

Negotiating Military and Family Life

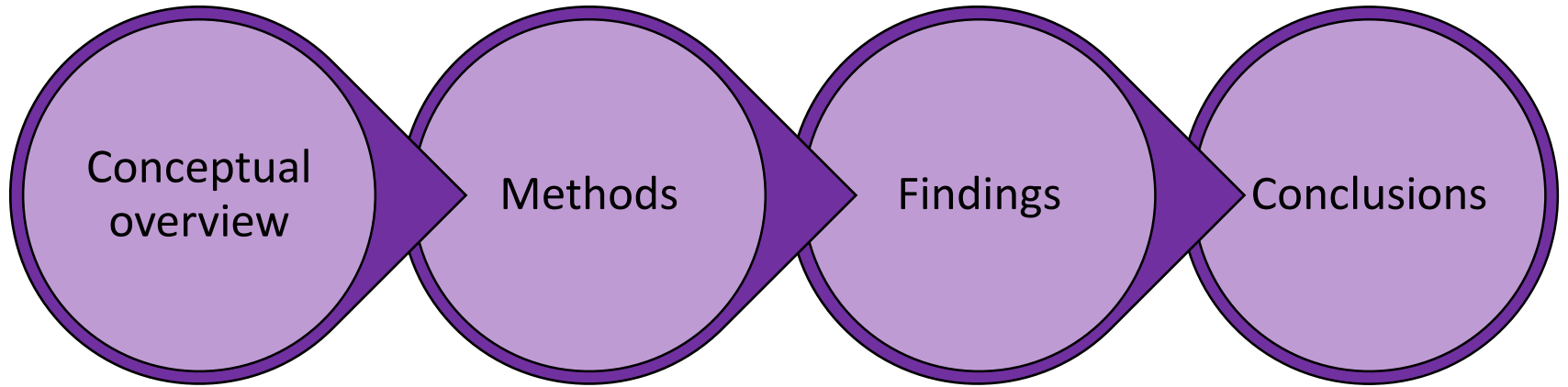
Zoe Morrison

Sarah Cunningham-Burley

Scott Tindal

Vince Connelly

Overview



Conceptual overview of the theme

- Reserve service does not sit in isolation: it interacts and intersects with all other aspects of Reservists' lives (family, friends, civilian work, etc.).
- Sustaining Reservist commitment over the long term requires ongoing emotional and practical support, particularly from the family.
- Accruing/ maintaining family support requires negotiating competing demands and expectations between family life and Reservist commitment.
- These negotiations are not a 'one off' event, they are constant and dynamic, shifting across the lifecycle.



Methods

- The following analysis is based on interviews with 75 Reservists and 24 spouses/partners of Reservists.
- Smaller number of interviews with spouses/partners interviewed:
 - Unwillingness of Reservists to include family members in research relating to their Reserve service. This reflects a wider strategy where Reservists keep their family and military lives separate.
 - Many spouses/partners do not see themselves as part of a 'military family'.
- Reservist families are a 'hidden population'.
- Those we spoke to were frank and open in discussing sensitive issues that affected them and their families.

Findings

The Reservist is exposed to diverse views of Reserve service by family members

“My mum and dad came to my passing out parade, they thought it was the best thing.”

Jayne, Army Reserves.



“My parents are very proud of what I do, [they] find it all fascinating ... They just think it’s fascinating, and they’re very proud as well, and like to hear the stories.”

Catherine, Royal Navy Reserves.



Reservists’ views of parental support

The Reservist is exposed to diverse views of Reserve service by family members

“I don’t think he [my dad] appreciated my reasons for going on the first tour. He felt it was a massively selfish thing to do. How volunteering to put your life on the line is selfish is quite beyond me, but there you go that was his point of view of it and I don’t think he understood where I was coming from frankly. We didn’t speak for a few weeks.”

Henry, Army Reserves.



Reservists’ view of parental support

The Reservist is exposed to diverse views of Reserve service by family members

“If he’s not happy, the whole house would be unhappy and that’s kind of how men are... he loves it, and if you can support that then your marriage is going to work”

Emily, married to an Army Reservist.



