and more broadly within social debates about veterans and the military. Outside academia, the political fallout from Iraq and Afghanistan has led to ‘veterans’ issues’ gaining increased prominence along with government efforts to enhance the social visibility and recognition of veterans in society (Dandeker et al., 2006; Forster, 2012). Indeed, veterans’ issues have become a source of political capital by successive

³ I will return to Frank’s notion of dialogical research later in this essay

governments aiming to address negative press coverage regarding the condition of ex-services personnel (Dandeker et al., 2006). There is therefore much to be gained – both symbolically and economically – from being seen to represent the interests of veterans. As a result, veterans are often talked *for* and *about* by various interested parties (e.g., charities, academics, media, policy-makers) proclaiming to speak on their behalf and thus, potentially, offering up *secondhand truths* about their lives.

For critical feminist researchers of the military such as Baker et al. (2016; p. 149), uncomfortable tensions arise when veterans are talked about by others, with particular caution due over “the idea of having academic mastery over the story we tell with other people’s stories”. These authors cite Alcoff (1991) who writes of “the problem of speaking for others”. Alcoff warns that:

As philosophers and social theorists we are authorized by virtue of our academic positions to develop theories that express and encompass the ideas, needs, and goals of others. However, we must begin to ask ourselves whether this is a legitimate authority. Is the discursive practice of speaking for others ever a valid practice, and, if so, what are the criteria for validity? In particular, is it ever valid to speak for others who are unlike me or who are less privileged than me? (p. 7)

The uncomfortable tensions arising from this problem relate not only to the ‘imperialist’ dilemma of claiming academic mastery over others’ stories, but also to the dangers of misrepresenting the other. Misrepresentations occur, for example, when clumsy categories like ‘hero’ and ‘victim’ – categories which subsume and obscure the complex realities of veterans’ lives and experiences – are perpetuated by various sources (Bulmer & Jackson, 2016). Importantly, misrepresentations can lead to misguided generalizations about ‘veterans’ which harm their collective image and identity. One example is the widespread belief among

the British public that it is common or very common for members of the Armed Forces to suffer some form of physical, emotional, or mental health problem as a result of their service (Ashcroft, 2014). The danger of misrepresentation exists in part because of the social location of those who speak on behalf of others and the “growing recognition that where one speaks from affects the meaning and truth of what one says, and thus that one cannot assume an ability to transcend one's location” (Alcoff, 1991; p. 6-7). That is, those who speak from positions of power – and who thereby claim authority to define the realities of those they speak of – may speak quite differently from those groups or individuals themselves.

Moreover, the danger of misrepresentation also exists because in speaking *for* or *about* others, one typically claims to have *understood* something about them. For academics, we speak based upon the understanding we claim to have generated through studying people's experiences in depth and detail. Such understanding is usually considered a necessary prelude to communicating our ‘findings’ and the resultant knowledge to (largely academic) audiences. Indeed, it frequently forms the basis of our research questions; to better understand the experience of ‘x’. Following Bulmer and Jackson (2016), I want to challenge this notion of academic understanding and to question what is the status of the knowledge that we, as civilian academics and researchers, claim to possess about veterans who participate in our research studies?

In questioning traditional modes of academic ‘understanding’ and knowledge production, my intention is certainly not to suggest that all such efforts at understanding are fundamentally flawed and prone to misrepresentations. Indeed, other authors have strongly critiqued the assumption that an ‘impossibility’ of understanding military experiences generally, or war in particular, prevents any non-military person from intelligibly discussing such matters (Dyvik, 2016; MacLeish, 2016). MacLeish (2016), for instance, writes that “Americans, military and civilian alike, insist that only those who have been to war ‘really

know' what it is like, and we often take this presumption to mean that only those who have been to war are qualified to comment on it" (p. 228). For MacLeish (2016), these presumptions unthinkingly reproduce the boundaries of 'inside' and 'outside' war experiences, with those on the 'outside' (i.e., all civilians/non-military) respectfully disavowing all knowledge and authority regarding these experiences. Such disavowals, MacLeish argues, amount to an "abdication of responsibility" (p. 228); since the politics of knowing veterans' experiences shuts 'us' out, 'we' need not concern ourselves with them.

Yet, certain elements of veterans' experiences seem to *resist* understanding and academic interpretation in ways that make communicating these experiences to a wider public profoundly difficult (Dyvik, 2016). Claiming glibly to have 'understood' veterans' experiences without acknowledging this difficulty might therefore seem a fairly reliable way of reproducing misunderstandings of veterans' lives. In order to illustrate the tensions involved, the following example shows how I first encountered the problem of understanding and representing veterans' experiences during my doctoral research project. The extract below is from an email exchange I had with one of the veterans (I will call him "Eric") who participated in this research. Eric was a member of a surfing charity for veterans experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). As part of the research which sought to explore the effects of surfing in veterans' lives, I interviewed Eric on a number of occasions about his experiences of surfing, of being around other war veterans in the group, and the continuing effects of PTSD on his life. The extract comes as part of an email exchange that Eric and I engaged in following this research regarding the issues I have been discussing in this paper:

I think the problem for anyone who hasn't been involved in the killing and death side of war is you cannot comprehend the rawness of the emotions, every sensory part of you is heightened and the results of your actions feel exacerbated even if they are not. Even talking about it I talk as if it happened to someone else, a subject to be studied.

