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Making the transition: How finding a good job is a risky business for military veterans in Northern Ireland

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Public significant Statement

This research brings important new insights about the transition from military to civilian life among Northern Ireland veterans; something which has been lacking in the literature until now. It highlights how concern for personal safety can be a barrier to finding meaningful work, and ensuring their longer term health and well-being.

Data Accessibility Statement: The data is held in a secure repository at Queens University Belfast Psychology Department and a Supplementary Data File containing some further data may be made available. Interested researchers should initially contact Professor Cherie Armour, at Queens University, Belfast.

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Abstract

Veterans transitioning from the military to civilian life may encounter difficulties in different domains of functioning. Most research in this area comes from the US and Israel, with veterans in Northern Ireland (NI) in the United Kingdom, remaining an understudied population. This qualitative study aimed to examine the nature of transition experiences of NI veterans by analysing responses (N =252) to an open-ended question related to the transition process, in a self-report survey. Thematic analysis highlighted both positive and negative experiences across high level themes. These were related to (1a) how good the military life had been, (1b) the transition had been easy for some veterans, and (1c) the skills gained in the military have been valuable; (2) it was hard to adjust to civilian life/still adjusting; (3) negative employment experiences; (4) lack of trust; (5) transitioning is hard in NI; and (6) inadequate support, post-service. The findings highlight that NI veterans share some of the same challenges as other veterans, however the challenges in NI are compounded by ongoing security concerns and political tensions, which means living under the radar is a reality for many, making finding meaningful work and community integration difficult. The findings indicate that preparation for civilian life and the acculturation process needs to start many months before discharge. Perhaps more crucially, regiments should work closely with and support civilian employers to equip them to recognise and value the skills ex-Services veterans can offer, and find a good fit for their skills within their organisations.

Key words: Military veterans; Northern Ireland; Transition; Employment; Security; Psychological Well-being.

54 **Introduction**

55 Transition from the military to civilian life is a relatively trouble free experience for
56 many who have served in the Armed Forces. However, it can be a daunting and stressful
57 process for a proportion of service leavers. Leaving behind the structure of military existence,
58 military culture, and comradeship to navigate a civilian life in of itself, poses numerous
59 challenges. Despite the fact that the majority of service leavers do not leave with physical
60 injuries or mental health problems, many will have functioning issues that make reintegration
61 difficult. In a 2008 survey conducted with a representative sample of 754 US Iraq/Afghanistan
62 combat veterans (Sayer, Noorbaloochi, Frazier, Carlson,Gravely & Murdoch, 2010), it was
63 found that despite already receiving Veteran Health Administration (VA) medical care, 96%
64 of veterans expressed interest in receiving support in other domains of reintegration into
65 civilian life.

66 Approximately half of the UK veteran population are over 75 years of age (MoD, 2019)
67 and while mental health problems do not present during or soon after transition, it has been
68 found that many veterans will begin to re-visit and process events from their combat
69 experiences which has been called Later-Adulthood Trauma Reengagement (LATR) and
70 social and emotional support may prove invaluable (Marinia, Fioria, Wilmoth, Kaiser, &
71 Martiree (2019). For those military personnel of working age, adjusting to civilian working
72 practices and culture can be hard (e.g. Ahern, Worthen, Masters, Lippman, & Ozer, 2015;
73 Redmond, Wilcox, Campbell, Kim, Finney, & Barr, 2015). The most frequently reported
74 needs were information on civilian life skills, such as; benefits, schooling, employment and
75 job training. Additionally, between 25% - 56% of veterans reported experiencing ‘some’ to
76 ‘extreme’ difficulty in several domains of functioning, including productivity, community
77 involvement, social functioning and self-care (Sayer et al., 2010). Numerous studies have

78 reported that physical and mental health problems can make it more difficult for veterans
79 finding work as they face difficulties related to interpersonal functioning, community
80 involvement, employment, and some may become homeless (Karstoft, Armour, Andersen,
81 Bertelsen, & Madsen, 2015; Kukla, Rattray, & Salyers, 2015; Sayer, Carlson, & Frazier,
82 2014). Indeed, as argued by Kukla et al., (2015), *"reintegration after leaving the military*
83 *involves multiple transitions that must be managed simultaneously" (p.487).*

84 The social needs of transitioning military personnel are therefore of increasing interest
85 to the research community and their growing importance is reflected in the creation of a Well-
86 Being Inventory of Veteran Transitions (Vogt, Tyrell, Bramande, Taverna, et al., 2020). The
87 emphasis here is placed not just on the importance of financial, mental and physical health on
88 well-being, but also on social satisfaction, gained through community integration and
89 acceptance, and finding meaningful employment. A study applying the inventory to US
90 veterans in their first year of transition, found concerns about a range of chronic health
91 conditions, but also that they were experiencing good vocational and social well-being (Vogt,
92 Taverna, Nillni, Booth, Perkins, & Copeland, 2020).

