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The reproduction of the gender regime: the military and education as state apparatuses constraining the military wife student

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Abstract

This paper reports on the experiences and perspectives of military wives as students and potential students of Access to Higher Education Diplomas, a qualification for widening participation in HE for ‘non-traditional’ students in the UK – an under-researched topic. Drawing on the theories of Connell (1990) and Butler (2008, 2011) to extend the work of Althusser (1971) on the functioning of the state apparatuses, we argue that for these women, the practices of the military and education system constrain their access to, and progress in, HE, and the gender regime (Connell 1990) is reproduced through institutional structures and practices. The study found that military wives’ own education plays a secondary role to their serving partners’ military careers; that the military promotes their roles as wives and mothers above educational opportunities; and that despite the widening participation agenda, an inflexible HE system further blocks educational opportunities for this group.

Keywords

Military wives; gender regime; Ideological State Apparatuses; Higher Education; Access courses.

Introduction: Military wives and Higher Education

This paper focuses on military wives' experiences of and perspectives on accessing Higher Education (HE). While there is now a body of research on military wives, their experiences of education is an under-researched field in the UK. The study found that through institutional structures and practices in both the UK military and the education system, military wives' access to, and progress in HE was constrained. We draw on the theories of Connell (1990) and Butler (2008, 2011) to extend the work of Althusser (1971) on the functioning of what he referred to as the state apparatuses. These are tools that maintain the current social and economic order, which include both the military and the education system, and we argue that these interact to shape military wives' gendered positioning, reproducing the 'gender regime' (Connell, 1990).

This study of military wives and HE is significant in many ways. Firstly, although it might rightly be argued that more women are going to university than men, the research shows that both the military and HE system promote similar patriarchal ideologies, which reproduce the gender regime and disadvantage this group of women. The study therefore adds more generally to our understanding of the gendered division of labour (Harrison and Laliberte, 1994) and the maintenance of gendered social roles (Cote Hampson et al., 2018). Secondly, it provides a rare analysis of gender issues in the military and HE, which employs the framework of Althusser's (1971) state apparatuses, arguing that this Marxist approach continues to be relevant for understanding contemporary society. Thirdly, it challenges both neoliberal claims that the state is in retreat, and the impression given that universities in particular, but also the military, function somewhat independently of the state: in this study,

we suggest the state remains central to the maintenance of the gender regime. Fourthly, the study has implications for the fulfilment of the UK's Armed Forces Covenant, which pledges that those who serve or have served and their families '...should face no disadvantage compared to other citizens in the provision of public and commercial services.' (Ministry of Defence, 2011), since the research argues that military wives do indeed continue to face specific disadvantage due to the way in which the state apparatuses, the military and the HE system, combine to maintain their gendered position.

Today's military workforce of approximately 150k personnel is a completely volunteer force. Of the approximate 75,000 British military spouses (Ministry of Defence, 2018), over 90% are female and 79% are parents (Ministry of Defence, 2017). With the Army employing about 56% of British military personnel and around a fifth in each of the Navy, Marines and the RAF (Dempsey, 2018), the majority of British military wives are mothers to Army service children.

Research on military wives and education is limited and what exists focuses mainly on the USA (Ott et al., 2018; Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012; Maury & Stone, 2014) with virtually no research conducted in the UK. We do not know what proportion of military wives access Further Education (FE) or Higher Education (HE) in the UK, or what proportion of wives already hold a degree. Nor do we know how many are prevented from accessing education due to challenging circumstances of being a military wife. We do not know how they access information about education, what they choose to study or what shapes their choices, nor about their specific experiences of being a mature student, nor how they combine study with the specific requirements of a military lifestyle. This small, qualitative study provides an insight into some of these issues.

USA research on military spouse students reports that, in 2012, 12.2% and 24.7% of military spouses had an associate or bachelor degree, respectively (Maury & Stone, 2014). When considering motivation for undertaking adult study, Ott et al.'s (2018) study suggested that genuine personal interest was the greatest influence on educational choices and the military lifestyle, the least. In fact, in the USA, military wives form a significant proportion of the increase in non-traditional female students, which has become the fastest growing group in HE (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). This is linked to changes in the 'Post-9/11 GI Bill' (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2019.), in recognition of the contribution that military spouses make to the military institution. It enables military personnel to transfer their unused education-related benefits to their spouse. The US Department of Defense has created the Spouse Education and Career Opportunities Program, which provides education and employment support for military spouses including career guidance (Military OneSource, 2019). Notwithstanding this support, two thirds of this student cohort fail to complete their courses due to a lack of academic support and/or support from those in their personal lives (MacDonald, 2018). USA research has also shown that military spouses face specific challenges in accessing education directly linked to the military lifestyle. These challenges, often not experienced by their civilian counterparts, include frequent relocations of military families (Maury & Stone, 2014; Ott et al., 2018), an expectation on the non-serving spouse to support the career of the serving spouse (Ott et al., 2018), and needing to cope alone with family responsibilities for long periods when the serving spouse is deployed (Harrell et al. 2004).