1 You cannot believe how weak and vulnerable you feel when it's you that is the topic
2 of the conversation. I also think that because I'm not only a veteran but a Desert Rat
3 of the First Gulf war that we have an added incentive to feel vulnerable because we
4 were test subjects; given immunizations (they couldn't test on animals in the theatre of
5 war) that caused health problems, veterans to commit suicide, to become homeless, to
6 be imprisoned and to kill. Trust me we have believed ourselves to be mad and that is
7 why we've become 'damaged goods'; because neither they nor us can ever take it back.
8 The permanency of it is overwhelming at times. It's 22 years since my last combat and
9 I can smell of every detail of it. I loathe it and miss it at the same time.

10 Eric's response stimulated in me a reflective process about how I as a civilian researcher
11 might go about 'understanding' and representing military experiences with which I have no
12 personal connection. Whilst it may be said that many or even most veterans 'do well' in
13 civilian life (Iversen et al., 2005), Eric's comments reflect an ugly truth about the lasting
14 effects of war for some veterans; a truth that I had been unable to grasp in the research
15 process. His reflections led me to consider in what sense I really 'knew' what I was talking
16 about, despite having been researching veterans' experiences of surfing and PTSD for over
17 three years. The problems I ran up against were thornier than I had anticipated. As Eric
18 suggested to me in a later email, "It's a quagmire because knowing isn't understanding from
19 my point of view, purely because you cannot 'feel' what it's like to have to live it." A number
20 of papers in the recent CMS special issue on embodiment address this particular quagmire
21 (Baker, 2016; Bulmer & Jackson, 2016; Dyvik, 2016). In particular, Eric's words resonate
22 with Harari's (2009) notion of 'flesh witnessing' discussed by Dyvik (2016); without which
23 meaningful communication of an experience is inhibited. As Dyvik (2016; 57) put it, "The
24 claim here is that war is something that must be experienced through and with the flesh."

1 This is the claim that Eric makes above, and it represents a key struggle for a sense of
 2 ‘understanding’ veterans’ lives.

3 **‘Understanding’ veterans’ lives as searching at the limits of our horizons**

4 In order to clarify this problem of understanding – what it represents and how we might
 5 respond – I find it useful to draw on Gadamer’s (1960/2012) concept of ‘horizons’. As part of
 6 Gadamer’s theory of hermeneutic experience, horizons refer to our range of ‘vision’ that
 7 includes everything that can be ‘seen’ from our own particular and unique vantage point upon
 8 the world. Horizons comprise all that which we feel we already know and believe.
 9 Conversely, anything unknown to us or outside our particular beliefs and comprehensions lies
 10 *beyond* our horizons. Our horizons are shaped by our accumulated previous life experiences.
 11 According to Gadamer, all understanding thus has an historical character (our ‘historically-
 12 effected consciousness’), such that we prefigure and pre-judge all new situations we
 13 encounter based on our prior life experiences. Experience and understanding are therefore
 14 inevitably intertwined (Mattingly, 2010), and we interpret based on what we already know. In
 15 narrative terms, Frank (2010) explains, understanding another person’s story is “enabled and
 16 also limited by understandings that have already been set in place by knowing previous
 17 stories” (p. 94). We can therefore speak of ‘horizons of understanding’ which both enable and
 18 constrain our ability to successfully interpret new situations, such as a conversation with
 19 another person who possesses a different set of horizons.

20 Importantly, horizons are durable but never totally fixed. Understanding the
 21 perspective or experience of another – veteran *or* civilian – thus depends on the extent to
 22 which one’s horizons can shift to accommodate that perspective. As Frank (2010) explains:

23 Understanding either a text or another person hangs between two principles: no two
 24 people’s horizons ever overlap entirely, but neither do these horizons completely

1 diverge. Dialogue requires difference, or else people would have nothing to say to
 2 each other. Dialogue also requires similarity, or else people would have no basis for
 3 understanding what others say. Hermeneutic understanding is a process in which
 4 *initial understandings shift in response* to the story and the storyteller. (p. 94;
 5 emphasis in original)

6 For Frank (2010), shifting one's horizons necessarily involves making oneself available to
 7 different ways of seeing, which is an ethical task. Avoiding the perpetuation of *secondhand*
 8 *truths* depends upon it. Interpretation, therefore, "requires and observes the shifting of
 9 horizons, based on an ethical will to understand what is not immediately accessible to the self
 10 but matters crucially to the other" (Frank, 2010; p. 95). Making oneself available to other
 11 perspectives also involves empathy, as indeed others have called for a more empathic
 12 engagement with veterans' lives and experiences (Bulmer & Jackson, 2016). Empathy is one
 13 means by which we attempt to imagine others' lives and engage with their perspectives
 14 (Smith, 2008). Empathy, however, can be tricky. As Duncanson (2013) argues in her study of
 15 soldiers' narratives from Iraq and Afghanistan, empathy is not "some sort of warm, fluffy
 16 feeling" and that "empathizing with others leads to self-reflection and self-doubt, which is not
 17 always a comfortable feeling" (p. 118). Moreover, empathy involves an imaginative
 18 projection into others' lives which entails further practical and ethical challenges (Smith,
 19 2008). As Smith (2008) explains:

20 Our capacity for imaginative projection can play an important part in understanding
 21 others and thus expanding our ethical horizons. It should also be made clear, lest a
 22 dualism is created, that imagining other lives is not in principle impossible.
 23 Nevertheless, there are barriers and challenges to imagining oneself 'in the other's
 24 shoes' and empathic imagination. (Smith, 2008; p. 145)

1 Foremost among such challenges is precisely the fact that empathy – whilst playing a role in
 2 expanding our horizons – is also *limited* and *constrained* by these horizons. We cannot, by
 3 virtue of our own embodied location, transcend our flesh and bones to experience the
 4 “rawness of emotions” Eric refers to (Smith, 2008).

5 Translating the above theoretical insights into my attempts to understand the stories
 6 told to me by Eric and by the other veterans with whom I worked, I found myself limited by
 7 my own horizons of understanding in which I found no overlap with Eric’s horizons in
 8 crucial places. For example, I have never been in combat and experienced the dangers and
 9 potential traumas associated with such an experience. As Dyvik (2016; p. 60) writes, such
 10 experiences transcend “‘normal’ human modes of expression”. Try as I might to empathise
 11 with the emotions that might arise within me upon encountering war, my imagination is
 12 limited by the lack of embodied knowledge I have of such situations. There is no comparable
 13 past experience I have had that will serve as a suitable point of reference (Carless & Douglas,
 14 2016). For the veterans with whom I worked, however, traumatic events in combat form part
 15 of their embodied history. There is a “permanency”, in Eric’s words, to war experiences; the
 16 feelings and the memories live with them in their bodies and they carry them around
 17 wherever they go. These feelings and memories pervade their sense of normal everyday life
 18 and mediate their engagement with the world. This is not to suggest that such feelings and
 19 memories are recalled at every waking moment, but that pivotal traumatic experiences woven
 20 into the fabric of a life necessarily become part of that person. They remain – sometimes in
 21 the background and at other times piercing the foreground of consciousness – but, irrevocably,
 22 they remain.

23 I became acutely aware of this gap between my horizons and those of my participants
 24 when I began discussing and sharing my research with them. It is as if we were, as Bulmer
 25 and Jackson (2016; p. 27) put it “strangers who are trying to cross a gulf in understanding”.

1 This works both ways: a number of veterans both within and beyond the research I conducted
 2 have told me that civilian life seems strange and alienating, and that they feel deeply
 3 unfamiliar with the ‘rules’ of ‘civvy street’ (see Cooper et al., 2017). Given that the stated
 4 aims of research are commonly to ‘enhance understanding’ of this or that phenomenon or
 5 group of people, how might we conduct such research when civilian and veteran horizons
 6 seem so divergent? Gadamer (1960/2012) wrote of a ‘fusion’ of horizons, whereby new
 7 encounters call upon us to test our prejudices⁴ and cause our horizons to move towards – to
 8 ‘fuse with’ – those of another, resulting in mutual understanding. Yet, given the often-stated
 9 *ineffability* of war, or the *unknowable* dimensions of combat and traumatic experiences
 10 (Bulmer & Jackson, 2016; Dyvik, 2016), how can such a fusion occur in practice? As part of
 11 a commitment to reflexivity in my work with veterans, I wanted to explore in what sense my
 12 horizons might expand to incorporate different understandings, to avoid perpetuating clumsy
 13 misrepresentations, and to facilitate a progressive *dialogue* with veterans in research.

14 **Between dialogical possibilities and monological forces in neoliberal academia**

15 Expanding our horizons is an empathic and relational process with dialogue at the centre. For
 16 Frank (2005, 2010, 2012), dialogical research involves – as far as possible – speaking *with* a
 17 research participant, rather than *about* him or her. Research that is dialogical maintains
 18 different commitments from other forms of research. As Frank (2012) argued in relation to
 19 narrative inquiry (but applying equally to other dialogical methodologies), “The commitment
 20 of dialogical narrative analysis is not to summarize findings – an undialogical word, with its
 21 implication of ending the conversation and taking a position apart from and above it – but
 22 rather to open continuing possibilities of listening and of responding to what is heard” (p. 37).
 23 Dialogical research therefore presents it itself as *open ended*; as one move in an ongoing

⁴ Gadamer rescues the term ‘prejudice’ from the negative connotations it has acquired, using it to refer to that which is already known or believed

1 conversation that calls out for responses (Frank, 2005). By contrast, *monological* research
2 claims to utter the last word about participants' experiences, and to establish conclusions
3 about them that are authoritative and final. The effect of monological research, according to
4 Frank, is to 'finalize' participants; to claim the last, definitive and finalizing word about
5 another person and what she or he may become.