93 The extant literature on veterans' transitioning has focused on health, particularly
94 mental health, and has come predominantly from the US (e.g. Kukla et al., 2015; Redmond,
95 et al., 2015; Sayer et al., 2010), and also Israel (e.g. Tsur, Stein, Levin, Seigal & Solomon,
96 2019). In some ways, the Israeli veteran experience is similar to NI veteran experiences in
97 that Israelis live very close, or within their theatre of war. But where they differ is that Israeli-
98 Palestinian conflict overtly continues. Also military service is mandatory in Israel, and many
99 are called to serve a number of times up to the age of 45 (Lander, Huss & Harel-Sharev, 2019).
100 What perhaps makes them unique, is that they move in and out of civilian and military life
101 over many years, and have to manage dual identities (Lander, et al., 2019).

102 In recent years, the multi-faceted nature of veterans' transition difficulties has received
103 increasing attention in the United Kingdom. Recent insights include a UK study which
104 revealed lower-ranked personnel may need particular help with finding employment (Burdett,
105 Fear, MacManus, Wessely, & Rona, et al., 2019) and early service leavers may be in more
106 need of mental health support (Buckman, Forbes, Clayton, Jones, Jones, et al., 2019).
107 Additional employment-focused support to service leavers may be particularly useful to
108 lower-ranked personnel and those leaving in an unplanned way. According to the Royal
109 British Legion Household Survey (2014) there are 2.8 million people within the ex-Service
110 community in the UK, and the majority live in England, and 64% are over 65 years of age. In
111 the 2018/19 financial year alone, 14,633 individuals left the UK Regular Forces (Dempsey,
112 2019), some of whom chose to settle in NI (exact number is unknown). While a number of
113 studies about UK veterans continue to emerge in recent years (e.g. Engelbrecht, Burdett,
114 Silva, Bhui, & Jones, 2019; Iverson, Fear, Simonoff, Hull, Horn, et al., 2007; Williamson,
115 Greenberg, & Murphy, 2019), the majority of samples are drawn from England, or are
116 reported as UK participants. Consequently, little is understood about how health and well-
117 being may differ across the four nations (Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland).
118 Research evidence is slowly growing and insights from Murphy, Ross, Busuttil, Greenberg
119 and Armour (2019) about UK veteran mental health, found that NI help-seeking veterans
120 represented 22% of their UK sample, despite NI veterans representing a small proportion of
121 the veteran population of the UK, suggesting higher need. Also, Ashwick and Murphy (2017)
122 discovered that Northern Irish veterans tended to be older, in poorer physical health and took
123 longer to seek help, compared to veterans from the other three nations. We know from a study
124 by Brewin Andrews and Hejdenberg (2012) that psychological problems and PTSD were
125 found to still be present 10 years after the original diagnosis among UK war pensioners.

Because of the paucity of research into the experiences of NI veterans compared to the rest of the UK, the Forces in Mind Trust funded a four-year programme of research into the health and well-being of NI veterans which has resulted so far in detailed initial scoping work and reports. These reports included a scoping review of their current and future needs (Armour, Waterhouse-Bradley, Walker, Hall, & Ross, 2017b); the existing support services available (Armour, Waterhouse-Bradley, Walker, & Ross, 2017) and public attitudes to NI veterans (Armour, Ross, McLafferty, & Hall, 2018). An Armed Forces Continuous Attitude Survey (Ministry of Defence (MOD), 2017) had reported that only 41% of Service personnel felt they were valued by society. The Public Attitudes towards NI veterans (Armour et al., 2018) was deemed particularly important, because there was a perception that public attitudes towards ex-Service veterans in NI may be very low, due because of the legacy of the Northern Ireland Conflict. This conflict resulted in the deployment of the UK Armed Forces (Operation Banner: 1969–2007). During Operation Banner, more than 300,000 soldiers served in Northern Ireland. And at the height of the Troubles in the 1970s, about 21,000 British troops were deployed, most of them coming from regiments from mainland UK. Home Service personnel formed The Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR) in 1970 and remained until 1992. During the conflict, attempts by Republican paramilitary organisations to reunite Ireland, involved attacks on the security forces, and bombings of civilians. But it also resulted in many sectarian killings, and as a consequence, over 3500 people lost their lives. However, the Good Friday Agreement played a significant role in a move towards peace, with the agreement essentially predicated upon the condition that Ireland would only be reunited if the majority of the people in Ireland consented to it. It was not until 2005 that a ceasefire and disarmament took place, and Operation Banner ended in 2007. Many military personnel from GB regiments chose to return to NI, and live in their former operational theatre.