There is no targeted financial support for UK military spouses to undertake study. Eligible British service personnel have access to funding to contribute towards fees for level 3 and

above qualifications (ELCAS, 2019) and eligible ex-military personnel have access to the publicly-funded FE/HE Scheme (ELCAS, 2019a), which enables them to study degree courses free from tuition fees. However, in the UK, unlike the USA, these education-related benefits are only transferrable to military spouses ‘in the event of the death or medical discharge of a service personnel whose condition renders them unable to utilise their [education benefits]...’ (ibid). Consequently, the majority of UK military spouses only have access to the same, and increasingly limited (Foster, 2016), financial support available to civilian, adult students.

This paper reports on a study of students with a military-affiliated background as military wives, who were either taking, had taken, or were planning to take the Access to Higher Education Diploma (AHED) in the UK. The study was commissioned by the Forces in Mind Trust¹ to shed light on the AHED experiences of (ex)military personnel and their spouses (Macer, 2016) in response to evidence to suggest a decline in AHED students with a military-affiliated background within the South West region of the UK (Stephanie Hulford, Email to author, June 13, 2013). This is particularly significant at a time when numbers of mature students continue to decrease in the UK (UCAS, 2018). The AHED is a level 3 qualification in England for those aged 19 years and over, usually studied at a Further Education Institute (FEI) as a full-time, one-year course. Access courses, such as the AHED, were introduced by the Department of Education and Science in 1987 with the aim of widening participation in HE and increasing social mobility (Busher et al., 2015) for mature, non-traditional students who lack the necessary traditional qualifications to enter a degree course (Busher et al., 2014). The term ‘non-traditional students’ tends to include working class, mature (over 21), minority ethnic, female and part-time students, i.e. those who have traditionally been under-represented in HE, although for some groups this has begun to change, for example, women,

who now enter HE as undergraduates in higher numbers than men. Each year, about 70% of approximately 40,000 AHED students progress to HE (Farmer, 2017), with nursing cited as one of the most popular degree choices for AHED students in 2016-17 (Quality Assurance Agency, 2018). Unique to the AHED, the government-funded Advanced Learner Loan can fund AHED course fees, these are then written off on completion of a subsequent HE course (Education and Skills Funding Agency, 2017), offering the student an AHED qualification free from tuition fees.

The main findings of the original project, reported elsewhere (Macer, 2016, 2018), describe how gaps in information, advice and guidance on AHEDs create military-civilian ‘transition blind spots’ for (ex)service families (Macer, 2018). In this paper, we focus on the specific experiences of the military spouses, all of whom were female.

Mature female students accessing Higher Education

Of the 37,000 Access course students in 2017-18, 73% were female and 46% were over 25 years (Quality Assurance Agency, 2019). This study of military spouses focuses only on females, all of whom were over 21 years and qualify as mature students. The experiences of mature women in FE and HE is quite well researched, although there is less research on AHED courses. Over the last 20 years, a small number of studies have considered these experiences of mature female students (e.g. Reay et al., 2002; Reay, 2003; Brine and Waller, 2007; Busher et al., 2014; 2015). While these studies showed that opportunities were opened up for some female AHED students with them progressing to study at university, the research suggests that this was not the case for everyone, and their journeys were far from straightforward. These previous studies show that mature female students tend to be juggling

a range of multiple and significant commitments and responsibilities besides studying, including paid work, unpaid, domestic work and childcare. The evidence suggests that study for mature women poses a range of difficulties and risks, such as arranging childcare, finding time to study, managing financial problems associated with possible loss of earnings, and running risks to their positions as mothers and wives (Brine and Waller, 2007).