6 In order to explore the challenges and possibilities of dialogical research with veterans,
7 I decided – following recent examples from the literature (e.g., Baker et al., 2016; Bulmer &
8 Jackson, 2016) – to utilise a conversational approach. Two extracts are presented here, like
9 quotes from an interview transcript, in order to highlight the key points which emerged from
10 a longer recorded conversation between myself and a veteran colleague (Alex). These
11 extracts illustrate how some of the tensions discussed in this paper are played out in
12 contemporary academic and political contexts. Alex is Project Director for a new initiative
13 called the Veterans Research Hub, which aims to bring together academic research on
14 veterans, identify gaps in knowledge, ensure ease of access to information for a range of
15 groups (e.g., government, media, charitable organizations, veteran groups, academics) and
16 facilitating communication and connection among these various stakeholders. He is a former
17 Army Officer, having served for 23 years and is now also working at the Veterans and
18 Families Institute. He is a relative newcomer to the world of research, having recently worked
19 on the Veterans Transition Review (see Ashcroft, 2014); a policy advisory document which
20 sought to survey the landscape of military-to-civilian transition, and which recommended the
21 curation of a Veterans Research Hub. Whilst Alex does not currently describe himself as an
22 academic, he is keen to promote a more balanced output of academic research, and a more
23 informed social commentary on veterans' issues. During the conversation we recorded, we
24 debated a range of issues pertaining to veterans' research, including which sections of the

1 military and veteran population research is conducted with, what topics are focused on, what
 2 the purposes of the research might be and the wider context of veterans' research:

3 Nick: As you read in the introduction, the paper I'm working on has come about as a
 4 result of my thinking in relation to the work that I do – civilian academics working
 5 with military veterans and in what sense 'understanding' is an appropriate goal.

6 Alex: I think 'understanding' is a difficult term because you can have an intellectual
 7 understanding, you can have an empathic understanding, or a sympathetic
 8 understanding, or a mixture of all three. But empathy only really comes through
 9 shared knowledge and shared experiences. I guess the danger is where people amass a
 10 great deal of factual knowledge and the second-hand lived experiences that are
 11 referred to in the start of your paper – where it's very easy to pick those experiences
 12 which fit your own ideas and shape arguments to fit that – where it may be in some
 13 way out of context. And the only true way to have the contextual understanding that
 14 allows you to pick accurately and appropriately what you wish to represent through
 15 quotes and facts or figures, is to have that greater contextual understanding in the first
 16 place. So it's a bit of a catch-22. How do you get there from here? And, for example
 17 the thesis by Dr Fox (Fox, 2010) about alcohol in the [British] military, where she
 18 effectively lived on and off with the military for months and over that time got to
 19 understand the military culture, and was able to see beyond the "Yes, there is
 20 increased use of alcohol in the military compared to other sub-sections of society";
 21 she was able to contextualise the benefits of that as well as the commonly reported
 22 issues. The most effective way is obviously to live amongst and know intimately the
 23 subject you are reporting on, theorising, etc⁵. And that's very difficult.

24 Nick: Yeah, see, for me, these problems become magnified I guess, when the topic of
 25 study is combat experiences and for me when I was doing my PhD research –
 26 people's experiences of post-traumatic stress – civilian academics hopefully won't or
 27 shouldn't have that contextual understanding because most won't have experienced
 28 that, so there is a tension there.

29 Alex: No, but unlike some academics and some commentators, you know what you
 30 don't know. Or, you have an indication of just how far the experience gap is. Some
 31 don't. And some papers that I have read which make me grind my teeth are quite
 32 clearly agenda-driven and using selective and biased interpretations of what they're
 33 trying to say in order to prove a point, rather than objective analysis⁶ of a set of
 34 information. It is great that as an academic, hopefully representative of your peers,
 35 there is this understanding that you need to know what you know. And not to assume
 36 that because you have some knowledge garnered in whatever way, you can speak
 37 authoritatively. There is no substitute for experience, that's a truism throughout life.

⁵ Indeed, ethnographies such as "Drink and Duty" (Fox, 2010) can provide some of the richest, detailed, and most nuanced explanations of a particular culture.

⁶ We later debated and critiqued the possibility of a truly 'objective' analysis.

1 Many is the young officer who turns up to his first unit with a head full of knowledge
 2 gathered through training and thinks they know what they've got to do. And the
 3 crusty old sergeant who's been in for ten years knows far more – maybe intuitively,
 4 but for the most part, through lived experience, having done it wrong and then
 5 subsequently got it right. I don't think there's a substitute for that.

6 Nick: Ok, so without naming names or particular papers, what kind of studies are you
 7 referring to there, the ones that make you grind your teeth?

8 Alex: Well, the sort of things that I see that are relatively sensationalist and negative.
 9 Because the predominant social commentary around veterans in the UK is broadly
 10 negative – because any number of interested parties have made it so and have pretty
 11 much swept the broad mass of perfectly normal Service Personnel and veterans under
 12 the table because they're not interesting, and because the majority of the work is on
 13 problems and things have been pathologized which perhaps don't deserve to be
 14 pathologized.