150 Key findings about public attitudes collected in the NILT Survey (Armour, et al., 151 2018) revealed that 13% of Catholic communities had a high or very high opinion of the 152 Armed Forces today, compared to 71% of Protestants. When asked about the Armed Forces 153 who had served in NI, 2% of Protestants and 34% of Catholics indicated that they felt more 154 negatively about the members of the UK Armed Forces who served in NI. When asked how 155 they would feel if someone from the Armed Forces moving next door to them, 30% of 156 Catholics indicated that they would be uncomfortable or very uncomfortable with the 157 situation, compared 15% of protestants.

158 A great deal of progress being made since the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. This 159 includes the formation of a power-sharing legislative assembly that has devolved government 160 responsibilities. The two largest parties with equal representation on the Assembly are the 161 DUP (Unionist) party and Sinn Féin (Nationalist) party. However, some argue, that the 162 conflict is not over (Cochrane 2013), because significant political and religious divides still 163 exist and outbreaks of violence, acts of intimidations and punishment shootings continue, 164 carried out by dissident paramilitary organisations. For example, an attack in 2010 on British 165 soldiers by the Real Irish Republican Army (IRA), outside an army barracks left two soldiers 166 dead and two injured. A dissident republican letter bomb exploded in 2015 inside another 167 army barracks in NI. It is perhaps understandable then that NI ex-service veterans have 168 concerns for their own personal safety. Adding to this is the ongoing and prolonged 169 investigation of thousands of unsolved deaths that took place during the Troubles, which has 170 not excluded members of the British Armed Forces, many of whom are now aged in their 60's 171 and 70's. The Legacy Investigations Branch (2014) exists as part of the 2014 Stormont House 172 Agreement (House of commons 2020). There is ongoing concern about the re-investigation 173 of cases that had been presumed concluded, the use of witness statements that may be over 174 40 years old and a disproportionate focus on actions of armed forces. But an amnesty for all

175 those involved in the Troubles is not an option, as it is strongly resisted by both Unionist and
176 Nationalist parties in NI.

177 Feeling under threat can affect psychological well-being (Mott, Graham, & Teng,
178 2012; Schmid & Muldoon, 2013), and worryingly may prevent those in need from seeking
179 help (Armour, et al., 2017b). Another effect of the current political climate is being unable to
180 freely and safely take part commemorative events to recognise military personnel who have
181 served and lost their lives in military conflicts. Being an ex-service veteran remains politicised
182 and stigmatised in NI and consequently military commemorative events, rather than being
183 opportunities to bring people together, are contested and opposed by Nationalist communities
184 who associate the military with Unionism, and consequently Catholic communities do not
185 identify or participate in them, at least not openly (Robinson, 2010). The scoping study of
186 support services for in NI (Armour, et al., 2017) revealed that an infrastructure of support
187 exists for ex-Service veterans in NI which are designed around the specific needs, and 19
188 veteran-oriented local and national voluntary and community organisations existed (Armour
189 et al., 2017) compared to 1,818 in England and Wales (Pozo & Walker, 2014). NI veterans
190 can access NHS services and employment and housing agencies available to all citizens in
191 NI. But existing stakeholders have attested to the reality that they mainly rely on informal
192 relationships networks for referrals, as trust issues prevent some veterans from coming
193 forward to access services such as housing and mental health (Armour et al., 2017b).

194 Making the transition from military to civilian life in NI has particular challenges, but
195 yet very little is published about the extent to which NI veterans make the transition
196 successfully, and currently there is a gap in the literature on the topic. The UK veteran
197 population is increasing (The Royal British Legion, 2014) and so in order to begin to establish

an evidence base, this current study utilised a qualitative approach to examine the NI veterans' experiences of their transition from the military to civilian life.

Methods

The current paper is part of a larger program of research, entitled the Northern Ireland Veterans' Health and Wellbeing Study (2014-2020). As part of this study, researchers conducted a self-report survey examining the psychological wellbeing of NI veterans. Participants were recruited through social media, newspaper advertising, local charities and veteran organisations. The survey was available online and in pen-and-paper format and consisted of a large set of standardized measures, some of which were adapted to the local context, and a series of open-ended questions. Participation was open to anyone who self-identified as a veteran of the UK Armed Forces, currently living in NI. A 'veteran' was defined as anyone who served in any branch of the UK regular or reserve Armed Forces and who no longer serves, or anyone who served in the regular Armed Forces and is now serving with the reserves (for the purposes of this study, current reservists were excluded). The survey went live in December 2017 and data collection finished in July 2019. Ethical approval for the study was granted by Ulster University's Research Ethics Committee.

The current study utilised participants' responses to the question "*Do you have any comments about your transition from the military to civilian life?*" The open-ended nature of the question allowed respondents to answer with no prompts, or any restrictions placed upon the length of their response. By providing no prompts about the type of transition experiences (e.g., health-related, employment-related), respondents were free to talk about what they considered to be the most salient issues for them. It also provided them with the opportunity to use their own words to describe transition experiences.