These challenges that female AHED students face are mirrored in research on mature female students in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) as well (e.g. Bowl, 2001; Moreau and Leathwood, 2006; Leathwood, 2006). Similarly, this broader body of research on mature women's experiences of HE focussed on institutional practices and assumptions that continue to disadvantage non-traditional students, despite the widening participation agenda and the fact that, as mentioned above, there are more undergraduate women than men in HE. They argue that HEIs assume that students will be male, young, able-bodied, flexible and unencumbered by domestic or caring responsibilities and thus for mature females, gender inequalities tend to be exacerbated by participation in HE (Reay, 2003; Moreau and Leathwood, 2006). In short, they view students as:

‘...fully responsible for managing the combination of work and study, reflecting discourses of the neo-liberal subject as a self-managing and responsible one. This also echoes common constructions of the student in educational discourse as an autonomous independent learner, a construction which is gendered and culturally specific, with particular implications for students who do not fit with the traditional norm of a young, white, Western, able-bodied, male student’ (Moreau and Leathwood 2006, 33)

The institutions themselves, the research indicates, continue to be inflexible and patriarchal, reluctant to change to become genuinely more inclusive for mature females (Bowl, 2001; David, 2015). One group of students about whom little academic research has been conducted in the UK, is military wives. This study begins to fill this gap.

The military as a gendered institution

As mentioned above, approximately 50% of military personnel are married, and spouses are overwhelmingly female. Traditionally disparagingly referred to as ‘camp followers’, the partners of serving military personnel are a distinct group, dependent upon, but not directly employed by, the military. Scholars have long argued that the military is a gendered institution (e.g. Enloe, 1988, 2000; Woodward and Winter, 2007; Jervis, 2011); that ‘[g]ender is a military issue’ (Woodward and Winter 2007: 3); and that the military itself, as a state institution, is shaped by gendered notions around social positioning in the state:

‘...ideas about gender are implicated in how the national purposes of an armed force are imagined. The values and ideologies that give meaning to military service in the minds of military personnel are shaped by ideas about men’s and women’s position relative to the nation state’ (Woodward and Winter 2007, 5)

Enloe (1988, 2000) argues that the whole institution of the military is infused with a masculine ethos. Women’s feminine roles are typically valued only as they enhance militarised masculinity. Not only is the military culture and its practices shaped by gendered notions, but masculinities and femininities are constituted via military practices (Woodward and Winter, 2007). In this way, the British military, despite recent changes, such as women

being allowed to fight in frontline combat roles, does not differ greatly from other military institutions, and retains a patriarchal attitude towards personnel and their families (Jervis, 2011).

Scholars have also argued that it is through gendering practices and the unpaid work of women - mostly the female partners of military personnel - that war is made possible.

‘The feminized imaginary of “home and hearth” has long been central to the notion of soldiering as masculinist protection. [...] women’s everyday domestic and emotional labor enables reservists to serve, constituting “hearth and home” as a site through which war is made possible. [...]’ (Basham and Cantignani 2018, 153)

The state military apparatus therefore has always relied on the work of women in non-personnel support roles. They are required to provide stability, despite relocations and deployments and other disruptions, to conduct preparations and prepare other family members for disruption, as well as looking after the household and children single-handedly when required (Harrison and Laliberte, 1994; Basham and Cantignani, 2018). For military wives, women’s often unpaid work such as mothering, housework and nurturing the family, becomes essential to the national endeavour (Enloe, 1988, 2000) and the economy (Harrison and Laliberte, 1994). In fact, the military depends on women being supportive of their male partners staying in the armed forces and providing unpaid labour (Jervis, 2011; Hyde, 2015).

As Hochschild (1983) points out, such work is often not recognised as labour, because gendered expectations mean that it is considered ‘natural’ for women to do this unpaid work.

The military needs women and cultural notions of femininity such as ‘patriotic motherhood’ and ‘national sacrifice’ (Enloe, 1988, 2000). Dependent on the feminised notion of self-sacrifice, the military expects that women will single-handedly raise children, look after the household when serving partners are absent, accept their position in the hierarchy, regard relocation as an opportunity rather than a burden (Enloe, 2000; Jervis, 2011). It is precisely because women perform this work, which calls upon feminised notions of self-sacrifice that men are freed up to be deployed for prolonged periods of time (Enloe, 2000).

Equally, within these gendered structures, mothering became essential to national identity and security (Enloe, 1988; Cote Hampson et al., 2018). Cote Hampson et al. (2018) have also argued that the way in which mothering is positioned and represented in the military is key to its contribution to the maintenance of gendered social roles. Research suggests huge peer pressure has traditionally been exerted to encourage wives to be mothers, and similar expectations do not exist of male spouses (Jervis, 2011). There are many reasons for this: some have argued that women become more committed to the military when they have children (ibid); that bringing up the children infused by military ethos, to understand a military life as a natural and normal life, increases the likelihood of those children accepting militarisation and working for the military themselves (Enloe, 2000).

