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**Williams, R K, Allen-Collinson, Jacquelyn, Hockey, John C  
ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5826-8005> and  
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**Williams, R K, Allen-Collinson, J, Hockey, J and Evans, A B ‘You’re just chopped off at the end’: Retired servicemen’s identity work struggles in the military to civilian transition, *Sociological Research Online*.**

Promoting positive transition to retirement and cultural adaption for ex-service personnel has been identified as a priority for both social-science research and for public health policy in the UK. The Royal British Legion (RBL) aims to provide support to service and retired service personnel, but to date the transition to retirement experiences of older (60-plus) ex-service personnel remain under-researched. In this article, we employ a symbolic interactionist theoretical framework to examine older servicemen’s experiences and identity challenges post-retirement from the British armed forces. Data were collected primarily through semi-structured, focus-group interviews with 20 former servicemen. Here, we focus specifically upon the challenges encountered by these ex-servicemen in the retirement transition from military to civilian life, a time of identity flux of sociological interest. To navigate this period of identity change and challenge, many participants constructed a ‘modified military self’ through involvement with the RBL as a key social support network. For many retired personnel the RBL offered a form of identification and group identity that resonated strongly with earlier experiences of comradeship in the military.

## **Keywords**

Ageing, military, symbolic interactionism, transition, identity work

## **Introduction and background**

Supporting service personnel in the retirement transition from military into civilian life is the focus of much public health policy and sociological research interest (Ahern et al., 2015; Ashcroft, 2014; Caddick et al., 2017; Cooper et al., 2018; Godier et al., 2017; Higate, 2000a, 2000b, 2001). Although definitions of transition differ depending on the disciplinary focus, most authors agree that transition involves people’s reactions and responses during a passage

of change as they move through life (see Kralik et al., 2006; also, Martin-McDonald and Biernoff, 2002). Occurring over time, transition entails elements of adaptation, including for example, personal, relational, developmental, situational, environmental or societal change (see Kralik et al., 2006). Essential to transition is the reconstruction of a valued self-identity. Military veterans who remain captives of their past often have difficulty reconciling their civilian and military selves (Higate, 2001; Beech et al., 2017). Servicemen and servicewomen who retire from the military have been shown to encounter very different experiences to people who retire from conventional civilian life and, for many, the transition back into civilian life is replete with difficulties and challenges (Carlson et al., 2013; Herman and Yarwood, 2014). Life in the armed forces can have a lasting effect upon identity (Oakes, 2011), as views, attitudes and social identities are shaped through shared experiences of the military lifeworld, thus distancing service personnel from civilian life. Military personnel are socialised into a world that is so different from their former civilian way of life that transitioning back can cause conflict to sense of self and social stability (Binks and Cambridge, 2017), causing veterans to question who they ‘really are’.

Retirement from the military is a challenging life-transition that can strongly impact on personal identity (Beech et al., 2017) and sense of self, yet the lived, embodied experiences of transition to retirement are under-researched and not well understood (Bulmer and Eichler, 2017; Cooper et al., 2018; Fossey and Hacker Hughes, 2013; Herman and Yarwood, 2014). According to the UK Ministry of Defence (MOD, 2011) definition, any person who has served in the British armed forces for at least one day is classed as a veteran. Whilst entitlement to transition support varies depending on length of service (Godier et al., 2017), early service leavers (those who leave the military before completing the minimum term of contract) have been identified as a group particularly vulnerable to the problems associated with the retirement transition period (see Ashcroft, 2014; Buckman et al., 2013; Godier et al., 2017; National Audit Office, 2007; The Futures Company, 2013). Sociological research has only relatively recently begun to address the issues associated with military exit, including for example, high rates of homelessness amongst former military personnel (Higate, 2000a, 200b). The enduring influence of military culture on ex-service personnel returning to civilian life is relatively under-theorised (Cooper et al., 2018), as are the experiences of *older*, retired service personnel. There is also a paucity of social-science research examining experiences of the support channels available to ex-service personnel. This article therefore addresses these research lacunae, in exploring identity challenges and issues experienced by older (60+) ex-servicemen,

and the role of the Royal British Legion (RBL) in supporting military-civilian transition and retirement.