Insert Table 1 here

222 Table 1 shows the age and gender breakdown of participants, and 40% of participants
223 were under 55 years old, 40% were aged over 55 years, and 20% were over 65 years old. Of
224 the 298 who entered data, a total of 252 participants responded to the question about the
225 transition experience. Of these, one hundred and twenty-six participants had served
226 exclusively in the regular Armed Forces, fourteen served exclusively in the reserves, and one
227 hundred and twelve served time in both. The mean length of time since leaving the military
228 for the whole sample, including reserves, was 21 years (between 1-59 years). The sample was
229 divided into cohorts, based on length of time that has passed since making the transition (see
230 Table 2). Approximately 10% of the responses were unrelated to a transition experience and
231 are labelled as 'other' in Figure 1.

232 *Insert Table 2 here*
233

234 In our sample, 49% of participants reported that they had suffered a physical injury
235 during their service and 35% were given a mental health diagnosis since discharge.

236 **Analysis**

237 *Insert Figure One here*

238 An inductive approach was used by the researchers analysing the data (DR and JR),
239 who adopted an interpretative orientation, as the views expressed were the personal
240 experiences of the veterans. This allowed for an in-depth analysis of experiences and shared
241 meanings. Each researcher independently identified and extracted six high level themes and
242 sub-themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After face to face meetings to discuss the codes, some
243 adjustments followed. Each researcher then checked the sub-codes of the other researcher.
244 This iterative process of cross-checking continued, and the researchers finally reached a high
245 level of consensus on the sub-coding. It had been over 30 years for a number of veterans since
246 they had left military service. Because of this, a content frequency analysis took place to
247 provide information that would allow for comparisons to be made and draw out any

248 contrasting features between the five Transition Groups. Results are presented in Figure 1.
249 Please note that Group 4 and Group 5 had smaller numbers and their responses represent 22%
250 of the data presented in Figure 1.
251
252 **Results**

253 **Content Frequency Analysis**

254 A number of responses were very short or were unrelated to the transition experience
255 itself, consequently they were combined and presented in Figure 1 under 'Other'. Very similar
256 themes emerged in every group, and the conclusion from this, is that the transition experience
257 is quite consistent in terms of nature of the problems faced, regardless of when they
258 transitioned, and whether it had been during, or after the Troubles. Those who had transitioned
259 between 31-40 years ago (Group 4) and over 40 years ago (Group 5) gave more reports that
260 military life had been satisfying and enjoyable, and felt they had acquired valuable skills that
261 helped them in civilian life. Group 4 reported the same difficulties as Group 1 and Group 2;
262 hard adjusting to civilian life, they experienced a lack of support post transition; struggled
263 with anxieties such as feelings of being lost and feeling abandoned, and find it hard to trust
264 civilians. Specific references were made to the security threats that exist within Northern
265 Ireland. Group 2 stands out a little more from the other groups in terms of finding the
266 adjustment to civilian life hard, and civilian working practices and attitudes.

267 **In-depth qualitative analysis**

268 **Theme One (a): Military life and the transition was positive for some, but is missed.**

269 Making the move from military to civilian life was relatively easy for some respondents
270 due, in part, to feeling equipped for the transition, and the fact that their standard of living did
271 not diminish once they entered civilian life.

272 *"I found the transition fairly easy, I was happily married with two young children*
273 *and had my own home, I got a good job with similar salary to my armed forces*

274 *final salary. My armed forces managerial abilities certainly helped when dealing*
275 *with a large workforce" [M71, Army Nco].*
276
277 *"My transition from military life was very smooth. I think I am an exception as I*
278 *was ready for civilian life" [M48, Army Nco].*

279
280 Nostalgic reflections of the military career presented in some of the narratives, with some
281 veterans saying how they particularly missed the social camaraderie of the military. In some
282 cases, this made the acculturation to civilian life particularly difficult, a phenomenon referred
283 to elsewhere as "reverse culture shock" (Koenig, 2015).

284 *"Making civilian friends is difficult. Staying in touch with friends from the army*
285 *has become very important to me as I feel closest to them than any civilian, even*
286 *the partners I have had. Most of my army friends live in England and I often think*
287 *I should move back over there to be close to them, sometimes I feel empty without*
288 *them, when going through tough times" [M29, Army other rank].*
289
290 *"The loss of social cohesion with similar minded individuals has been difficult. In*
291 *particular, my wife and I miss the cohesion of mess life and the friendship*
292 *associated with this" [M54, Army officer].*
293
294
295 **Theme One (b): Life and employment skills gained from military have been valuable in**
296 **the civilian life.**

297 A number of NI veterans were able to secure jobs for which they were a good fit, mainly
298 because of their military training. A facet of military culture and life that appeared consistently
299 in the narratives was that of structure and order, a consistent theme found in other transition
300 research (Black & Papile, 2010). There was an appreciation of the fact that military service
301 had made a significant contribution to supporting and enhancing their personal development.