Repressive and ideological state apparatuses and gender

As one of us has argued elsewhere (Chadderton, 2014), when considering the two institutions, the military and education, it is fruitful to refer to the work of Marxist theorist Althusser (1971) on the state apparatuses and their role in the maintenance of dominant social interests. Despite the potential relevance of such an approach to an analysis of gender

issues and the armed forces, other authors have not tended to apply Althusserian approaches. Althusser is employed more often in research which considers the role of the education system in maintaining the neoliberal status quo and representing dominant class interests (e.g. Udas and Stag, 2019), although again, seldom in research on gender issues and education. Besides Chadderton's (2014) previous work, it is also rare to employ Althusser's work to consider the interaction between education and the military. Althusser identifies what he calls Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs), which he argued included the government, the military, the church, the courts and prisons; and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), which included educational, religious, family, legal, political and communications control: all tools that Althusser argued maintained the current social and economic order, although represented as neutral and reflective of society. According to Althusser, the RSAs provide more overt social control, and the ISAs work at a more subconscious level to ensure that the population internalises the dominant social values and remains compliant. However, the two types of state apparatuses are not separate, rather they feed into and sustain each other; ideologies created and promoted by one institution are held up by the others. Furthermore, Althusser argued that all state apparatuses have to a certain extent both a repressive and an ideological function, although the RSAs' primary function is via direct, physical repression and secondary function is ideological, and the ISAs focus primarily on ideology, although can also function in a more direct way. In this study we argue firstly that considering the education of military wives combines the RSA the military and the ISA education and secondly, we focus on the ideological functions of the military and education and show that similar ideologies (in this study, around gender) are promoted by the practices of both. The gendered ideologies upheld by both apparatuses sustain the work of the military RSA. We also argue that although an Althusserian approach might be considered somewhat dated or irrelevant by some, and it may be argued that the importance

of some of the different state apparatuses may have shifted, or in some cases waned, our analysis demonstrates that the military and educational state apparatuses continue to pursue modern versions of their 'old' work in updated institutional forms: the British military and university system.

Althusser's work focuses on the population's internalisation of dominant social values in order to maintain the capitalist relations of production. However, he pays little attention to the gendered nature of these values and the structures that uphold them. Connell (1990) argues that the state apparatuses are part of a wider structure of gendered power and contribute to the institutionalisation of men's domination.

'[M]en's overall social supremacy is embedded in face-to-face settings such as the family and the work-place, generated by the functioning of the economy, reproduced over time by the normal operation of schools, media, and churches.' (Connell 1990, 514)

Connell refers to these institutionalised structures as a 'gender regime', arguing that:

'The state is constituted within gender relations as the central institutionalization of gendered power. Conversely, gender dynamics are a major force constructing the state, both in the historical creation of state structures and in contemporary politics.' (Connell 1990, 519)

She also points out that the state's position in gender relations is not fixed, and is constantly shifting as events occur and society changes. However, the gender regime is perpetuated in

different ways and under shifting conditions. This means that the gender regime is continually recreated by social structures, institutions, practices and acts. Indeed, scholars have shown that gender is neither natural nor fixed, rather it is socially constituted through interactions, acts and practices (e.g. West and Zimmerman, 1987). Judith Butler (2011) has argued that gender is in fact a performative, by which she means it is a hegemonic norm and discourse which has subjectifying force: it creates (perceived) realities, which shape identities, structures, institutions and practices. Gender can be said to function as a performative in that it entails a series of acts, structures and practices which ensure the continued privilege of men (Butler, 2008; see also Chadderton, 2018). Heterosexuality and heterosexual family structures are also privileged via what Butler refers to as the heterosexual matrix, a framework of family relationships that are socially privileged. Butler argues that performatives such as gender and the heterosexual matrix are perceived to be, or even made to be 'real' in some sense, through the accumulation of both explicit and implicit citations of norms. The continual citation of these gendered norms renders them 'real', and creates the illusion of naturalness (Butler, 2008). Gender and heterosexual family structures are therefore still often understood as biological, immutable, 'natural', despite them being increasingly contested in some spheres (e.g. Ringrose, 2013). Equally, women's work continues to be under-valued and the ongoing assumption that it is predominantly women who will provide the caring and domestic labour in our society are notions which are proving very resistant to change (see e.g. Leathwood, 2006). We draw on insights from these social theories to analyse our data on the experiences of military wives accessing HE.

Methodology

This paper reports on a re-analysis of data generated from a wider study (Macer, 2016), to understand the gendered experiences of military wives as students, as explained above. The original study was framed by the concept of an ‘AHED student journey’ i.e. from awareness of AHED to engaging with AHED sector to experience as AHED student.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a convenience sample of (ex)military spouses, who were recruited to the study through an advertising campaign involving Access Validating Agencies, AHED providers, universities and military charities. All spouses were female, although the recruitment was also open to male, non-serving spouses. The majority of the semi-structured interviews were face-to-face although, due to logistics, two interviews were carried out by telephone. It emerged during the interviews that these participants were keen to speak because they felt that their voices as military wives had gone unheard and they welcomed the opportunity for their stories to be told for the benefit of their peers.