The RBL is a well-known British charity providing social, financial and emotional support to veterans and members of the British armed forces, their families and dependants (RBL, 2015). Here, we contribute new perspectives to the small literature on the experiences of UK ex-service personnel (see also Fear et al., 2009) in relation to ageing and key life-stage transitions. We draw on data generated by a qualitative study of 20 older, retired service personnel, which highlight the collective, shared memories and lived experiences of these servicemen (all participants were male), who were all members of the RBL, having previously served in the British armed forces. We consider the retirement transition from military to civilian life, the longer-term effects of military service, participants' experiences in retirement, and the RBL as a social support network for military veterans and their families.

### **Theoretical perspective**

The study draws on symbolic interactionist insights to examine participants' retirement and post-retirement experiences, where they encountered certain challenges to their former identities as 'military men'. Our conceptualisation of identity utilises Jenkins' interactionist perspective (1996) where self is defined as each individual's reflexive sense of her or his own particular identity, constituted *vis à vis* of others in terms of similarity and difference. In highlighting identity as relational, a 'collaboration' between the person and the social world (McAdams, 1993), the influence of others is theorised as highly salient with regard to identity (re)construction, maintenance and negotiation. As a key component of identity in process, social actors engage in assessing how and in what ways they are similar to, and different from, other people. Stone (2006) thus argues that to have an identity is to join with some and depart from others; for example, our RBL participants often identified strongly with their military and ex-military comrades and highlighted differences between these groups and the general 'civvie' (civilian) population.

Symbolic interactionist perspectives on identity are quite diverse, and have been posited as ranging along a continuum between more 'processual' and more 'structural' orientations (Allen-Collinson, 2007), though differences can sometimes be nuanced. Structural approaches often utilise relatively fixed notions of role identities and social positions, linking social structures to persons (Howard, 2000). The more processual approaches place greater emphasis upon the processes of active identity (re)construction within interactional contexts, and it is

upon this more processual, situational concept of identity that we focus here, whilst nevertheless fully acknowledging the power of social-structural forces upon identity (re)construction and negotiation. One of our key interests was the way in which the former servicemen brought into play their various identities within the interactional flow of their everyday lives.

Of relevance to our research, a further analytical distinction is sometimes made within symbolic interactionist accounts between ‘social’ and ‘personal’ identities. In the current analysis, we draw on Snow and Anderson’s (1995) conceptualisation, where social identities are defined as those we attribute to others, whilst personal identities are the meanings attributed to the self by the social actor her/himself, and actively brought into play during the interactional flow. These forms of identity may at times be in tension, and challenged by significant others such as family members, friends and peers (Allen-Collinson, 2007), and by the ‘generalised other’ in the form of a wider public audience. We also draw on Perinbanayagam’s (2000) conceptualisation of identification, which develops the work of Snow and Anderson (1995) in formulating distinctive forms of identification: materialistic, associative, and vocabularic. All three of these instrumentations for the claiming of identity were used by participants in the current study as they sought personal and occupational credibility with others in their social networks.

Having delineated above our theoretical perspective, in the following section we outline the research project itself and the methods utilised.

## **Methods**

A ‘limited topical life history’ (Allen-Collinson, 2011) approach was utilised to focus data collection and analysis on a particular period in participants’ lives, including their lived experiences of retirement and transitions from military into civilian life. Twenty retired servicemen aged 60 years and over, were recruited, all of whom were members of the Royal British Legion in a city in the English Midlands where three members of the research team were based. Older ex-servicemen were recruited to contribute to the relatively small literature on men’s experiences as embodied, male, ageing subjects (Sparkes, 2015; Williams et al., 2018). In total, we recruited 13 retired Army and seven retired Royal Air Force (RAF) servicemen, using retirement as an indicator of a specific stage in the life-course. Participant details are presented in **Table 1**. Due to receiving pensions at a lower age than do most civilian workers, all participants were retired from paid employment in the military. As has been noted,

historically-speaking retirement is a relatively new phenomenon (Phillipson, 1999) and notions of any standardised retirement age have been problematised in recent decades (e.g., Vickerstaff and Cox, 2005). In the UK armed forces, however, those having served full-time for at least 20 years are permitted to retire from the age of 40 (MOD, 2015). Although some participants had initially found employment after leaving the military, all were fully-retired from paid employment at the time of the research.