302 *"Joining the service as a boy helped me to become more independent. It supplied*
303 *me with a trade and training, so that on my end of service I was able to get a good*
304 *job and be able to socialise without problems" [M81, Army officer].*
305
306 *"Using the skills you have learned and used in your military career particularly*
307 *leadership, organisational and social helped me make a very smooth transition to*
308 *civilian life" [M60, Royal Navy 4].*
309

While some had to seek work overseas, these roles nevertheless enabled them to make use of their management skills and they felt their disciplined attitude towards work gained during their military service was valued.

> *"I was lucky in that shortly after leaving the Army, a position came up to which I was well suited; my military training was in many aspects of security and intelligence, and the role was in (African country) I was born in (African region) and speak (language), and the role was as security manager at (a place of work). My resettlement courses involved Health and Safety and all of the briefings on CV writing, interviews etc. These all contributed to a successful series of roles over the next 20 years. I was happy with the resettlement process" [M65, Army officer].*

> *"I found the transition fairly easy, I was happily married with two young children and had my own home, I got a good job with similar salary to my armed forces final salary. My armed forces managerial abilities certainly helped when dealing with a large workforce" [M71, Army Nco].*

Theme One (c): The military work ethic and culture are important and remain after service.

Military standards were considered to be influential in building character, strong morals and team spirit, and particularly suited for those who liked order and discipline.

> *"Military life had given me confidence, self-discipline and an ability to work/live closely with others. It has also given me a humour that had been beneficial to all aspects of my life" [M49, Navy Nco].*

> *"My military service was a great experience. There was lots of learning and whilst I learnt to build on my independence, at the same time I learnt about the importance of teamwork. Whilst I was in service that was all good but post service, the military needs to do more, especially here in Northern Ireland" [M49, Army officer].*

Theme Two: Hard to adjust to civilian life/still adjusting.

The military provides a working environment which functions as a self-contained community, where healthcare, housing, food needs etc. are all effectively taken care of, and it provides a protected, supportive environment which lasts for many years. Some assumptions in serving personnel may therefore exist about the relative ease with which a new career may be found in civilian life, and for those who do not prepare, transition from a military to a civilian career is far from easy (Redmond et al., 2015).

"I miss my friends from the army and the lifestyle and family feeling I had with them wasn't prepared mentally and practically i.e. like paying bills etc. to go into civvie street" [M54, Army officer].

"I found the transition difficult due to joining the army at 16, straight from school, and being institutionalised for 25 years. Although now having been away from the army for 6 years I feel that I am coping better with the change. I suppose trying to find my way in a world that was very alien to me with a different structure, mind-set and outlook the most difficult" [M47, Army officer].

Theme Three: Negative employment experiences result from a divergence between military and civilian work culture.

While military standards, discipline and team spirit were valued by ex-Service veterans, and were an asset with regards to some employment opportunities, their absence in a civilian working context conversely resulted in some describing re-entry into civilian employment straight out of services as a shock, often because of the divergence between the two cultures. This unpreparedness could be due in part to the extent to which some military personnel had totally immersed themselves in military culture, internalising and adopting military values, such as selfless service, honour and duty - values perceived by some veterans to be lacking in civilian working environments (Ahern et al., 2015; Redmond et al., 2015). They also struggled to find meaningful employment and felt it was because they were ex-forces.

"It has been the hardest challenge adjusting to civilian life. Work has been the most difficult as civilians don't have the "get the job done attitude". They put obstacles in place which are pointless" [M35, Army Nco].

"The first year after leaving the Service was hard. I found that people in Civvie Street tend to fight each other and teamwork seemed non-existent. Speaking to other vets over the years I have found they had found the first 6-12 months the hardest. My first 5 years were spent unemployed as I couldn't get a job. Most of the time it was due to being ex-forces [M53, RAF Nco].

"I found it extremely difficult to adjust to Civvie Street after I left even finding employment no one wanted you. They would say you are a security risk to my business, even today I will not speak of my time in the military only with those who I know have served. Not even with my family. Civvies don't understand never will" [M64, Army other].

385 In Canada, veterans have reported that the most important component of successful
386 transition for them was whether or not they found satisfying work (Black & Papile, 2010).
387 There are diverse and wide ranging potential job roles that could be offered to veterans. While
388 some veterans found work because they were able to make good use of their management
389 skills, mechanical skills or medical training, a lack of support for veterans with less obvious
390 skills was mentioned, support that could help them translate these skills into something they
391 could sell to civilian employers (Zogas, 2017). In NI, compared to Great Britain (GB;
392 England, Wales, Scotland), respondents highlighted a particular struggle with having their
393 skills and experience recognised and valued by recruitment agencies, and there were reports
394 of some veterans ending up in less skilled professions as a result.

