

Exploring ex-Military and Service leavers engaged in a Transition Awareness

Programme for Construction

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"The world as we have created it is a process of our thinking. It cannot be changed without changing our thinking."

— Albert Einstein

1.1 Introduction

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in academic publications and research examining the physical and mental health concerns associated with Military Service of the United Kingdom (UK) and the Military Armed Forces Personnel (MAFP) (Sharp et al., 2019). Every year, in the UK, on average, 20,000 MAFP leave Service (Defence Statistics, 2018). The Government, Ministry of Defence (MOD) and the Armed Forces Covenant (AMC) insist they deserve our respect, support, and quality intervention (AMC, 2018). The National drivers focus on strategies and positive pathways, such as, the Transition Awareness Programme (TAP) to tackle any misperceptions preventing military Service leavers from integrating successfully into civilian society. Furthermore, Service leavers should suffer no disadvantage due to having served (MOD, 2020; Meek, 2018) if that is possible. The responsibility for transition of service leavers with complex needs lies predominantly with MOD, who are calling for a more holistic approach to transition (Defence Transition Service). However, Ziencik (2020) argues that the MOD does a highly effective job of training men and women to operate, which requires a specific discipline within Service and an abysmal job of reversing that training before sending them back into civilian life.

Lombard (2020) argues the skills and capabilities are transferable to a wide variety of employment opportunities. Within the construction sector, also known as the built environment, there is an escalating demand for recruits for trades and leadership and management skills (Chartered Institute of Builders: CIOB, 2016). It is a rapidly developing division, which urgently requires a continuous source of highly disciplined and committed professionals with the ability to adapt, perform and operate at a high level (Balfour Beatty, 2020; Lombardo, 2020).

It is also a curious fact that mental health problems of MAFP can occur during the time of transition into civilian life with many adverse effects (Fossey, 2013). The pressures of this process may culminate in all manner of difficulties, including withdrawal from support networks with the ultimate cost to poor mental health and even suicide. The rise of mental health problems in MAFP in recent years is of great concern (Mental Health in the UK Armed Forces, 2020). The combination of these factors increases the risk as well as presents a unique opportunity to address a multiplicity of challenges and roadblocks.

Seeking to understand why some experience difficulties might seem obvious. In real terms, on average ten construction workers a week take their lives (Samaritans, 2021). Further, 26% thought about suicide, 97% revealed they had been stressed, in 2019 (CIOB). The CIOB, referred to these statistics as the 'silent crisis.' Many MAFP have experienced loss of a colleague by suicide (Pease et al., 2016) and more recently been affected by Covid-19 related problems. A study that explores the many challenges, building on their resilience, and at the same time, acknowledging that for some, these may be some of the hardest to reach individuals, makes this proposition vital.

Considering Military service's context, and its male dominated industry, including cultural expectations of silence, the answers we find from this exploration may be illuminating. It is important as a professional to recognise that when supporting the resilience of MAFP, avoiding making assumptions about what difficulties they face is critical (Walker, 2013). One point is that for everyone, there will be some unique personal meaning to the challenges they experience and will occur regardless of how others might perceive it to occur, as it will arise under a range of diverse influences. Walker, (2013) saw the utility of projecting oneself into unknown civilian futures as problematic.

For any symptom, problem, or challenge that a person may experience as problematic, invariably other people who have a similar experience may not experience it as a problem. Successful transition can lead to the further enhancement of self-esteem, positive self-identity, and the development of emotionally healthy and resilient veterans (Kutter et al., 2004; Demers, 2011; Iverson et al., 2005, 2011; Lawhorne-Scott and Philpott, 2013; Walker, 2013; Harkness and Zader, 2016; Stojanovic et al., 2016; Maguire et al., 2017; Albertson et al. 2017; Binks and Cambridge 2017; Cox et al., 2018; Derefinko et al., 2019; Rayment, 2020; Stone et al., 2020; Rhead et al., 2020). However, despite divergent views on the future of the world and work, a fresh look at supporting the maintenance of purposeful goals may be required (Luken, 2019 and Morris, 2019).

One such programme is Project Resettlement Education Community Construction Employment (Project RECCE). It aims to prevent negative outcomes associated with transition, raise awareness of skills for construction and support MAFP. The programme is a collection of training skills focused on employment, education, and mental health support for the construction sector. It offers bespoke industry modules, site visits, mentors, work placements and job opportunities and personal inspirations drawn from a pool of individuals across a lifetime. Each have shared knowledge and experiences and is conveyed in a way to inspire others. It also applies a composite of commonly used and recognised theories and models to support wellbeing (i.e., Maslow, 1943; Powers, 1973).