The interviews included:

- 15 past, current and potential AHED students with a background as a military wife in the Army, Navy and Royal Air Force (RAF).

(Table 1: Profile of student interviewees TO GO NEAR HERE)

- 3 AHED Co-ordinators (civilian professionals), each from an area with a local Army, Navy or RAF base, were recruited through Access Validating Agencies; and
- 30 military-facing, Career Information, Advice and/or Guidance (C-IAG) professionals (whose clients had a military background; invited to participate in the study

through military charities) and civilian-facing, C-IAG professionals (civilian clients, invited to participate through FEIs that delivered AHEDs).

Although recruitment was open to all military spouses, participants were wives whose partners had reached the rank of Officer or above. The profile of the military wives recruited was not representative of the military's social class division i.e. the military ranking structure. However, social class was not considered specifically as part of this analysis because further background data was not collected, in accordance with the funder's agreement.

Interviews conducted with civilian and military professionals covered topics such as: Career Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG); AHED-related IAG; links with FEIs and/or HEIs; military–civilian professional links; support for education; and AHED students with a military affiliation. Interviews conducted with past, current and potential AHED students covered topics such as: career aspirations; access to career IAG; support for education; promotion of AHED; AHED-related IAG; support for AHED journey; and challenges to the AHED journey.

The findings presented in this paper relate to a re-analysis of the original data through a gendered lens, as it emerged during the original study's initial analysis that gender was a major theme for service spouses and deserved further analysis. We addressed the following questions: What motivates military wives to undertake an AHED qualification? How do they access information, advice and guidance about further study and qualifications? How supportive do they perceive the military to be of their studies? Does the completion of the AHED actually lead to military spouses continuing to HE? What role does gender play in

these processes? The data was then analysed thematically drawing on the work of Althusser, Connell and Butler, as explained above.

Findings

In this section, we argue that the state apparatuses, the military and education, interact to shape military wives' gendered positioning and the related challenges they experience as adult learners. We contend that these military wives' educational decisions are shaped by the role to which they are allocated by the military; that their education plays a secondary role to their serving partners' careers; that the military promotes their roles as wife and mother above educational opportunities; and that the inflexibility of the HE system further blocks educational opportunities, making it difficult for military wives to continue to HE.

Education choices shaped by military role

Our data suggests that participants' role as a military wives strongly shapes their educational decisions, providing their motivation for further study. This is distinct from other non-traditional students, where in the main, evidence suggests that they undertake further study for other reasons, such as personal interest (e.g. Reay, 2003). Many participants in this study talked about the need to equip themselves to be able to support their family's unknown future during life after the military. Several also discussed their concerns about the uncertainty surrounding the future civilian careers of their male, serving spouses.

...my Access got me into university, so when he does finally leave, at least one of us will be on a steady good wage until he decides what he wants to do. [Current RAF Spouse/3]

Two participants mentioned that due to injuries sustained by their partners during service, they were now trying to secure their own careers because they had been unable to do so previously while their partners were serving. Their motivation was to equip themselves to become the main earners and able to support their families when they transitioned back into the civilian world.

...my decision to do the Access course was triggered by my husband's injury... because he has PTSD... I thought that if [X] couldn't earn, I would always be able to cover it... I had to start thinking about a different future after he was injured... [Past Army Spouse]

Several stakeholder professionals interviewed mentioned the known benefits of a smoother military-civilian transition for the whole family when the spouse has civilian employment (Forces in Mind Trust, 2013).

...it's going to have less of an impact on society if the non-serving spouse can get into employment easily... if you're no longer in this military bubble... it's going to be so much easier for the whole family to transition to civilian life. [Service Family Federation/1]

Stakeholder professionals cited nursing as a favoured career route for military wives because it offers them a portable career to accommodate their mobile military family lives. The majority of wives interviewed were indeed following a route into a nursing career through an NHS-funded degree.

...our Access into nursing and healthcare professions is very popular... with [military] spouses... [Access Co-ordinator/2]

...nursing is very popular with... spouses. ...because you can take nursing with you when you move. [Service Family Federation/2]

Again, this suggests that decisions about what to study are shaped by their roles as military wives, which required them to be mobile and flexible. Furthermore, nursing is a gendered choice of career, associated with notions of femininity including nurturing and caring. This data suggests that the military wives in this study were seeking study routes that would still allow them to support the military to a certain extent, and would not challenge the ‘masculine ethos’ (Enloe, 1988, 2000) of the military.