15 Nick: I think that highlights an important point as well because we're not always
 16 aware of the cultural assumptions and biases that are shaping our own views, and the
 17 narratives about veterans that we find ourselves drawn into.

18 Alex: I think in some ways, and this is a bit fanciful, one should almost make a
 19 declaration of interests at the start of the paper, so for example "I was brought up in a
 20 broadly conservative household that read the Telegraph, I joined the military, and my
 21 worldview is broadly, x" and *then* say what I have to say, because that contextualises
 22 from where I'm coming.

23 Nick: Yeah, I guess it would make a bit more transparent or open the position you're
 24 speaking *from*.

25 Alex: Yes, because it's very easy for an academic – and I use this term advisedly – to
 26 hide behind their titles and qualifications and say "I am an expert because I have this
 27 qualification and this experience, therefore what I am saying is *truth*", but there can
 28 be a huge amount of unacknowledged influence on that individual and a worldview,
 29 unless you are talking about something purely statistical, wherever there's
 30 interpretation through the social sciences, and lived experience – I would suggest it is
 31 pretty impossible to overcome your own background, your own political standpoint,
 32 and your own experience.

33 Nick: Absolutely, I agree.

34 The conversation presented thus far highlights a number of conditions under which dialogue
 35 is likely to flourish: a greater contextual understanding of veterans' 'issues', a steer away
 36 from 'pathologization', greater transparency with regard to research 'agendas', and a broader

commitment to reflexivity among military and veteran studies researchers⁷. For these conditions to prevail, a number of monological forces working against them must be contested. For instance, the politicization of veterans and their ‘issues’ in British society in the wake of Iraq and Afghanistan has, arguably, served to entrench dominant public narratives about veterans as ‘damaged’ or ‘damaged heroes’, and as social problems in need of fixing (Bulmer & Jackson, 2016). Reifying the pathologizing narrative therefore makes it easy for researchers to attract funding in support of projects designed ‘to support our brave ex-servicemen’, but it also crowds out alternative stories⁸ and stifles dialogue. Moreover, the *effects* which these stories – as ‘actors’ (Frank, 2010) – are having on the social position of veterans are not considered in the research that replicates and reinforces them. Despite the increasing visibility of veterans in society, the horizons through which we collectively interpret them thus become narrowed.

Furthermore, monological forces currently sweeping through academia – both in Britain and elsewhere (e.g., Davies, 2005; in an Australian context) – could mitigate against the possibilities for dialogue. As our conversation continued:

Nick: The thought occurs to me that in all of the work that we do, we’re supposed to be championing how good it is, how authoritative it is, etc., so that we can be judged as world-leading and internationally excellent in terms of the REF⁹. So because there’s that emphasis, we have to promote ourselves as the experts, and as the possessors of authoritative knowledge on the subject. Whereas maybe that’s not necessarily compatible with actually being more honest about what it is that we don’t know.

Alex: No, and the problem is – I’m not saying ‘be all things to all people’, but equally you can fool some of the people some of the time but you can’t fool all the people all the time. I think honesty is important. And [small sigh], the problem is in society

⁷ It is notable that reflexive attention to researchers’ own positions has emanated predominantly from scholars adopting a critical stance toward military studies, rather than from ‘mainstream’ military sociology, psychology, and other disciplines.

⁸ Counter-narratives provide a potential means of disrupting the dominant perspective. Possible counter-narratives include veterans as activists (Flores, 2017) or as successful ‘adapters’ of military skills, living productive civilian lives (McDermott, 2007).

⁹ The UK’s Research Excellence Framework for judging and evaluating the quality of research output

generally, business, etc. – success goes to the confident. The guy who may have no more knowledge than anybody else but who may appear to have. He has the confidence to carry people along. But there is a tension in that because whilst I think most people acknowledge that people who admit their failings are better people – people want to be confident in those who are leading them, who are thought leaders. And it's a tightrope between admitting your own lack of knowledge in order to engender empathy with perhaps a certain audience, so that one doesn't appear to be talking down and talking about – rather than talking for . . .

Nick: Yeah, I think that's really important . . .

Alex: . . . But also being confident enough that other sectors of the audience will take one seriously. So if you are Professor Whoever, what you say will be given credence, but you can still talk an awful lot of crap from the perspective of some others. So, I don't really have an answer to that.

Clearly evident in the above exchange is a desire for a more honest form of research engagement and communication which acknowledges the limits of our current horizons, and which regards attempts to 'finalize' veterans with suspicion (Frank, 2012). Researchers can indeed 'finalize' their participants by using their professional status (power) to claim authoritative knowledge about the experiences of others, thereby colonizing the other's experience (Smith et al., 2009). In order to contest the monologic, finalizing mode of academic engagement, it is important to recognise the wider circumstances which reinforce and sustain it. In particular, monological research – that which narrowly presents itself as authoritative and definitive – is increasingly called for by the demands of an 'audit culture' within contemporary neoliberal academia (Sparkes, 2013).