Project RECCE is informed by a Perceptual Control Theory (PCT: Powers, 1973) a theoretical framework supported by a wealth of evidence (e.g., Powers, 1973, 2005; Runkel, 2003; Mansell, Carey, & Tai, 2012; Luken, 2019). PCT offers an understanding of human behaviour (Powers, 1973) from a perspective that people in supportive roles and MAFP can easily comprehend. Mansell, Carey, and Tai (2013) argue, it is challenging to understand behaviour from an outsider's vantage point, because goals can conflict, creating inefficiency.

When exploring the issues experienced with MAFP and when providing fresh insights, thoughts, deliberations, actions, as well as the intentions of the people seeking help is revealed (Mansell, Carey, and Tai, 2013). Despite divergent views on the future of the world and work (Luken, 2019). Support models that fully explain self-direction and the uniqueness of a person's development may have benefits (Luken, 2019).

This study proposes to present UK MAFP first-hand experiences related to transition, access to TAPC, their use of mental health support and its interventions. The research so far, has sought to discover standard denominator variables that could be measured and be used to help predict or prevent problems experienced (Luken, 2019). To date no studies have explored these experiences with sufficient depth or discovered how these change processes relate to goals, intentions, and drivers. Gordon et al. (2020) insists on a review of mental health awareness literature to include the undivided elements of the veteran experience and the mechanisms involved, essential to research and outcome gains. Exploring these factors, including control, and maintaining important goals for MAFP is essential. The gaps in the research that explore the experiences and personal accounts of MAFP continue to exist. Gordon et al., (2020) and Binks and Cambridge (2017) support the need for a deeper understanding of MAFP experiences. The Service leavers and veterans enrolled on the TAPC may advance our understanding. The exploration allows for a deeper and more meaningful exchange with the researcher and participants to improve their effectiveness and understanding of themselves and their world. The overarching objective is to further the field and by applying a methodological and philosophical underpinning that can incorporate the range of idiosyncratic complexities that may be encountered through exploration. The study will adopt a qualitative paradigm.

Denzin and Lincoln (1998) state, "qualitative implies an emphasis on processes and meanings that are not rigorously examined, or measured (if measured at all), in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency. Qualitative researchers seek answers to questions

that stress how social experience is created and given meaning." (p. 8). The data will be analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to investigate the meanings people assign to their experiences and seek to understand the participants' accounts engaging with the TAPC. The research will only cover components of Perceptual Control Theory required to outline a possible account of conflict experiences (Luken, 2019). This will ensure the quality of support and consistent processes to understand individual preferred states, which are essential and differ in all individuals.

1.2 Literature Review

The literature indicates that many transitioning Service leavers successfully adapt to civilian life (Cooper et al., 2016). Cox et al. (2018) and Whitworth et al. (2020) argue transition is a time of inevitable uncertainty, personal responsibility, and difficulties, with each civilian environment different. Many researchers claim, ex-Armed Forces personnel face difficulty transitioning and managing their adjustment (Iverson et al., 2011; 2005; FiMT, 2013; Bhui et al., 2016; Cooper et al., 2016; Hatton, 2016; Binks and Cambridge, 2018; Fossey et al., 2019). Murphy and Busuttil (2015) state that most ex-forces "do well" in their transition. However, it seems there is no specific definition of what 'doing well' means.

The Armed Forces Covenant (AMC) responded to the increase in research and academic publications surrounding Military personnel's mental health, including the furious criticisms that highlighted that more proactive means of support for our soldiers entering the civilian world is necessary (Defence Select Committee, 2018). Morin (2011) argues that the transition process provides an opportunity for some to recreate close bonds, consistent during their military Service. An unsuccessful transition may affect the ability to control and have broader implication on self-confidence, impacting employment, relationships, and society.

Compared to the general population, MAFP had higher rates of increased anxiety and difficulty concentrating. These have been identified as barriers to employment (Gordon et al., 2020). Gordon et al. (2020) and Stone et al. (2018) establish that obtaining and maintaining long term employment and having financial security are protective factors for the overall wellbeing. Many Service leavers find work quickly (Morin, 2011).

Supporting MAFP is both a heavy mandate and an opportunity to seek the most appropriate method of support. Gordon et al. (2020) found that social cognition is a significant factor in whether a job can be maintained, 47% of people could not sustain employment, 50% of people joining the army at a non-officer level have a reading age at or below that of an average eleven-year-old. Factors such as these, affect CV writing, looking for jobs, reading the job description, and applying oneself to the role. Redundancy and increased mental health concerns are also highlighted in the literature, highlighting the importance of empowerment through education and employment (Gordon et al., 2020). However, McLeod (2019) posits that many employers discount veterans before providing opportunities that may significantly bolster wellbeing.