395 *"I'm from England and joined an English regiment and still have contact with*
396 *them. I was very jealous of how they could go for a job interview and they could*
397 *talk about their experiences from the army. Living in Northern Ireland you*
398 *can't, and found I had very little options as to what jobs I wanted to go to.*
399 *Always first question asked so what was your last job. Or previous work. Can't*
400 *say nothing for the last 20 odd years. When you find a job it's then hard to then*
401 *make friends and socialise with them, as you have to work out their*
402 *background" [M52, Army Nco].*
403
404 **Theme Four: Lack of trust is a barrier to developing social relationships with civilians**

405 Supportive social relationships are important for psychological wellbeing and can even
406 be protective against adverse mental health outcomes in military veterans (McLafferty, Ross,
407 Waterhouse-Bradley, & Armour, 2019; Vogt et al., 2019). Several respondents talked about
408 their lack of trust in non-military individuals, particularly because of security concerns. As a
409 result, many choose to socialize only with other veterans, which could lead to feelings of
410 isolation within their communities.

411 *"My transition was smooth as I had a good job working abroad when I left, which*
412 *ended 3 years ago. Coming back to Northern Ireland to live was hard for me and*
413 *the job situation and people's attitude towards veterans. I am referring to*
414 *recruitment agencies who have a negative impression of ex-military personnel no*
415 *matter how well qualified or educated you may be. Compared to the mainland, we*
416 *are light years behind. My peers had no trouble finding well paid and suitable work*
417 *on the mainland...there are specific ex-military recruiting agencies, free courses*
418 *offered to veterans, the list goes on" [M48, Army Nco].*

419

420 *"In NI, once you leave you're on your own and the support network is not there. A*
421 *lot of soldiers over here do struggle with the employment challenge and end up*
422 *with the lower end of the scale jobs such as driving, warehouse work, security*
423 *officers, which in my opinion is ridiculous" [M48, Army Nco].*
424
425 *"As I try to fit in with civilians it's difficult, they share none of my experiences…*
426 *My main social group is with my branch regimental associations. We have*
427 *regular dinners usually on military bases in NI, or in very safe venues in*
428 *predominately protestant areas of NI. In NI to admit to your neighbours that you*
429 *were in the Armed forces is a big personal security issue" [M62, Army other*
430 *rank].*
431
432 *"You quite often feel as if you are living a lie because of the Northern Ireland*
433 *situation you keep yourself to yourself, find it extremely difficult to put you trust in*
434 *anyone. You end up being socially quite isolated" [F56, Royal Navy other].*
435
436
437 **Theme Five: Transitioning in NI is particularly hard.**
438
439 In addition to the security threats, there are also differences between mainland GB and
440 NI in terms of accessing statutory services and support to find housing and employment.
441
442 *"Once you leave the Armed Forces you are on your own with very little or no*
443 *help from any government agency. The military Covenant is only a sound bite for*
444 *politicians who I have no trust in, whatsoever. The only trust is in your old*
445 *comrades' associations" [M72, Army Nco].*
446
447 *I'm not sure if it is the same elsewhere in the UK, but once out of the army and*
448 *home in NI, I have felt isolated and abandoned. There are no services here, and if*
449 *they are they are not well advertised or communicated. NI universities don't*
450 *welcome elcas etc., so access to education is weaker" [M27, Army Nco].*
451
452
453 **Theme Six (a): Support with transition was inadequate.**
454 A lack of support from the military during and after transition featured consistently in
455 the narratives and resonated with the experiences of US veterans (Keeling, Ozuna, Kintzle, &
456 Castro, 2018), particularly those needing help with housing, finances and finding work etc.
457 Enlisting in the military involves much more than starting a new job, it entails adopting a
458 lifestyle, a set of values, and making a strong moral commitment to one's country (Pohl,
459 Bertrand, & Ergen, 2016). The new recruit then becomes part of a tightknit cohesive unit,

protected and supported by their comrades. Many respondents reported that on leaving the military, they felt immediately cut off and unsupported.

> *"It was difficult there was no support in settling and finding work and accommodation. You felt like they had abandoned you. Missed the army way of life and friends" [M54, Army Nco].*

> *"At the time I left, I felt there was little and no support for the transition from military to civilian life. I did my resettlement course and that was it, no advice for career or where to go if things got tough, I found myself isolated and couldn't talk to family as I had come from a war zone in Bosnia to nothing happening in my life" [M55, Army Nco].*

Often veterans leave the military with a large financial settlement and find themselves ill-equipped to manage their finances, and this has sometimes resulted in poor decision making.