The drive for auditing and evaluation exemplified by (but by no means restricted to) the REF has been the subject of critique by a number of concerned academics (Davies, 2005; Martin, 2011; Murphy & Sage, 2014; Olssen & Peters, 2005; Rowe & Brass, 2008; Smith et al., 2011; Sparkes, 2013). As Murphy and Sage (2014) argued, "there is a very real sense amongst academics that the REF is adversely shaping the nature of research itself. In this context, reporting on the REF signals heightened pressures to publish and a developing

1 culture of disregard for certain types of research in favour of short-term ‘REF-able’ work” (p.
 2 604). Strong demands for such short term ‘REF-able’ work run counter to the development of
 3 scholarship and dialogic engagement. Likewise, the rising importance of targets and
 4 performance criteria, impact factors and other metrics means that ‘churning out’ publications
 5 for the sake of publishing, rather than expanding knowledge, becomes the yardstick of
 6 academic excellence (Murphy & Sage, 2014; Olssen & Peters, 2005). As a result of such
 7 practices, opportunities for longer-term reflection and dialogic engagement with participants
 8 are typically curtailed in favour of work that is ‘quick and clean’, which offers rapid solutions
 9 and leads to ‘impact’.

10 Linked with the above, the impact agenda¹⁰ has encouraged (or perhaps forced) a
 11 particular mode of public engagement which sits uneasily with dialogic principles, especially
 12 with regard to military and veterans’ studies. For instance, demonstration of ‘impact’
 13 arguably requires academics to present themselves in public and in the media as authoritative
 14 knowledge possessors and as ‘experts’. Expert appearances by academics are, in turn, good
 15 for business in the corporatized university with its exposure-hungry press offices. Academics
 16 benefit from this by bolstering their academic capital and increasing the visibility of their
 17 own brand image (Arnoldi, 2007). Numerous academics have, however, warned of the risks
 18 of the “burgeoning public orientation of academic discourse” (Rowe & Brass, 2008; p. 687),
 19 including a propensity for the media to distort rather than mediate knowledge, to elevate
 20 opinion into analysis, and the challenge of presenting complex arguments whilst constrained
 21 to short contributions and ‘sound-bites’ (LSE, 2014; Orr, 2010). Each of these challenges,
 22 Orr (2010; p. 29) claims, are “anathema to the academic desire for reflection, depth and
 23 expert nuance” which academics value and which genuine dialogue requires. Paradoxically,
 24 then, public ‘engagement’ in these circumstances tends rather to mean didactic, passive

¹⁰ See Martin (2011) for a useful critique

engagement with academics as the tutors. The problem of speaking for others (Alcoff, 1991) is thus unrecognized, and academics can easily ‘finalize’ veterans by funnelling them into familiar, preordained categories.

Why might we practice dialogical research, and what might it look like?

Despite the significant challenges highlighted in the above conversation, there are good reasons for pursuing more dialogic forms of research in critical military studies. As our conversation illustrates, there is a need for research which embraces a more open form of communication and exchange, which respects experiences which fall outside of our horizons, and which “rejects last words” (Frank, 2012; p. 34). Dialogical research embraces this spirit and sense of openness. Following Gadamer (1960/2012), dialogical research moves from a commitment towards straightforwardly ‘understanding’ participants’ lives and stories, to one of expanding the horizons through which we interpret them. As Frank (2010) put it: “The hermeneutic commitment is to ask not only what the story means within my horizons, but also how far I can understand what it means within the horizons of the storyteller and other listeners. Perhaps most important: how does the story call on me to shift my horizons?” (p. 96).

Whilst a person’s horizons are never fixed, empathic dialogue also requires us to recognise and respect the differences between ourselves and others¹¹. For instance, given that experiences of combat, trauma, or simply military life fall well outside of my own horizons, any knowledge or understanding that I develop about the veterans’ lives will necessarily be a partial, second-hand knowledge. It is knowledge that might perhaps only be “glimpsed tangentially” (Carless & Douglas, 2016; p. 47). Accordingly, the dialogical achievement is

¹¹ Smith (2008) offers a critique of researchers’ attempts to imaginatively project themselves into others’ lives in order to claim a sense of understanding or empathy regarding their experiences. To make such claims, Smith suggests, risks denying the difference between self and other and is one way in which researchers might commit ‘symbolic violence’ against the Other.

not the same as ‘merging’ with the other; moving toward a closer understanding of their lives and thus ‘fusing’ one’s horizon’s with the other’s. A complete fusion, as Clark and Holquist (1984) wrote, “Even if it were possible, would preclude the difference required for dialogue” (p. 78). Rather, it is more like an appreciation of the other’s experience from afar, or a broadening of the horizons through which I understand the other and the world (Mattingly, 2010).