Many MAFP may have neglected to address their mental health problems. Further, some do not necessarily receive a diagnosis despite experiencing some distressing symptoms, 10% are reported to suffer alcohol misuse, 32.7% of those drinking at a harmful level self-report an alcohol problem, 73.4% reported dependency of alcohol and suicide ideation is not known (Stephen et al., 2017). The sickness itself may be medically unexplained, some do not see a diagnosis including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as being helpful (Pease, et al., 2016). Iversen et al. (2011) conducted a study into what prevented Service leavers from seeking support. Iversen et al. found that 76% of responders stated that the main barrier to seeking support is the stigma associated. Further, Iversen et al. argues that the inaccessibility of interventions was owing to a variety of shortcomings, such as practicalities of time-

consuming routines, scheduling appointments, having time off work, lack of understanding, and being unable to navigate the system.

Conceptualising the difficulties experienced at an individual level through a more in-depth understanding, rather than through observations and questionnaire may offer more meaning, as questionnaires cannot always be relied upon (Zolfagharian et al., 2019). The beliefs MAFP hold may lead to problems that impact reduced self-esteem and motivation to seek help, creating dissonance about connections with others (Rafferty et al., 2020).

When managing problems and emotions, conceptual models to alleviate stress have viewed coping as a conscious effort and have guided much of the research over the past three decades (Bray et al., 2001). Further, although the study by Binks and Cambridge (2018) provided unique insights as they reviewed the transition challenges of Service leavers with a focus on identity. Social identities inform how networks arise between people who frequently choose to associate, which highlights the impact of group identity, which may support influencing factors such as the institutionalisation effect of military service. However, socially formed identities are ascriptive characteristics and are not intrinsically related to performance, and goals. Their use for purposes of a group identity offers some commonly held beliefs about its influences (Kalin and Sambanis, 2018). Still, critiques, claim social identities may be explained with reference to its consequences, however, it does not explain intrinsic meaning. It does not exhaust the potential for alternatives that highlight the expressive motivations, which leaves many aspects of identity unexplained (Kalin and Sambanis, 2018).

Understanding the mechanisms through which identities motivate behaviour may offer a more accurate approach. This would involve exploring the deeper goals and drivers which remain unexplored. In alleviating some of the barriers creating conflict, rather than a generalised observation from conceptual models of understanding, critics of behavioural

models argue people are not just behaviouristic stimulus-response machines (Powers, 1973, Mansell, Carey, and Tai, 2013). They argue that behaviour is far more complex (Powers, 2005; Mansell, Carey, and Tai, 2013). So far, no definitive common denominator of adjustment problems has yet been identified (Reisman, 2016).

Perceptual Control Theory developed by Powers (1973) supports an integrative paradigm to understand human functioning across the social and mental health domains (McClelland, 2004; Carey, Mansell, & Tai, 2013; Luken, 2019). PCT has been applied to group workshops (Morris, 2019) and a wide range of social problems, including employment (Luken, 2019), addictive behaviours (Webb, Sniehotta, & Michie, 2010), dissociative experiences (Johnson, 2009; Mansell & Carey, 2013) compulsive symptoms (Pitman, 1987) and depression (Hyland, 1987). Because PCT helps individuals realise their unique perceptions, needs, values, goals, and challenges, it empowers self-management in applying the principles of control, conflict, and reorganisation as it engages individuals to control what matters to them. The programme helps MAFP consider their goals behind their actions and explore how to improve agency may have enormous benefits. It may offer a more parsimonious account that might be needed to drive research and programmes for the future.

There has been little pragmatic exploration of MAFP seeking to improve job functioning for industry and the ability to cope with day-to-day stressors, which is vital to the readiness of this population and stakeholders (i.e., MOD, DWP and CIOB). Despite contradictory literature that states a positive trajectory for most, acknowledging those who are vulnerable, we can build on what we understand of the Military experience and literature so far, which may be lost, if we do not explore the transition to civilian life from a new perspective.

Research Question:

What are the challenges faced while transitioning, how do the challenges apply to seeking employment in the civilian construction sector and what helps overcome these challenges?