### **Table 1 here**

Data were collected via three semi-structured focus groups, together with follow-up conversations and informal observations in a range of RBL contexts, such as weekly coffee-mornings. The men were purposely categorised into groups specific to their military branch, to gain collective recollections and experiences from those with similar forces backgrounds. Focus groups lasted between 80 and 100 minutes, and were recorded by Dictaphone. Detailed field-notes were also collected, and follow-up conversations were held to check key information. Data were then analysed thematically drawing on Braun and colleagues' (2016) six-phase thematic analysis model, involving: data immersion and familiarisation; generating initial codes; theme development; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and write-up. Whilst mindful that 'member-checking' has its limitations vis-a-vis judging the quality of research (Smith and McGannon, 2017), we used this process to promote discussions with participants regarding initial interpretations. In the following data extracts, alongside the quotations we have provided contextualising information such as age and service branch; pseudonyms have been used throughout.

## **Findings and discussion**

From data analysis a range of themes emerged; we focus here on participants' lived experiences post-retirement from the British armed forces and their accounts of the transition from military to civilian life. Our second theme centres on experiences of the RBL as a social support network.

### ***Enforced retirement: crossing the military-civilian divide***

As Parry and colleagues (2004) note, older age is often associated with periods of significant change and transition, linked, for example, to personal and spousal health, bereavement, caring duties and retirement (Centre for Ageing Better, 2016). Retirement may have positive impacts,

however. The end of paid employment can allow more time to engage in family commitments (Hochman and Lewin-Epstein, 2013) and long-standing or new interests; some older adults may view retirement as a period of ‘flowering’, with time to explore new things, and take up new challenges (Cox, 2015; Bell and Wheeler, 2015). Negative aspects can include reduced income (Vickerstaff and Cox, 2005) and decline in health and mobility (Gilroy, 2008; Bell and Wheeler, 2015). Here, we analyse experiences relating to loss of and/or challenges to occupational, personal and social identities (see also Allen-Collinson, 2003, 2004; Allen-Collinson and Hockey, 2007) particularly collective military identity. For the ex-servicemen, losing their established membership of the military, and the sense of belonging and camaraderie they shared when part of the military, was a theme that emerged strongly.

The enforced low age of retirement in the armed forces was experienced as highly problematic, with some participants describing resentment toward the strict military age restrictions, which *forced* them into retirement despite being fit and healthy and prepared to continue working:

As a regular Army officer you have to go at fifty-five, unless you're a general or something like that. So fifty-five, you're out. Whether you like it or not. Which is a shame really because most of us have still got lots to give and are fit enough and keen enough to carry on. (Arthur/71yrs/Army)

That is one thing that I think a lot of service people resent, you're just chopped off at the end. (Alfred/73yrs/RAF)

I wanted another year, I went to see the colonel. He said, “I can't, it's your age”. I said, “you can't say that, that's ageism”. He didn't know what to say. He said, “Anyway, I can't”. (Johnathon/79yrs/Army)

Various researchers (see Cooper et al., 2018; Walker, 2012; Wolpert, 2000) identify how military career-leavers are often confronted by challenges such as changing family dynamics, loss of status, the need to work due to financial problems, difficulty finding equivalent levels of employment, the need to compete with younger people, and civilian disinterest in service personnel. The loss of status was felt keenly by many, and exemplified by the enforced handing-back or removal of forms of ‘official identification’ such as military watches, equipment and identification badges. Allen-Collinson (2011) portrays how forcible removal of

a person's official identification objects (such as an ID card) can result in distressing experiences of identity contestation and loss. In the case of the retired servicemen, the forcible removal of identification badges prevented them from entering places to which they had once entered freely. This not only functionally constrained them and caused considerable inconvenience but also symbolically reduced them to 'mere' civilian status; they were no longer considered established members within the military insider group. Alfred's quote highlights the temporal shift to an identity *outside* the military:

One of the interesting things I found when I left the Air Force is they take your identity card off you. They take your watch back and all your equipment and about a week later I was at RAF Cranwell, my very last period, and about a week later I had to go there on some business and I had to stand in the queue with the painters and decorators and tradesmen and get my photograph taken. And a week before I could go in just flashing my identity card. (Alfred/73yrs/RAF)

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, Perinbanayagam (2000) stresses the strong materialistic dimension to identity and 'identity work' (see also Allen-Collinson and Hockey, 2007). In relation to the military, participants described being supplied with specific clothing, badges, identity cards and equipment. Throughout their time in active service, these military objects, had become positively cathected as important components in their materialistic identification. As Belk (1988) notes, possessions can symbolically extend the self, and these military objects appeared to become symbolic physical representations of participants' own and shared military identity. When these were confiscated, the servicemen experienced a strong challenge to their materialistic identification (see also Allen-Collinson, 2011) and a form of attack on their extended sense of self (see Belk, 1988), analogous to Goffman's (1976) concept of 'role stripping'. Although participants were not permitted to keep the majority of their military objects upon leaving the military, they were handed their discharge papers (a record of service formally stating discharge from the military). The men were also eligible to apply for their 'Veterans' Badge'. To all those having served in the British armed forces, such objects can act as a reminder and confirmer of identification (see also McCarthy, 1984):

If I can point out one thing, like the Veterans' Badge, now I deliberately, when I go in any of the supermarkets and I see one of them, I'll go up to him and I'll shake his hand, I'll say, "Who did you serve with?" And, "Oh, I was in the RAF". Fair enough. (Richard/73yrs/RAF)

Via such materialistic identification, Richard illustrates how he sought ‘associative identification’ (Perinbanayagam, 2000) with other members of the military. Verbal constructions such as ‘who did you serve with’ serve to emphasise how participants still seek to claim some level of military ‘insider status’. ‘Vocabularic identifications’ (Perinbanayagam, 2000) such as this are powerful indicators of personal identity and group allegiance, reflected in the ‘old soldier’s’ oft-repeated saying that: ‘once you are in [the military], you are always in!’. Even though participants were retired and no longer ‘full’ members of the military, many still tried to assert their identification with the military via, for example, continued membership of the Royal British Legion, wearing a Veterans’ Badge and/or military medals when out in public and on special occasions.

Another challenge occurred early on during post-military life, when participants found that military norms and values jarred with their new civilian way of life, particularly vis-à-vis the highly structured way of life experienced in the military, when contrasted with other ‘looser’ occupational environments. Henry recounted:

But then I came out and I went to work for X Heath Authority and I worked for them for a while and I couldn’t get on with that because the National Health Service at that time was wishy-washy. They couldn’t make decisions, they didn’t know what they were doing, there was no coordination or anything and coming from the military, which you’d always had that. (Henry/80yrs/RAF)

Whilst Henry struggled to adapt to a new working environment, many participants reported encountering great difficulty in finding paid employment after leaving the military, identifying prejudice against former services personnel as a contributing factor. Louis’s account in particular illustrates the perceived differences between retired servicemen/servicewomen and civilian peers:

I applied for two jobs when I came out. One was as national secretary for the X Association. At my final interview you could tell they’d already decided who they were going to choose. It was a fella who’d worked for Dunlop and he was bloody useless, I can tell you that now. But at my interview they said “the problem with you, is that you’ve no experience of working with civilians”. I’ve no experience of working with civilians? What are we? Are we humanoids, or are we down from outer space? I find it

an insult for a start to differentiate between people in uniform and people in civilian life. (Louis/84yrs/Army)

In our time there was certainly that prejudice, coming out and trying to find a job. (Victor/63yrs/Army)

The intense, strict, highly-disciplined military socialisation process (Hockey, 1986), is designed to produce a form of embodiment in which greater control of bodily states, dispositions and the emotions are engendered. The unintentional consequences of this, however, for some participants resulted in institutionalisation, and a concomitant lack of preparedness in relation to life outside the military. When leaving the armed forces, some found themselves vulnerable to the effects of ‘military institutionalisation’ (Higate, 2000b: 97); so institutionalised they were incapable of managing even mundane elements of everyday civilian life (see also Higate, 2001), as Edward testified:

And when I came out of the Army I was institutionalised, I then had to be institutionalised [had to structure his own life to mirror former military institutionalisation], because going in the Army and then coming out after forty years, that’s the only thing that you’ve known. (Edward/75yrs/Army)

Indeed, so deeply embedded were the military’s structured routines and discipline that life on ‘civvy street’ was intolerable for some ex-services personnel:

I’ve known friends that never made it past two years. Literally died because they missed the routine, the discipline, they cannot cope with the same sort of things within civvy street. (Desmond/74yrs/Army)

Whilst the above comment might initially be thought an extreme response, many participants reported entering an identity-challenging ‘limbo’ state (Bamber et al., 2017); or an unsettled, liminal (Van Gennep, 1960) state where they felt outsiders to both the military, and to the civilian population; ‘marked’ as betwixt and between. The marked/unmarked distinction has been used (Allen-Collinson, 2006; Brekhus, 2008) to analyse the relationship between the ‘generic’, normative and privileging (unmarked), and the ‘deviant’, non-normative,

stigmatising (marked) aspects of social identities. The stigmatisation of ‘marked’ outsiders by the ‘unmarked’ group (in this case, civilians) is a powerful exclusionary process.

Participants portrayed vividly the challenges of negotiating their ‘marked’ social and occupational identities, and feelings of marginalisation emerged as salient within the data. Many expressed frustration at no longer being part of the military insider group, whilst also perceived as not competent to take up civilian employment. Further, as Higate (2001) notes, the military-masculine gender ideology often discourages service personnel from admitting they are in ‘emotional need’. Gilbert, who was suffering from post-traumatic stress at the time of his enforced early discharge from the Army, expressed the emotional devastation he experienced when being abruptly ‘pensioned off’. He felt ‘lost’, in a ‘no-zone’ without any sense of belonging, in contrast to the intense belonging and camaraderie he had known in the Army:

Basically, I was in the Army but I was forced to leave, I couldn’t go on any longer. I left early. And that to me was heart-breaking. It simply said they didn’t want me, they didn’t recognise post-traumatic stress in those days, they didn’t keep you on despite your wounds. My health was – well, I say my health, my fitness was deteriorating. So what they did, they pensioned me off. And that to me then, I was coming out into – very little knowledge, no resettlement costs or anything like that, I just came out and I just landed on the doorstep of X, my home town, with not an idea of how to find a job. There was a Forces resettlement guy who quite literally was there when he felt like it, and he wasn’t interested. Sent me to do a test for typewriter repair and maintenance. That wouldn’t have been a long-standing job, would it? To me, I was lost. So I found myself joining everything simply to belong. I became a member of a Lodge, I became a member – well, I was already a member of the Association – they had a club up in the barracks, so I was a regular attender there when I was on leave. So I was already a member of the Association, but that only met for a meeting once a month. So there was very little to fill your time. And until I found a job – although it was belonging to something – I still missed the belonging like the Army had. (Gilbert/80yrs/Army)

Participants’ experiences resonate with extant research: Walker (2012), for example, notes how military exit is frequently associated with mental health issues. Anxiety and psychosomatic difficulties have been identified in long-standing research (Bellino, 1969), including military retirement syndrome (McNeil and Griffen, 1967), so-called ‘old soldier syndrome’ (Greenberg,

1965), depression (Greenberg, 1965), grief reaction (Carlson et al., 2013; Kilpatrick and Kilpatrick, 1979) and other kinds of mental illness (Booth–Kewley et al., 2013; Rice and Sher, 2013). The loss of camaraderie created during the intense military socialisation process (Hockey, 1986), and throughout their military careers, was lamented by interviewees, with James exemplifying such feelings of loss, including in relation to military ‘family’:

You miss it when you leave it [the military] because you're used to it and it helps you to maintain your fitness and maintain your camaraderie with all your colleagues. And when you come out, you just aren't doing it all... Yeah, you definitely feel like you have lost your family. (James/72yrs/Army)

For many participants, it was not only their job and military family they had to leave behind when leaving the military, but a whole, all-encompassing way of life, requiring social as well as geographical dislocation:

You've left and you've got to rebuild your life, because it's all together. You leave the Army. You leave your job. You leave your house usually as well and you have to relocate, to find somewhere to live and find a job. (Victor/63yrs/Army)

Constructing some degree of identity continuity (see also Allen-Collinson and Hockey, 2007; Hinojosa et al., 2008) in this period of liminality and transition proved challenging for the ex-servicemen. Whilst some identities, such as that of a military employee, were disrupted (even abruptly) due to strict military age restrictions specifying who could be actually ‘in’ the military, participants could turn to new social groupings and thus began to develop, co-construct, and/or (re)value other identities. By joining the RBL and attending a gamut of the social events associated with this social group, ex-servicemen started to construct identities situated in what could be described as an extended armed forces context. As they were already familiar with the social norms and values associated with the military and thus to some extent with the new, extended military network, construction of a ‘modified military self’ seemed possible. It is to the RBL that we turn in considering how this organisation facilitated some degree of military identity continuity post-retirement from the forces.

### *The Royal British Legion*

The British armed forces comprise the following distinct branches: British Army, Royal Air Force, Royal Marines and the Royal Navy. Our participants were drawn from both the Army and the RAF. Despite previously serving in these different branches, with their own distinctive cultures, nevertheless, the men expressed strong bonds of association with each other, which transcended differences in background:

You're all from the same family. Even though some of us have an Army background or [an] RAF or Navy [background], now in the British Legion we are just one. It doesn't matter where you served or what branch of the forces you served in.  
(Calvin/71yrs/Army)

Divided (to some extent) during their military occupational careers, in retirement and in the social network of the RBL, participants expressed a commonality and strong connectivity. Victor exemplified such connectivity, portraying how the men were inclined towards and bonded with each other in the RBL through their shared past as serving members of the forces, and their belief in the value of the RBL. Whilst they may not have been 'comrades in arms' at the time of their paid service, they expressed strong feelings of shared comradeship in the RBL:

I said to someone the other day, we're all here because we want to be here for different reasons. And I think that's very true that the one thing we've got in common is that we have served and that we believe in the Legion and what the Legion does. And beyond that, you know, we're a disparate lot really, but we have that comradeship thing going on, which is quite special... Oh yeah, yeah, because we transcend that. I say to people in the branch, you know, all of us are far more than we ever were in the services. You know, when people say. (Victor/63yrs/Army)

Through the RBL, the men had co-constructed a new identification. Where they were once divided and compartmentalised into different military groups, they subsequently expressed feeling joined together as one united 'in-group' through the RBL. As Henry stated:

'We' are all the same now here in the Legion, it doesn't matter what your background is. Everyone can come along and we welcome that (Henry/80yrs/RAF)

Collectively, participants spoke highly of the RBL and what it represented to them: the group 'family' identity they experienced when employed in the military. The strong comradeship emphasised by Victor above, remains deeply engrained, sedimented and embodied, binding them together in a lived, shared identity. Both national and local RBL groups hold many formal and informal events throughout the year such as the national Poppy Appeal, Armistice Day, Remembrance Sunday, and, in the RBL branch studied, weekly coffee mornings were held. These social gatherings provide opportunities for retired service personnel and their families to meet with other RBL members in a safe, familiar and supportive environment. Whilst participants described interacting with other RBL members face-to-face in the immediate context of the local and county RBL social spaces, they also expressed feeling part of a wider social group of people with a shared military background and socialisation. The importance of this strong social network for our participants, who were all 'older age' ex-servicemen, emerged clearly, as they noted that in older age the prospect of reduced social networks and consequent social isolation loomed large:

I don't think you really appreciate it (social relationships) until you get to our age. Once the children have grown up and moved on then it is just the two of you again. You might see the grandchildren every now and again but the fact is that they have their own lives to live and so it is just you and the wife again. I think that is why the British Legion is good in some respects. Some people who have lost their husbands or wives just come to see people, otherwise they probably wouldn't have a conversation with anybody for weeks. (Henry/80yrs/RAF)