Dialogical approaches to research with veterans cannot, therefore, remove the problem of understanding others’ lives, nor the problem of speaking for others (Alcoff, 1991). However, engaging in dialogue *can* help avoid misunderstanding and misrepresentation of the other’s experiences. Misrepresentation occurs when the researcher’s attempts to understand the participant’s situation miss the nuances of his or her experiences and no opportunity is sought for discussing interpretations with the participant him or herself. By misrepresenting other people’s needs, views, and concerns, we risk arriving at moral judgments about them that are inappropriate, paternalistic, or just plain wrong (Carless & Douglas, 2016; Smith, 2008). Monological misunderstanding finalises the other in ways that prescribe falsely constructed images of them supposedly on their behalf. When expressed in dialogue, however, misunderstanding of the other can present an opportunity to clarify and refine how that other is depicted. For research with veterans and for critical military studies, a dialogical approach can therefore provide opportunities for reflecting on the process of inquiry itself, and for changing how knowledge about veterans is created and shared.

Furthermore, dialogue enables us to conceive of a broadening of horizons as a *two-way process*. Reflecting on the various assumptions which veterans, their families and military personnel might harbour about civilian researchers provides a further stimulus for dialogue. To illustrate this, consider Eric’s response to reading an early draft of this paper:

1 I was fascinated reading the academic detail and what you were attempting to do. I
2 appreciated it but I was still aware I was a test subject . . . and a mentor of sorts trying
3 to inform an outsider how it feels to witness and commit savage and barbaric acts in
4 this civilized world of ours. But I know if you look deep into the cracks the world is
5 only ever one step away from falling into chaos due to the people who control it. The
6 Pit is always there and human nature is our own worst enemy. I read that academics
7 reflect on how they can witness veterans' lives and interact with them to better
8 understand their experiences. In some ways I applaud you and in others I can't help
9 but think it's futile. There is an element of trust that has to be given in order to convey
10 an experience. In my experience when I've spoken with other veterans there is an
11 understood brotherhood and trust is automatic. We know we've been to bad places
12 and done bad things and that's a given. We don't question it we don't probe it. We just
13 are. But there are things deep inside we will never say, not to anybody. That little
14 piece of horror that is part of your DNA. It's not macho or dogmatic. It's shameful and
15 will never see the light of day. How can you understand what can never be
16 said? Academics are allowed to witness only what we are prepared to tell. I have
17 spoken with many veterans about deepest concerns but only because they felt they
18 could voice them or needed to tell me – not *me* in particular – but someone they knew
19 would fully understand on all levels what they were saying . . . another veteran.

20 Importantly, Eric's testimony suggests a personal vulnerability that calls for greater respect;
21 knowing where horizons cannot stretch and that – despite all of our ethical precautions – the
22 research process may still leave people feeling exposed and vulnerable. In addition, this
23 extract raises questions over how I am perceived by Eric (and how he perceives his
24 relationship to me; as “a mentor of sorts”). What other assumptions might veterans and
25 military personnel harbour about civilian researchers? Are we, for example, a nuisance,

1 prying into unwelcome or even unspeakable territory? Are our efforts to broaden our
 2 horizons purely academic (in the pejorative sense); an exercise in intellectual obscurity?
 3 Herein lies a further challenge for dialogical researchers: we may disagree or feel the need to
 4 question veterans' interpretations of 'us'. As Duncanson (2013; p. 155) suggests in her
 5 analysis of British soldiers' attempts to empathise with the Afghan population, "empathy
 6 does not mean blindly agreeing with whatever claims are made by another person". Relatedly,
 7 empathic dialogue also does not mean arbitrarily nominating someone as representative of the
 8 other. In presenting Eric's testimony above, I make no presumption that he speaks on behalf
 9 of *all* veterans. Indeed, it is vitally important to seek a dialogue with a broad range of
 10 individuals (Duncanson, 2013). As such, it is also necessary to acknowledge that the veteran
 11 'community' is a large and heterogeneous one, and that given the diversity of views and
 12 experiences, empathic dialogue is likely to be a slow and challenging (but necessary) process.

13 So, what might a dialogical approach to critical military studies look like? There are
 14 numerous possibilities – and examples from the literature – which can help to stimulate a
 15 dialogical research agenda. One way, as shown by Bulmer and Jackson (2016), and further
 16 demonstrated in this article, is through a literal dialogue between two people, which disrupts
 17 the monological and authoritative academic voice and helps to illustrate the ways in which
 18 ideas are formed, debated, challenged, and/or agreed. The conversational style shows a form
 19 of dialogue in which the researchers seek to open themselves up to multiple perspectives,
 20 instead of narrowing down the possible understandings, as per more traditional academic
 21 ways of writing and reporting. Rather than drawing definitive statements, a conversation
 22 shows how a trajectory of interaction develops between two or more individuals, and the
 23 possible consequences that emerge from this for research with veterans.

