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Social inclusion through service provision for the armed forces community: the officers' perspective

INTRODUCTION

Recent research published by The Royal British Legion (2014) defines the United Kingdom (UK) armed forces community as service personnel who have served or are currently serving in the armed forces, their spouses/partners (including separated and widowed) as well as dependent children. Currently, the full-time UK armed forces across all services number just under 153,000 (Dempsey, 2019), 29,530 (19%) of whom are from the officer ranks and above (Dempsey, 2019). Recent statistics by the Ministry of Defence predicts that by 2028 there will be 1.6 million veterans of the armed forces living in the UK. This indicates an increasing need for effective plans concerning the social inclusion of service personnel by providing them with services that support their civilian life. The voluntary sector plays a key role in the provision of health and welfare services to the UK armed forces community (Gribble et al., 2014). Although there has been research into the armed forces community, by academics as well as the charity sector, more in-depth understanding of the various cohorts of the armed forces community is required. Amidst increased support and awareness of the UK armed forces (Ashcroft, 2012), this study aims to understand the different service needs of just one segment of the UK armed forces community – namely, officers and their families. A better understanding of this segment will help the various charities that support the armed forces community in tailoring their services to meet the needs of officers and their families. Additionally, it will provide insights into how to position their brands to ensure their services can be publicised more effectively.

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Theoretical background

There has been an increased interest amongst the public and the media about the armed forces and, more specifically, on what happens to them after they leave the service (Iversen et al., 2005). The media often focus on a minority of veterans who face problems once they have left the service, which includes homelessness, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), alcohol abuse and so on. Recent research has found that, contrary to common myths, the majority of veterans leaving the service make a smooth transition and enjoy a perfectly normal civilian life (Iversen et al., 2005; The Royal British Legion, 2014). However, even those who have made such a smooth transition may still need help and support in the future. The multitude of armed forces charities operating in the UK and the public support for these charities indicate that there is a need for these services. It is estimated that approximately 20,000 service personnel leave the UK armed forces each year (Hatch et al., 2013). This, in combination with the Ministry of Defence (2019) projection that veteran numbers will increase to 1.6 million in the UK by 2028, indicates that the various armed forces charities need to be better prepared to meet the needs of the armed forces community.

Most research published on the subject of the armed forces has been carried out in the USA, with relatively little concerning the UK armed forces (Iversen et al., 2005). Although the existing research on the US armed forces provides great insights, the cultural and administrative differences mean that they lack relevance to the UK context (Ashcroft, 2012). However, there is some interesting and insightful research emerging on the UK armed forces, both from academia and the charity sector, including from The Royal British Legion (2014) and Forces in Mind Trust (2013). Most of the existing research from the USA and the UK focuses on understanding the mental health issues faced by veterans during and after their service, as well as the transition from the armed forces into civilian life (Hatch et al., 2013; Hoge, Auchterlonie, Milliken, 2006; Iversen et al., 2005; Jordan, 2011). Very little research has been carried out related to the needs of the UK armed forces and how charities can best meet these needs. Some inroads have been made into this by the armed forces charity sector (Forces in Mind Trust, 2013; The Royal British Legion, 2014; etc.), but more research is needed here.

The studies involving the UK armed forces have largely considered the armed services as a single cohort. However, there are significant differences between ranks, and especially between the officer and non-officer ranks. For instance, MacManus *et al.* (2012) studied the anti-social behaviour of armed forces personnel before joining the service and its impact on mental health and behaviour during and after service. They found that only 6% of officers reported anti-social behaviour prior to joining the service. This was attributed to the comparatively higher educational levels of those joining the service as an officer. Iversen *et al.* (2005) investigated

the transition of the armed forces personnel leaving the service, and found that officers were less likely to leave the service early than junior soldiers. These differences amongst the ranks indicate that the service needs of these armed forces groups also differ. Although service charities such as The Royal British Legion have begun to investigate the service needs of the UK armed forces community, the differences between officers and other ranks have not been examined in detail. Furthermore, The Royal British Legion (2014) estimates that 1 in 20 members of the UK armed forces community had unmet needs for support. This study aims to fill this gap and provide some insight into the service needs of officers of the UK armed forces and their families.

Methodology

This is an exploratory study, which aims to understand the service needs of the officers of the UK armed forces community. Consequently, a multi-stage qualitative research method was used. The first stage was to review the published research from some of the UK armed forces charities. The second stage involved personal conversations and interviews with armed forces benevolence charities and visits to outreach services held for armed forces communities in the South-East of England, which were used to observe the nature of the services provided and the interactions between beneficiaries and service providers. Finally, in-depth interviews were carried out with case workers and beneficiaries of a service charity that provides services to the officers of the UK armed service community, using a self-selected sample. All the participants were based in England. In total, eight case workers and eight beneficiaries were interviewed. The personal interviews, observations from the outreach services and the interviews with benevolence charities were thematically analysed to identify service needs.

Findings

The findings of the research are summarised in Figure 1 and identify some of the catalysts that create the need for various services.