Henry, along with other study participants, described issues of loneliness and social isolation that many older adults face (Friends of the Elderly, 2015), particularly in 'older old age'. Indeed, in modern secular societies the ageing body can be problematised such that groups of older adults are marginalised into sanitised, regulated spaces of care. This can limit the extent and duration of the networks of relationships within which older adults are situated, particularly those stretching beyond such 'aged spaces'. These trends have been outlined in relation to older people's rehabilitation post-illness (Evans and Crust, 2015) and their physical activity (Allen-Collinson et al., 2011; Evans and Sleaf, 2012), for example. Working from a symbolic interactionist perspective, Weiss (2001) argues that, for people to have the ability to experience themselves positively, they need other people. Social isolation and loneliness are related but

are empirically and conceptually distinct in that one can feel lonely even when not socially isolated, and *vice versa* (De Koning et al., 2017). As noted in the above extract, some members of the RBL had lost spouses or long-term partners and, in consequence, there could be a tendency for these people to become lonely and/or socially isolated (see also Windle et al., 2011). Thus, participants perceived the RBL support network to be socially very important and their weekly attendance at the RBL coffee mornings provided, for many, a ritualised interactional routine and context for sociability. Being around people who shared a similar identity provided continuity of social place for many participants. This also facilitated the production of a shared RBL identity that influenced the (re)production and regulation of acceptable behaviours, social norms and core military values (Hockey, 1986).

For all the benefits that involvement in the RBL offered, participants did, however, note problems in recruiting new and younger members. In part they considered this to be due to the younger generation of service personnel's perceptions of the RBL. Alfred expressed the views of many when identifying potential mis-perceptions of the RBL and its role:

We are getting older and we want people to step in and take our place. But we're finding we're getting still older people in it to run it, you know... Because when they did away with National Service... they [younger soldiers] thought that the British Legion was just people that sat round drinking all night and they got the wrong impression. But the youngsters are not really interested today, we can't get them, it's the same whatever you do... And because of this Afghan war that we've had, and the injuries these soldiers received are horrendous and they want looking after, in my opinion. They want looking after, without having to run to the NHS, which has been exhausted at this time, as you know. I think we can perhaps help these soldiers, sailors, airmen, whoever needs our assistance. Yes, and I think that's great. (Alfred/73yrs/RAF)

Above, Alfred emphasises the positive attitudes and openness of his cohort of RBL members in regard to extending their social support network and welcoming new members to the Legion. It is clear, however, that our participants shared relatively similar military experiences as a result of serving their time at a particular historical epoch and for a relatively long time. This creates a strong sense of cohesion within the current RBL group, and may consequently feel exclusionary to new members, potential and actual.

## Conclusion

In this article, we seek to contribute specific insights to sociological research on retirement from the armed forces, in particular focusing on older retired service personnel, and the role played by the RBL as a social support network in older age, when social isolation or loneliness can be encountered. We have drawn analytically on symbolic interactionist theoretical perspectives to explore the experiences of 20 ex-servicemen who were members of the branch of the RBL in a small British city. Key themes emerged from the data, cohering around the multidimensionality of identity, and the relationship between the privileging and ‘stigmatising’ aspects of social identities, and their situational contingency (see Goffman, 1990) or, in Brekhus’ (1998; see also Allen-Collinson, 2006) terms, the relationship between the ‘marked’ and the ‘unmarked’ aspects of identity. Findings revealed the challenges that the retired servicemen faced when negotiating their ‘marked’ social identities in civilian life, and underlined the importance of analysing the interactional context, as participants were found to engage in the active presentation and negotiation of their identities in specific situations, as a form of ‘identity work’ (Allen-Collinson and Hockey, 2007). Thus, participants actively asserted their military identification by wearing military medals and/or badges, for example, when out in public. Applying a symbolic interactionist lens facilitated the analytic exploration of the detail and nuances of these kinds of interactional encounters and the active engagement of our participants in signaling their military background via such materialistic identifications, in addition to vocabularic and associative identification (Allen-Collinson, 2006; Allen-Collinson and Hockey, 2007; Perinbanayagam, 2000). Symbolic interactionist perspectives, including Goffmanesque insights regarding the presentation of self, focused our analytic attention on the ways in which participants strove to construct continuity of a ‘modified military self’.