> *"The hardest problem I have had to deal with all relates to Finance. I left the Army with a large sum of money from redundancy. I had little help or assistance, I found a lot of people came out of the woodwork to advise myself and family, however it was for their benefit and not mine. The investments and decisions I made were poor, this caused me to always look back with regrets and negativity" [M43, Army Nco].*

The unhappiness expressed was not only about the general lack of support with resettlement, but also significant concerns about personal safety, and lack of protection featured as many (79% of our sample where deployed to NI) continue to live in their former operational theatre (Patterson, 2008).

Theme Six (b) Negative emotions feeling abandoned, lost and lonely.

The salient threats and lack of support left some feeling particularly anxious and angry towards the military. Their discourse revealed feelings of hurt, and abandonment. Isolation and mental health problems can increase risk of suicide among veterans, something which is an increasing concern worldwide (Lusk, Brenner, Betthauser, Terrio, & Scher, 2015; Pease, Billera, & Gerard, 2016).

> *"It was a total disaster own my own since I was 15. I knew nothing about Civvie Street, tax, pay etc. I felt isolated and scared" [M61, Navy Nco].*

495 *“Major trauma, like being a puppet with the strings cut. Total abandonment” [M51, Army Nco].*
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498 *“I live in NI and like most veterans we feel abandoned. No consideration was ever given to us in the many agreements that took place. Last couple of years have been extremely trying. TV, radio, papers never leave it alone. Legacy inquiries and soldier arrests have the veteran community agitated in NI. We here in NI did not leave like others did, yet we are the veterans with the least” [F51, Army Nco].*
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505 **Discussion**

506 This paper presents the results of research into the experiences of transitioning from
507 military to civilian life among NI veterans, using information collected via a self-report
508 survey. A qualitative analysis and a content analysis provides an interpretation of how
509 veterans were making sense and feeling about their experiences, and from this, a number of
510 consistent themes were formulated. The content frequency analysis (Figure 1) enabled us to
511 determine the degree to which each theme featured in the narratives of the five Transition
512 Groups. Themes that best characterise our findings are; military life had been satisfying, and
513 the military work culture, the camaraderie, and character-building nature of their experiences
514 had been valuable, but the military life was missed (Theme One (a), One (b), and One (c)).
515 These narratives sharply contrasted with other themes that also emerged about how hard it
516 had been to adjust from being military personnel to a civilian, and how they some were still
517 struggling (Theme Two). The narratives also included talk of negative employment
518 experiences, because of a divergence between military and civilian work culture (Theme
519 Three); but also a lack of trust pervades and is a barrier to developing social and work
520 relationships with civilians (Theme Four). The experience of transitioning in Northern Ireland
521 seemed to offer particular challenges because of political tensions and security concerns
522 making some reluctant to approach services for help, and also differences exist between NI
523 and GB in how military veterans could access services such as employment and housing
524 agencies (Theme Five). Theme six focused on the belief that support services for transition

525 had been inadequate (6a); and some expressed negative emotions (b), with the exception of
526 Group 5 (Group 5 made up 8% of the sample).
527 On balance, narratives about negative experience featured more predominantly in the
528 discourse compared with positive and nostalgic reflections on military service. Respondents
529 described difficulties adjusting to civilian life made more challenging by transitioning in NI,
530 and feeling unsupported during and after the transition from the military. What is important
531 to emphasise at this this point, is that the main survey had attracted over 1300 respondents
532 and of these approximately 252 (19%) gave an answer to the question regarding transition.
533 We can only assume that transition for the remaining 80% was problem free. These findings
534 are not dissimilar to those reported by Morin (2011), who found that 72% of US veterans
535 recounted finding it easy to make the adjustment to life as a civilian and around 27% found
536 the transition difficult. Being on active duty can be exciting and stimulating for some
537 personnel – a phenomenon referred to as 'combat rush' (Betthauser, Allen, Grigsby, &
538 Brenner, 2017). At the same time, however, there are unfortunate negative consequences to
539 combat exposure, such as traumatic brain injury (Turgoose & Murphy, 2018), posttraumatic
540 stress disorder (Richardson, Frueh, & Acierno, 2010), depression (Bonde Utzon-Frank,
541 Bertelsen, Borritz, & Eller, 2016) and others. Also at least one third of our sample had
542 received a mental health diagnosis since discharge and could be particularly vulnerable and
543 in need of support. We know that many veterans will re-visit traumatic combat experiences
544 many years after the event, a phenomenon described as Later-Adulthood Trauma
545 Reengagement (LATR) (Marinia, et al., 2019). However, the ongoing security situation in
546 NI means those most in need, may in fact be the ones *least* likely to come forward for support.
547 Our analysis also revealed that leaving the military was very stressful for some, as their
548 service had ended abruptly, and it felt like a shock (Redmond et al., 2015). In fact, Borus
549 (1975) was one of the first to write about the notion of shock among homecoming Vietnam

550 veterans. He provided one explanation as to why transition can be particularly difficult for
551 some service leavers and this is because they lacked the coping mechanisms needed to
552 navigate the significant change in their lives, and they struggled. This could also be true for
553 veterans who had served in conflicts, but unlike in the US, NI veterans transition in an
554 environment where the threat to life is still tangible, and those without coping mechanisms,
555 they could find it particularly stressful, heightening any sense of abandonment and injustice
556 experienced.