24 Researchers can also practice dialogue as a form of analysis (Frank, 2010, 2012). For
 25 example, Frank's (2010) method of dialogical narrative analysis aims to explore what

1 people's stories *do* in dialogue with the stories of others. The approach begins by listening
2 carefully to veterans' own stories, then moves outward to consider what effect these stories
3 might have on other listeners; for example, challenging dominant narratives and offering
4 counter-stories (Douglas & Carless, 2015). Unlike monological research conducted *on*
5 veterans, a dialogical narrative approach seeks to amplify veterans' voices, placing these
6 voices at the heart of the research. This is not to advocate that veterans should have a
7 privileged say or allow them to become the sole arbiters of truth. Indeed, we must remain
8 critical of stories we find troubling, such as those which might uncritically promote or excuse
9 a militarist perspective. As one example of a dialogical narrative approach, our previous
10 research (Caddick et al., 2015b) explored how veterans' stories might challenge traditional
11 portrayals of masculinity and mental health with regard to PTSD, whilst also remaining
12 critical of the ways in which military masculinities still appeared to shape the stories being
13 told.

14 Another way to promote dialogue may be to invite veterans to become active
15 collaborators with us in the research process. Carless and Douglas (2016) demonstrate
16 collaboration in their narrative study of injured veterans taking part in sport and adventure
17 training as a form of rehabilitation. In this example, the authors co-wrote a story with their
18 participant, 'Josh', which sought to authentically and faithfully represent Josh's experience of
19 taking part in a week-long 'Battle Back' programme for injured veterans. The story is
20 presented as just that – a story – in words familiar to the participant. The authors resist the
21 urge to analyse and interpret the story through the prism of academic theory (i.e., through
22 their *own* horizons), choosing to present the story in a way that honours the participant's
23 experience. Relatedly, participatory approaches – whilst particularly under-utilised in
24 research with veterans and the military – have long been advocated as a more dialogical
25 model of *partnership* between academics and their research participants (Cornwall & Jewkes,

1995). Within participatory research, “the emphasis is on a “bottom-up” approach with a focus on locally defined priorities and local perspectives” (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; p. 1667). Such approaches are not without challenges, particularly the potential for ‘muddled relationships’ (Mayan & Daum, 2016), but when pursued authentically can lead to greater empowerment of the researched communities.

Furthermore, we may view the entire process of research and dissemination as an expanded form of dialogue, for example by communicating our research more effectively to the audiences we seek to engage (particularly those *for whom* knowledge is created) in more accessible and engaging ways, and then inviting responses from these audiences. As Frank (2005; 968) put it: “The significant question is whether research that presents itself as part of an ongoing process is evaluated as *inconclusive*, in a pejorative sense, or as *open ended*, which in dialogical theory is both empirically correct and ethically appropriate” (emphasis original). In addition, the language used to communicate with different audiences is important to consider. Whilst not the only way, stories have again been used as a way of communicating research in ways that people outside of academia can engage with (Smith et al., 2014). By sharing our work in different ways, researchers can also invite responses to their interpretations of participants’ lives and experiences, and then consider how these responses might alter their interpretations.

19 **Concluding thoughts**

20 Building on previous work exploring the reflexive dimension of military and veterans’
 21 research, this paper has argued the case for a more open, democratic and dialogical approach
 22 to working with veteran participants. Such an approach has much to offer critical military
 23 studies, particularly an awareness of the research process as broadening our horizons rather

1 than straightforwardly ‘understanding’ others’ lives and problematically claiming
 2 authoritative knowledge about them. As Alcoff (1991) put it:

3 We should strive to create wherever possible the conditions for dialogue and the
 4 practice of speaking with and to rather than speaking for others. If the dangers of
 5 speaking for others result from the possibility of misrepresentation, expanding one's
 6 own authority and privilege, and a generally imperialist speaking ritual, then speaking
 7 with and to can lessen these dangers. (p. 23)

8 In order to create the conditions for pursuing dialogical research, strategies are required for
 9 tackling the numerous challenges outlined in this article which mitigate against dialogical
 10 possibilities. Several possible strategies are worth noting in conclusion. One option, as
 11 adopted by other critical researchers of the military (e.g., Baker et al., 2016) and further
 12 reinforced here, is through sustained and forceful critique of the practices and conditions we
 13 find problematic. As Fairclough (2010) suggested, “From awareness and critique arise the
 14 possibilities of empowerment and change” (p. 68). Critique thus enables us to expose and
 15 challenge problematic discourses – both within the academic ‘audit culture’ and beyond in
 16 the ways veterans are positioned by powerful others. Another strategy may be to utilise the
 17 powerful ‘impact’ discourse to argue that real, radical impact comes not from passively
 18 disseminating findings to the public – or worse, imposing them on others – but by working
 19 *with* veteran communities to collaboratively develop and conduct research which addresses
 20 *their* priorities and changes others’ perceptions. Finally (for now), projects such as the
 21 creation of a Veterans Research Hub aim to put dialogue at the centre by promoting a
 22 ‘community of practice’ linking academics, veterans, the media, policy makers and service
 23 providers, fostering new collaborations and new perspectives on veterans in society. By
 24 enlarging and enlivening the social conversation about veterans and veterans’ issues, this
 25 project could help to reach new audiences for whom veterans’ research has relevance and

importance. Moreover, this project must itself be critically reflexive in order to ensure a broad range of voices are heard amidst the discussion taking place. Such strategies are much needed to create the dialogical spaces required for an expanding of horizons and a progressive change in the ways veterans and their experiences are ‘understood’ within and beyond critical military studies.

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