2. Research Methodology

Qualitative research methodology is multimethod in focus, involving an interpretative, naturalistic approach to its subject (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is a qualitative methodological approach and preferred analytical tool. Smith, (2009) report, IPA attends to things that matter to people means distinguishing between different parts of experience and making decisions about which parts to focus on

Eatough and Smith, (2017) It captures the lived experiences of MAFP. It allows for an exploration of socially constructed meanings, works well across varying populations, as well as individual experiences (REF). IPA is useful when exploring the participants' experience in small samples and allows a more sensitive application in different mental and physical health research fields (Smith and Osborne, 2008). IPA compliments when working with multiple interpretations that individuals may make of a specific experience and is particularly important in exploring concepts that are difficult to identify or are not yet identified (Briggs, 2010).

IPA embraces the making sense of personal experience, as it offers an idiographic approach and interpretative engagement to examine the participant's individual and personal accounts. Smith and Osborn (2008) argue that IPA effectively yields accounts of pervasive and integrated experiences, such as 'phenomena' and 'meaning', central to all human endeavours. While defining self-attributed principles, this methodology is a preferred tool to help professionals in supporting roles and learn from others' experiences. It is beneficial for individual contexts and particular social worlds (Smith and Osborne, 2008).

Meaning relates to understanding certain complexities, including challenges, values, goals, and even disruptions. The Military context is symbolic to broad and generalised terms. However, individual identity will be highly insightful, as humans are unique. IPA is suitable and credible to interpret the meanings associated to individuals (Smith, Flower and Larkin., 2009). It explores personal constructs which may be different for MAFP than civilians. It has been applied as a methodology for Binks and Cambridge (2018) for exploring transition identity in Service leavers

The undiscovered context analysis will be credible as it seeks an individual interpretation (Smith, 2004). Therefore, as far as feasible, it can closely explore the nuances, instead of some measure of frequency, unlike in quantitative methods (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009). IPA has also been applied to explore how an individual controls perception that has value to the individual through meaning, intentions, and goals, which will undoubtedly form part of this exploration (i.e., McClelland, 1994).

2.1 Participants

The study aims to gather data from 5 Participants who will enrol on the Transition Awareness Programme for Construction (TAPC) (male and female) aged 25–58 years and who served in the Military Armed Forces. The length of time of Service and the context in which they left Service may also differ. The study may include those still serving (i.e. early Service leavers) unemployed and those on Universal Credit. The sample size is consistent with the chosen IPA methodology, which typically involves 3–15 participants (Smith et al., 2009).

All participants will be sent information regarding an invitation to participate in the study. Before the study commences, all participants will receive information on the study and be encouraged to take a week to consider if they want to engage in the study. If they wish to participate, they will have an additional week to consider the information provided, which will

be clearly defined and discuss any study details to ensure informed consent, which is necessary to consider predicted attrition of around 40%, n7. They may indicate that they have a mental health condition, such as PTSD, but this will be managed and supported.

2.2 Procedure

The course date is displayed on Facebook or advertised with the Career Transition Programme, DWP, or the Military of Defence, word of mouth, and social media platforms. The researcher will ask participants enrolled on the programme to return completed consent documents electronically, signed, scanned and password-protected, secured on the Build Array database. Participants will fully understand what the study entails, be reminded of confidentiality and understand their right to withdraw. If they wish to withdraw from the study for any reason, they will be debriefed and offered support as part of an exit strategy. Participants will be encouraged to ask any questions during the interview process to ensure they understand what will occur. An additional information sheet will explain details in the event of any distress experiences, such as any memory triggers resulting from the interview.

Safeguarding protocols will explain debriefing and how it will occur to reduce any distress. The investigator will adhere to the ethical guidelines and professional standards in line with the British Association Counselling Psychotherapist (BACP) and The British Psychological Society (BPS) in any adverse emotional reactions. The researcher (Susan McCormack is the Chief Clinical Officer for Project RECCE and University of Wales St David student) will introduce the students attending the programme and share information regarding engaging with the study.

Participants will be selected under the capacity to provide richly textured information that will represent greater efficiency rather than random sampling (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Demographic information will also be collected, such as command of the English language.

The information required will include name, date of birth, address, contact number, next of kin, medical history, terms of the agreement, general Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) protocols and consent to participate in the study. The programme details will be introduced and sent to all delegates enrolled on the programme, which delivers education, training, skills, and mental wellbeing support for the construction industry through information on the website and email. Once registered onto the programme, through Build Array (database), an initial telephone call and follow up will be made to explain the course details and information relating to the study. The researcher will remind the participant of confidentiality throughout the interview process. The initial protocols will address any risk. If it is self-reported that the process is disruptive to their mental wellbeing, an exit plan and support will be applied.