Self-sacrifice: Wives’ careers as secondary

Many participants told us that the serving spouse’s career in the military is prioritised by the military over any career their non-serving wife may follow. For example, wives mentioned needing information and professional advice to guide their education and career decision-making. However, some pointed out that they did not know where to go to get this support, indicating that they were only aware of the career IAG provided by the military to serving

personnel, suggesting that their careers were positioned by the military as secondary to those of their serving spouses.

Whereas the soldier has all the advice on hand, the spouse has none of that and when they've been out of work for 10 years, following their soldier around... [it's] crucial for them... [Service Family Federation/1]

Current and ex-military personnel have reported that AHEDs appear to be poorly promoted (see also Macer, 2018), suggesting that such information and advice is not prioritised by the military. It is worth mentioning that there has been a long history of poor promotion of AHEDs to the general public (Crichton and Pettit, 2008), although provision by the Quality Assurance Agency of a dedicated website² aims to fill gaps in information and guidance on AHEDs.

Word-of-mouth seems to be our strongest tool... I know it is in most places... [Access Co-ordinator/1]

... there are so many wives here saying that they want to be nurses, midwives, whatever but they just don't know about the Access course. [Current RAF Spouse/2].

Some interviewees described how the provision of career IAG to military wives had appeared to reduce in recent years. There seemed to be more support available to British wives living on military bases overseas, compared to that available in the UK.

I've been married to my husband for like 18 years and I've noticed a massive change in terms of what's available and promoted to spouses... compared to years ago... basically, it's gone to nothing... [Current Army Spouse/1]

Overseas seem to be a lot better at helping spouses with their education... they have an Open University clerk and civilian courses, all available to a spouse posted overseas... but not in the UK... [Current RAF Spouse/1]

Interviewees suggested that the cost of HE is a deterrent to many military wives. Neither the military nor the Government offers bespoke financial support for military spouses' education, suggesting that there is little recognition of the career sacrifices the spouses make while supporting the military careers of their partners.

...there were no funds to help spouses at college... yet I had given up my career so that he can have one... [Current Navy Spouse]

...the most frequently asked question I have from spouses ...about adult education³, is to do with funding. ...we get asked -, can we have access to those resettlement credits? [Service Family Federation/1]

...it would be helpful if their spouses could be classed as a special type of person who can access particular funding because of their military situation... and the sacrifices they make to their education and careers... [College Career Advisor/2]

I don't know why the MOD won't allow the transfer of the serving Personnel's [education-related funding benefits] to the spouse, particularly if the spouse has to become the main breadwinner... the transfer conditions are very narrow... I'd like to see it transferable in all cases... [Help for Heroes Career Advisor]

Indeed, this data infers that there appears to be little interest from the military in supporting the vocational preparation of the supporting wife to become the main breadwinner, an arrangement that could be considered disruptive to traditional gender roles and the notion of the male as provider. The data in this section supports previous research, which suggests that the military depends on women's unpaid work in supporting it to make war possible (Enloe, 1988, 2000; Harrison and Laliberte, 1994; Jervis, 2011), and benefits from not providing support for their HE, which might compromise the support they provide to the military.

Wife and mother role promoted

HIVES are the British military's bespoke family resource centres. They provide a physical hub within and for military communities and offer a wide range of information and advice for military families. However, some interviewees felt that the HIVES focussed primarily on issues relating to housing and schooling, promoting the spouse's role as wife and mother above access to HE.

What frustrates me, quite a lot ... although we can disseminate anything, 80% is about housing... we could be signposting to adult education much more... [HIVE Officer]

I used to work in a HIVE in Germany... they could give out information on things like careers and adult education. I think the HIVEs today could be offering more than they do... [Current Army Spouse/1]

Participants mentioned that local information about post-16 education appeared to be directed at service children rather than the needs of the military wife adult learner.

...there was definitely information about local colleges [in the Welcome Packs] ... but it wasn't aimed at the spouses, it was aimed at like older children... [Current RAF Spouse/2]

Fourteen of the fifteen wives interviewed were mothers. When partners are absent on military duties or deployment, non-serving wives experience extended periods of lone parenting. The military community's frequent geographical isolation from family networks means that non-serving wives find it difficult to call on family members as a resource for childcare needs. However, the lack of affordable, quality childcare on or near military communities suggests the military simply expects the wife to provide parenting duties as part of the support that they provide to the military.