In terms of social support, participants reflected back on the limited support channels they had available to them when making their transition from the military to retirement. They also expressed concern for service personnel currently serving in the British armed forces who would, participants feared, face similar challenges in exiting the military and re-integrating into civilian life. Participants considered that they themselves would have benefitted from targeted help and support in this challenging transitional and liminal phase. Our symbolic interactionist perspective generated analytic reflection upon the processual and temporal, demonstrating how participants’ present relationships and close bonds with others in the RBL had emerged from past, shared experiences of involvement with the military at a particular epoch in history. RBL

participants thus appeared to be strongly socially inclined towards, and bonded with each other through their past military experiences, feelings of comradeship, and the shared values and norms engendered during their military socialisation and sustained throughout their military careers. They also expressed shared beliefs regarding the benefits and usefulness of the RBL itself in providing a social support network for ex-service personnel and also for their families. The RBL was described as a social space where participants could engage with their former military identities and practices, such as military etiquette, terminology and core military values. RBL members are able to provide social support to fellow retired service personnel and their families particularly effectively, as they share similar military experiences and lifeworlds; social support in the transition phase between leaving the military and entering into retirement was shown to be particularly salient.

From the data, it is evident that the norms, values and social networks, which so closely bound the older RBL men together, have been formed and maintained over a relatively long time-frame. This demonstrates the importance of taking into account both temporal and relational aspects when conceptualising the ageing process and different life-stage transitions. Inevitably, servicemen and servicewomen, at some point in their lives, have to make the transition from military to civilian life - if they survive their service. Thus, to improve the support for retired service personnel, research into post-military support channels (such as the RBL) is needed to explore how transitions to retirement are personally and institutionally managed (Walker, 2012). Finding appropriate ways to support service personnel in the transition-to-retirement phase is viewed widely as a priority for research and public health policy (Cooper et al., 2018). Further research is clearly needed to address some of the questions posed by Godier and colleagues (2017) as to why so many ex-service personnel, including early service leavers, are not actively seeking help when faced with considerable challenges in re-integrating into civilian life. Developing the research in this domain could improve and enhance services such as the RBL, which are designed specifically to support military veterans, their families and dependents (Godier et al., 2017; The Royal British Legion, 2015). As our participants highlighted, there are currently high numbers of former service personnel, injured physically and psychologically in recent conflicts, struggling to live their post-military lives.

Given the small-scale, case-study and exploratory nature of the study, no claims for generalisability or representativeness of our findings are made, or sought, vis-à-vis other occupational groups or indeed the armed forces of other nation-states. Similarities with findings from other research on military exit did, however, become evident in relation to some aspects of our participants' experiences, for example, encountering employment difficulties,

changing social relationship dynamics, and loss of status (see, for example, Cooper et al., 2018; Walker, 2012; Wolpert, 2000). Retirement from the armed forces does appear to generate particular problems for those retiring, including the relatively low age of ‘enforced’ exit, despite many forces personnel being highly physically fit and active. This could generate intense feelings of rejection and resentment as Alfred so poignantly illustrated in saying: ‘You’re just chopped off at the end’. Furthermore, the lack of familiarity with the processes and requirements of civilian life (Higate, 2001), due to long-term enclosure in a ‘total institution’ (Goffman, 1976), also generated specific problems, particularly when retirees encountered hostility from civilians, including potential employers. In this article, we have addressed the identity challenges encountered by those retiring from the UK armed forces having served during a particular epoch; an interesting further direction for research might therefore be cross-cultural comparison, for example with the armed forces of the United States and other ‘Western’ countries, as well as cross-temporal research investigating those serving at different historical periods.

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**Table 1: Participant details**

<b>FG1: RAF</b>	
Richard	73yrs
George	77yrs
Alfred	73yrs
Tom	75yrs
Henry	80yrs
Simon	69yrs
Mathew	88yrs
<b>FG2: Army</b>	
Edward	75yrs
Johnathon	79yrs
Arthur	71yrs
Desmond	74yrs
Calvin	71yrs
Frederick	72yrs
Gilbert	80yrs
<b>FG3: Army</b>	
Harold	80yrs
James	72yrs
Louis	84yrs
Murray	79yrs
Victor	63yrs
Samuel	65yrs