The majority of the beneficiaries required the services of a benevolence charity due to relationship breakdown. This agrees with research carried out in the US, which identified that the armed forces and their families increasingly required counselling due to the pressures and stress placed on relationships as a result of deployment (Jordan, 2011). Other catalysts include redundancy (either being discharged from the armed forces or being made redundant from a civilian job post-service), serious illness, including of a dependent family member, and also injuries or illnesses sustained as a result of service in the armed forces.
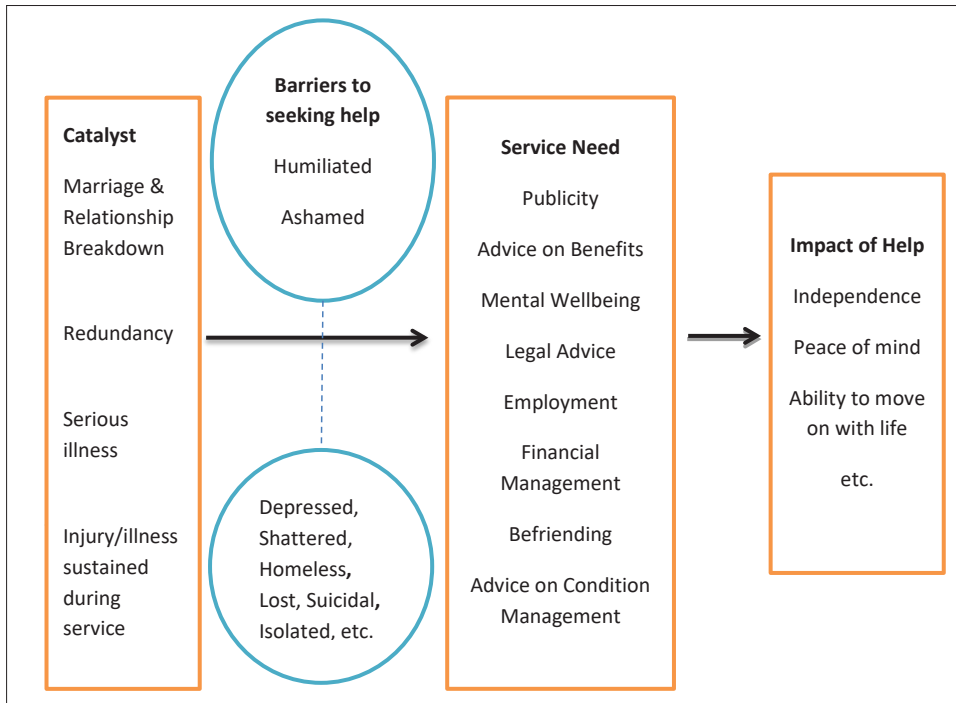
Figure 1. Summary of findings

Source: own study.

As a result of some of these catalysts, former officers and their families can be left homeless, depressed, isolated and, in some rare cases, feeling suicidal. Many case workers reported, in addition to being identified by the beneficiaries themselves, that this is segment of the community is very proud and has experienced a higher standard of living, which makes asking for help an alien concept for most of them. They described their feelings as humiliation and being ashamed of having to seek help. In some cases, they did not inform their extended family or friends about their contact with an armed services charity. However, some explained that they felt a sense of pride in overcoming these barriers and taking the first step in sorting their lives out by seeking help.

In terms of specific service needs, publicity, advice on benefits, mental wellbeing, legal advice, employment, financial management, befriending and advice on condition management were all identified as recurring themes, and therefore more relevant.

In most cases, those who needed help were not aware of specific service charities that they could approach for help. Although the majority of service personnel and the public are aware of the largest service charities, such as The British Legion and Help for Heroes, there are a multitude of more specific ser-

vice charities (Gribble et al., 2014). Most officers and their families were either unaware of these charities or did not understand the various ways in which the charities could help them. As one participant mentioned, '*knowing that there were people out there that we could go to would be the first service anyone could provide us'*.

The need for advice on eligibility for and availability of state benefits, as well as legal advice, were two key service needs. Officers and their families are not generally familiar with the benefits system and lack awareness of the various state aids that are available to them. As well as advice on eligibility for state benefits, the respondents also mentioned that they would need someone to help them '*navigate the benefits system*'. The need for legal advice stemmed from various issues, such as divorce settlements, child custody issues and redundancy.

Mental wellbeing was a major service need that was reiterated by all participants. Recently, there has been growing concern about the impact of military deployment, especially to Iraq and Afghanistan, on the psychological wellbeing of the armed forces (Hoge, Auchterlonie, Milliken, 2006; Jordan, 2011; MacManus et al., 2012). In a study of US veterans, Hoge *et al.* (2006) identified that the use of mental health care services for the entire armed forces population shows a linear increase over time since 2000. As well as serving personnel, deployment also has an impact on spouses and partners (Mansefield et al., 2010). This study found that, for the officers and their families, mental wellbeing encompassed issues such as relationship counselling, stress, anxiety and depression.