...the biggest thing that really differs us from civilians, in my opinion, is the fact that we just have to take the hit when our partners go away for six months. ...you have to become everything... and trying to study as well... it's impossible. [Current Navy Spouse]

I am worried that... if he gets posted away... I'd have to sort of try and juggle the course with four kids on my own... we don't have any family nearby to help out...
[Current Army Spouse/2]

This section supports previous studies, which argue that the way in which mothering is positioned in the military is key to its contribution to the maintenance of the gendered social roles it continues to depend upon for its survival (e.g. Cote Hampson et al., 2018).

Inflexible HEIs

Our data implies that the specific circumstances faced by military wives when accessing education opportunities tended not to be recognised by HEIs. Two main issues were highlighted: first, the impact of the mobile military lifestyle, and secondly, the requirement for university applicants in the UK to evidence 'recent study' to be accepted onto a degree course, increasingly defined by UK universities as within the past 3-5 years.

Several interviewees explained how they had to select university courses based on a best guess as to where their family may be stationed in the near future.

I didn't want to have that conversation with the university about the possibility of having to relocate because I thought it would lessen my chances of getting in.
[Current RAF Spouse/3]

One described feeling disempowered because she felt unable to discuss this dilemma with a university for fear of it jeopardising her application.

One problem that service spouses have is they're very restricted to where they can apply to university. I've got someone I saw last week who... applied to five universities, based on a best guess of where they might be stationed next... that's impossible to plan for... [College Career Advisor/1]

Although there is no official time limit on the validity of an AHED qualification, there are implications for those students who fail to progress on to an HE course within a time limit that evidences 'recent study'. Two participants in this study described how their highly mobile military lives had prevented them progressing from their AHED on to a degree course within this HE-imposed time limit.

Unfortunately, I haven't been able to get to university yet... the limitations of our lifestyle... it's very, very difficult for me to know where we are going to be living... It would be really helpful if there was some understanding by the universities that, through no fault of our own, you may not be able to find a university place within the time limit of your Access qualification. [Current Army Spouse/2]

...because we did more than five years overseas, I've got to go all the way back to the beginning, do an(other) Access course because I've got to prove my recent study... because the military posted us overseas... I lost everything. [Current RAF Spouse/1]

This lack of flexibility by the HEIs around the particular needs of these female students appears to be further disadvantaging them. This final section concurs with other research on HE, in which it is argued that despite more women now gaining degrees than men,

universities continue to disadvantage mature females by continuing to be structured to suit students, usually men, without external responsibilities (Reay, 2003; Moreau and Leathwood, 2006).

Discussion: The repressive state apparatuses and the gendered positioning of military wives

In this paper, we argue that the interaction between the ideological functions of state apparatuses, the military and education, contributes to the ongoing functioning of the patriarchal gender regime (Connell, 1990) which institutionalises the social and educational disadvantage, specifically that of military wives researched in this study. As suggested by Althusser (1971), these two types of state apparatus do not function separately, rather they both promote similar patriarchal ideologies via their practices, which maintain the dominance of men and masculine subjects. Through this study, we have contributed important insights into the ways in which the gender regime is maintained: both the gendered division of labour and gendered social roles, in this case via the interaction of military and educational practices. In fact, practices around military wives, where both the military and the education system constitute wives and their education and careers as secondary to that of their serving partners, reproduce traditional gender hierarchies by a continual citing of gendered norms (Butler, 2011).

We argue first, that for the interviewees in this study, wives' educational aspirations and decisions are shaped by their (unpaid and unofficial) military role. The participants were generally seeking education opportunities to be able to attain a career with which they could support their families. This aim, to provide for their families' futures, was not supported by

the military; rather the military actively promoted their feminised support role of self-sacrifice, prioritised their role as wife or mother and failed to provide a lack of advice and guidance on educational options. These practices potentially thwart these women's efforts to re-educate themselves and, if necessary, become the family breadwinner, something that would potentially disrupt patriarchal gender relations. The participants in the study mentioned that the most common aspiration or career choice was nursing, itself a feminised profession, thus to a certain extent this would allow military wives to continue in their support role for the military by enabling them to be flexible, but also does not threaten their gendered identities. Jervis (2011) argues that

‘the military’s gendered expectations of wives have become more subtle [...] which means that women often perceive their continuing compliance with the support roles traditionally assigned to them as their personal “choice”’ (p.5)

Secondly, we argue that the practices of the military ensure that non-serving spouses’ careers are secondary in importance to that of their serving spouses. As non-serving spouses are mostly female, (and in this study the participants were all female), this has implications for the fuelling of patriarchal social relations and gendered positioning in society in general. This is reproduced in the military, as a gendered institution with a masculine ethos, where women’s careers are positioned as secondary to men’s (Harrison and Laliberte, 1994), their roles only valued when they enhance militarised masculinity (Enloe, 2000). Thus gendered identities are both performatively constituted through military cultural practices (Woodward and Winter, 2007) and the military is gendered via its cultural practices, which continually cite gender norms (Butler, 2011).