Susan McCormack (the researcher) has supported over 200 MAFP. The risk of any adverse reactions to the investigation on entering the TAPC and the study is minimal or none. Participants will have time to read through all the information. Forms are stored and password protected. Interviews will take place, at a mutually agreed time allocated for the process. The participant will be contacted two weeks before to the course start date. They will have an extra week to consider, followed-up by a telephone call. Once completed, consent forms are submitted through Build Array.

Each participant will be allocated a time through a (secure) booking system on the Project RECCE database and a follow up email will invite the Participants to a Zoom/Teams call asking if they would like more information on the study. A colour will be attached to the consent form to maintain confidentiality throughout the study (e.g., amber). The coding will ensure the information is easily identified as a participant of the study and ensure their safety and anonymity. The information platform Build Array will safely store all the data from the completed enrolment forms.

Participants will be given an hour slot for an in-depth interview face to face. If they are unable to access Zoom/Teams, the interview will take approximately 40-60 minutes. During the interview stage, an audio recording will begin when the interviewee feels confident to proceed. This will be carried out face to face at the Project RECCE Hub or depending if lockdown restrictions apply, participants will be interviewed via Teams/Zoom or telephone call.

<u>Interview 1</u> . Prior to the TAPC.	Q1. What challenges are you experiencing? Q2. What areas of support have been helpful in support of a new career?
<u>Interview 2</u> . Post Intervention at four weeks.	Q1. What challenges are you experiencing? Q2. What areas of support has been helpful in support of a new career?

Fig. 1. IPA open questions during participant interviews.

1. Interview 1. Prior to the start of the programme and the initial interview stage will be face-to face or via Zoom/Teams.
2. Interview 2. The same procedure will take place with a Zoom or Teams. The interviews will take place pre-engagement of the TAPC and post-intervention. The (four-week).

The interviews will allow the participant to set their parameters of what they want to talk about (Smith et al., 2009). The information sheet detailing what to expect during the interview process will be conveyed clearly and they will be asked if they fully understand what to expect and if they have any questions, to ease the understanding of the process. The semi-structured interview schedule will be open-ended, questions nondirective, to encourage the accessible narrative and detailed responses required for IPA (Smith, 2003). Throughout the interview process, a multi-step inductive process is consistent with the research question

(Barter and Reynold, 1999). It may be necessary to probe to gain clarity and understanding during the recording. Some participants may want to expand or provide further comments to ensure their experience is sufficiently covered. The questions, though separate, will build upon one another, with each phase informing the next (Fig. 1).

2.3 Ethical Implication

The study's ethical implications will mainly concern confidentiality, disclosure, consent, and ensuring the risk assessment is concurrent when working with MAFP. The safety, security, and needs of participants will be at the forefront of this exploration (Austin and Sutton, 2019). The data documentation will be stored, and password protected for the research's sole purpose (GDPR) (ICO, 2018). Participants will have access to immediate counselling support or help with debriefing and psychological support or counselling should this be required. The student carrying out the research is registered with the British Association of Counselling Practitioners. Susan McCormack is experienced in trauma and working with MAFP and will be available to support the participant if they wish to debrief or receive counselling. Adult Safeguarding and Lone Working policy will ensure added protection. Handouts offering support will supplement the information sheets and include emergency contact numbers and the details of the study. The participant has the right to withdraw.

2.4 Data Collection and Analysis

The research will aim to explore, as is feasible, the personal interpretations and accounts of the participants and managed through an interpretative process (Brockie et al., 2014). The researcher (Susan McCormack) will transcribe the responses from the interviews verbatim, taking care that the data is understandable. The questions will be explorative concerning the participants' personal experiences and interpretative accounts. The recordings will be stored in the Cloud and password protected for the sole purpose of the research and consent forms filed

(GDPR) (ICO, 2018). The transcribed data requires clear description, annotation, contextual information, and documentation that explains how data is created or digitised. The audio files from the interviews will be played back, transcribed, and analysed verbatim. The researcher's diary will record reflection during each interview and will be used to note significant ideas, experiences or any images conveyed by participants. The information may be open to interpretation, sometimes ambiguous, based on participants' perceptions and experience (Kietzmann and König, 2015). The preliminary themes that emerge from the transcripts will be checked, coded, reflected upon and analysed (Smith and Osborn, 2008). Themes will be clustered into groups according to any standout features, annotating this, coding for insights into their unique perspective.

The process will continuously examine the transcripts, eliminate partiality, generalisability, and address any limitations where possible. It will support any differences between the participants and within each transcript, ensuring it captures the uniqueness of individual experiences, combined into master themes to provide a composite portrayal of processes involved. It may be possible for an external supervisor, who is not involved in data collection, to check the coding system and verify that the themes are sufficiently grounded in the data (Smith et al., 2009).

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