A study on the UK armed forces community identified that 33% of officers mentioned that one of their biggest concerns about leaving the forces was financial and budgeting issues (Ashcroft, 2012). This corresponded with the findings of this study, where the participants identified the need for help and advice on managing their finances effectively. Employment was also an important service need. A recent survey by The Royal British Legion (2014) identified that for those aged 16–54, employment was a major concern. Although the survey did not differentiate between officers and other ranks, the survey findings concurred with those from this study.

Befriending was a need mentioned by almost all participants in some form or another. For some, it was a case of knowing that there was someone available who understood their situation and could keep them motivated through a difficult stage of their life. For others, it was the simple need of having a friend that they could talk to. Hatch *et al.* (2013) found that service leavers experienced less social participation outside of work and experienced more social isolation and disengagement. Although the Hatch *et al.* study did not differentiate between officers and other ranks, the results identified it as a need among the officer community. A further need was of condition management. Families who had members who became seriously ill or were injured as a result of the service mentioned the need for advice on adapting their lives to be able to live with the condition.

CONCLUSION

This has aided the better understanding and identification of the service needs of the officers of the UK armed forces and their families. The needs identified here can help those organisations that assist officers and their families to target their services more effectively to their beneficiaries. In this way, the service charities can ensure that the specific needs of the officers are catered for and their services make a genuine impact on the lives of their beneficiaries. It is important to note the barriers to seeking help and their implications for branding and marketing by the charity services. As a result of these barriers, organisations serving the armed forces community, especially officers, may need to communicate their message in such a way that the feeling of 'asking for help' is considerably minimised. In other words, the marketing efforts need to focus on building a brand image that promotes the theme of serving the armed forces community as opposed to the armed forces community seeking and receiving help.

Although the research here focussed on a relatively small sample, it is noteworthy that all interviews elicited similar responses. This may indicate that for this cohort of the UK armed forces (i.e. officers), these needs apply in general. It also further highlights the benefits of applying the principles of market segmentation to the armed forces community with a view to gaining a better understanding of the different cohorts. This may help various service charities cluster their services for different cohorts and thereby make their services more relevant.

This study only focused on those who are current beneficiaries of a service charity. Future research needs to expand this study further so that current and future potential beneficiary needs are also taken into account.

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Summary

Public awareness and interest in the UK armed forces has increased over the years as a result of their involvement in various conflict situations. Research has also identified the increasing support and services that the armed forces community need, including mental wellbeing and the transition to civilian life. The voluntary sector has played a key role in the social inclusion of the armed forces by providing support and services for the armed forces community in the UK. This paper argues that gaining a more in-depth understanding of the armed forces community and their needs would help the various service charities to plan and deliver their services as well as to promote themselves more effectively. The purpose of this research was to understand and identify the service needs of one cohort of the UK armed forces – officers and their families. Qualitative, in-depth interviews of case workers and the beneficiaries of a service charity working with officers and their families were carried out, as well as observations and discussions with various service charities and the attendees of outreach services for veterans. The thematic analysis of the interviews, observations and discussion notes helped identify eight specific service needs that were important to the officers and their families.

Keywords: social inclusion, service personnel, service needs.

Włączenie społeczne poprzez świadczenie
usług na rzecz społeczności sił zbrojnych: perspektywa oficerów

Streszczenie

Świadomość społeczna i zainteresowanie brytyjskimi siłami zbrojnymi wzrosły na przestrzeni lat w wyniku ich zaangażowania w różne sytuacje konfliktowe. Badania wykazały również, że wzrasta zapotrzebowanie społeczności sił zbrojnych na usługi wsparcia, ukierunkowane na wzmacnianie dobrego samopoczucia psychicznego i ułatwiające przejście do życia cywilnego. Sektor wolontariatu społecznego odegrał kluczową rolę w integracji społecznej przedstawicieli sił zbrojnych, zapewniając wsparcie i usługi dla tej społeczności w Wielkiej Brytanii. Niniejsze opracowanie dowodzi, że głębsze zrozumienie społeczności sił zbrojnych i ich potrzeb pomogłoby organizacjom charytatywnym w planowaniu i świadczeniu usług, a także w skuteczniejszym promowaniu własnej aktywności. Celem przeprowadzonych badań było zrozumienie i zidentyfikowanie zapotrzebowania na usługi wsparcia ze strony jednej z kohort brytyjskich sił zbrojnych – oficerów i ich rodzin. Przeprowadzono jakościowe, pogłębione wywiady z pracownikami prowadzącymi działania wspierające funkcjonariuszy sił zbrojnych i ich rodziny, a także samymi beneficjentami organizacji charytatywnych. Ponadto, podstawą wnioskowania były obserwacje i dyskusje z przedstawicielami organizacji charytatywnych oraz uczestnikami usług pomocy dla weteranów. Tematycznie ukierunkowana analiza wywiadów, obserwacji i notatek z dyskusji pomogła zidentyfikować osiem konkretnych obszarów zapotrzebowania na usługi wsparcia, które były ważne dla oficerów i ich rodzin.

Słowa kluczowe: włączenie społeczne, personel usługowy, potrzeby usługowe.

JEL: H55.