Thirdly, the data suggests that the military spouse's role as wife and mother is promoted above access to education. As others have argued (Jervis; 2011; Enloe, 2000), these feminised roles are indeed the most important to the military, as this unpaid work allows service personnel to perform their work. Women accessing education might distract them from these roles, as their time would be spent in study, and then potentially in a career that could compete with their role as feminised military support. As argued above, other research on mature women in HE suggests that women's positions as mother and wife can be perceived by others in their family and community as threatened by their undertaking studies (Brine and Waller, 2007). Thus the military's active support for their role as wife and mother and lack of support for career advice, reproduces traditional gender roles within the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 2008) and, as others have argued, the way in which mothering is positioned by the military is a key contribution to the division of gendered social and labour roles (Cote Hampson et al., 2018)

These first three points suggest that military practices ensure that women's unpaid labour is available to them to maintain the continued functioning of the RSA, the military. This of course, is precisely the purpose of the ideology promoted by the state apparatus: the maintenance of the status quo and current social arrangements (Althusser, 1971).

Lastly, the data suggests that HEIs are inflexible around educational access for military wives. In this way, these students are potentially precluded from further study due both to their situation as military wives, and also by the HE system which does not acknowledge their specific situation. Military wives seeking to enter a UK university through the AHED route not only risk having their career progression plans halted if they are unable to progress on to HE study, they also risk losing out on free tuition for AHEDs that have been funded

using the Government-funded Advanced Learner Loan. As explained, the constraints of their military life – mobility and/or extended periods of lone mothering – may mean that an individual is unable to secure a place on an HE course within the university-stipulated time limit for evidence of ‘recent study’. As a consequence, these military wives have to pick up the cost of their AHED course tuition fees, because they will not have met the requirements that enables them to have their AHED loan written off – i.e. completion of an HE course (Education and Skills Funding Agency, 2017). This extends recent research, which argues that despite the appearance of separation of the university from direct intellectual control of the state, universities continue to function as an ISA by generally reproducing the relations of production (Udas and Stagg, 2019) - in this case, we argue, this is a gendered process.

Conclusion

In this paper, focussing on the under-researched area of military wives and education in the UK, we have argued that the state apparatuses of the military and the education system interact to disadvantage military wives who want to undertake higher study and, in doing so, reproduce the gender regime. This study found that military wives’ educational aspirations and decisions are shaped by their military role; that their education plays a secondary role to their serving partners’ military careers; that the military promotes their roles as wife and mother above educational opportunities; and that the HE system remains inflexible and thus further blocks educational opportunities. The findings from this study therefore support other research on mature female students, which argue that despite widening participation agendas, HEIs continue to disadvantage these students and reproduce patriarchal structures. These state apparatuses therefore interact to position wives in a position of dependency and self-sacrifice, traditionally regarded as ‘natural’ positions for women in society. Through their

normal operating practices, these state apparatuses are institutionally reproducing the gender regime (Connell, 1990).

There is a growing call in the UK (Lyonette et al., 2018; Caddick et al., 2018; Centre for Social Justice, 2016) for this distinct student cohort to have access to specific solutions to mitigate the particular, gendered challenges they face – or have faced - as a member of a military family. Such action would support a key tenet of the UK’s Armed Forces Covenant, launched in 2012 as a promise from the nation to those who serve or have served and their families, that they “...should face no disadvantage compared to other citizens in the provision of public and commercial services.” (Ministry of Defence, 2011). A recent study (Shared Intelligence and National Centre for Social Research, 2019) found that only 8% of public and commercial services, including colleges and universities, are signatories and that a main barrier to organisations signing the Covenant is their lack of knowledge about the disadvantages facing members of the Armed Forces Community. This study suggests that if this promise is to be fulfilled, the UK government will need to recognise the specific ways in which the gender regime is maintained by both the military and HE system - otherwise its impact will be limited.

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Declaration of interest statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors

Notes

1. Forces in Mind Trust www.fim-trust.org
2. www.accesstohe.ac.uk
3. When interviewees talk about 'adult education' they are referring to HE.

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Table 1

Profile of interviewees [all female; 14/15 were mothers]

		Past AHED student	Current AHED student	Potential AHED student
Army spouse	Current	2	1	1
	Ex	1	1	1
Navy spouse	Current	1	1	0
	Ex	0	0	0
RAF spouse	Current	1	3	1
	Ex	1	0	0