Spouses / partners view of Reserve service

“My wife didn’t really think much about it and she wasn’t particularly pleased when I did join, but then she soon became used to it. She’s quite happy with it now ... well, she’s just used to it. She doesn’t particularly like me going away for my two weeks training, but she’s become used to it, and it’s just normal now.”

Bruce, Royal Navy Reservist



Reservist’s views of their partner’s support of Reserve service

Care for dependents is a challenge, gendered, and changes over time

- Care responsibilities may increase/ decrease over the lifecourse, with implications for their capacity to commit to the Reserves at different stages of their lives.

“Things have changed, my weekends are different now, the kids are much more independent. It’s different from having an 18-month-old and a 3-year-old that need you constantly. [Now they are both teenagers which] doesn’t put so much pressure on me when he’s away at a weekend”
Sophie, married to an Army Reservist.

“When I joined I had more commitment: I could basically go away and do lots of things. And then as your civilian life changes you’re able to put less time into the Reserves because you’ve got other commitments. [But] as my kids grew up my commitment has just gone through the roof. I’m doing more time than I’ve done in a long, long time but during that period somewhere between it was definitely a juggling act.”

Robert, Army Reservist



Spouse’s view of childcare provision across the lifecourse



Reservist’s view of childcare provision across the lifecourse.

Care for dependents is a challenge, gendered, and changes over time

- Tacit assumption that dependent care was the domain of women, regardless if they were the Reservist or not.
- Female Reservists were often responsible for organising childcare when they were away with the Reserves, while female partners of Reservists often shaped their work and hobbies around the Reservists' military-related absences from the home.

“It was more my responsibility of sorting out the children... My commitments often at a weekend would be orientated around whether he was away or not. If I had to do something and he was away, then I wouldn't do it.”

Felicity, married to an army Reservist



Female spouse's view of childcare provision

“[in looking after the children] we've always had plan A, plan B, plan C. So plan A is each other. Plan B is our close family and plan C is our further family or friends. So we've always done that.”

Freya, Army Reservist



Female Reservist's view of childcare provision

Negotiating absence from the family

- Reservists' transitions between presence/absence from the family relies on carefully negotiated settlements:
 - Using annual leave from their civilian work to fulfil their Reserve commitment, losing 'family time' in the process.
 - Using military pay as a negotiating strategy: their absence in the family now will be recompensed with tangible rewards later.
 - Referring to their Reserve service as 'employment'. Doing so legitimises their absence from the home because they frame their service as 'providing for the family'.
- Carefully negotiated settlements can be disrupted by changes in circumstance, e.g. the birth of a child, illness in the family, new civilian job, new military job.

Some Reservists prioritise their military service over forming or maintaining relationships.

- Many women did not think they would be able to maintain their degree of commitment to the military and a serious relationship simultaneously .

“I’m not actively looking for anybody [...] I don’t think that the set of circumstances I am in now really lends itself to a relationship [...]. I don’t think I would be doing this [Reservist service] as a female at this age if I was in any sort of relationship”
(Catriona, Army Reservist)

“he said he was fully supportive but then was a bit funny about me spending my weekends with sailors and marines; just, I think, jealousy. [He] was a bit jealous and things - so if you bring marine sailors into the mix...”
Roxanne, Royal Navy Reservist



Views of single female Reservists

Some Reservists prioritise their military service over forming or maintaining relationships.

- Some of the younger male Reservists (18-25) were highly dedicated to their Reserve commitment, often choosing not to get involved in any serious romantic relationships in order to concentrate on their military service.

“No girlfriend or anything - just don’t care [about that]. The weeks flew by when I was going through training. The only thing I was thinking about was ‘I’ve got two weeks until the next weekend. I’ve got three weeks until the next weekend’ and I was planning my training and just cracking on with it.”

Alistair (22), Royal Marine Reserves



View of a young male Reservist

Conclusions

- Reservist families may need different forms of engagement with Units, or may chose not to engage with military, or may not be invited into military life;
- Family support cannot be taken for granted;
- Carer responsibilities may impact on readiness to serve;
- Influence of gender on support available to Reservists;
- It is not always family first: long term implications of this are not known;
- Reservist families are different from normative views of 'the military family'.