557 Ensuring a safe environment within which to find satisfying employment, especially
558 those suffering from trauma related injuries, should be part of their treatment pathway
559 (Murphy, Ashwick, Palmer & Busuttil, 2019). In the case of NI veterans, Murphy et al. (2019)
560 reported finding that a higher proportion of their sample of help-seeking veterans with mental
561 health problems were from NI, and they tended to be younger. Our content analysis revealed
562 that Transition Group One (transitioned in last 10 years) who are the youngest group, and
563 possibly coming from the Iraq or Afghanistan conflict, spoke most about difficulties
564 transitioning into NI. Together these findings tentatively suggest that the younger veterans
565 should be a particular focus for ex-service support organisations.

566 To re-enter civilian life with a range of health problems is challenging enough, but an
567 added challenge in NI is the lack of mental health support and trauma services for both NI
568 veterans and civilians. This is an ongoing issue and can in part, be explained by the historical
569 dearth in a statutory support infrastructure for victims of trauma in NI. In Israel, where the
570 Israeli-Palestinian conflict is continuing and hostile attacks occur on home soil, it was
571 recognised in the early 90's that missile attacks were traumatising civilians as well as the
572 military, and they began to build trauma centres (Bleich, Dycian, Koslowsky, Solomon, &
573 Wiener, 1992). As a result, Israeli military and civilians have access to high quality trauma
574 services, leading to increased resilience against continued threats to life. NI has been lacking

575 in a trauma service infrastructure until very recently, and while services are beginning to grow,
576 their absence has been felt by not just NI civilians, but also the veterans living in the region.
577 Unlike the US, which invests heavily into the VA service provision, NI veterans must rely
578 upon mainstream healthcare services when they leave the military. This complete lack of
579 infrastructure has meant the whole population of NI has historically had limited trauma
580 specialist services available to them (Wave Trauma Centre, 2012). Furthermore, in other parts
581 of the UK such as England, should a veteran demonstrate they have a clinical need resulting
582 from military service, that is equal to the needs of other civilians on an NHS waiting list, they
583 are entitled to priority access to NHS care. This provision is not afforded to NI veterans, due
584 to continued inconsistencies in equality law between Great Britain and Northern Ireland
585 (Equality Act 2010) and lack of support from Nationalist political parties and refusal to
586 embrace the principles of the Armed Forces covenant in NI and offer veterans the support
587 they need. As a consequence, strong attitudes pervade discussions between Nationalist and
588 Unionist parties about any proposals for military veterans to get preferential treatment from
589 other victims of the Troubles.

590 Feelings expressed about the lack of trust, as well as a perceived lack of support services
591 for NI veterans after discharge, were particularly salient in the discourse suggesting those
592 suffering from pre-existing problems resulting from traumatic combat experiences, could be
593 having their symptoms magnified by feeling unsupported by government as well as the
594 undercurrents of threats to life from dissident republicans (Patterson, 2008). There are
595 generally positive attitudes in NI overall, towards the Armed Forces and for the principles of
596 the Armed Forces Covenant (AFC; Armour, et al 2018), however the AFC (Ministry of
597 Defence [MOD], 2014) has not been adopted in eight out of the 11 Local authorities in NI
598 and the Public Attitudes Survey completed in 2018 (NILT) also discovered that negative
599 attitudes persist among Nationalist communities in NI towards the Armed forces (Armour et

600 al., 2018). As a consequence, ex-Service veterans feel that seeking out employment in specific
601 parts of the province is unsafe for them.

602 Another important finding of this research is that a sizeable number of veterans felt very
603 unsupported generally, and this goes beyond dissatisfaction to stronger feelings of anger and
604 hurt. It is possible to begin to understand these emotions if we adopt a social exchange
605 perspective (Blau, 1964). Robinson and Rosseau (1994) would explain this hurt and anger as
606 an expression of a strong sense of injustice felt by veterans in NI. These feelings of injustice
607 occur when one party in a psychological contract perceives the other to "have failed to fulfil
608 promised obligation(s)'' (p.247). Military personnel enter into a social contract when they
609 sign up for Armed Forces. At this time, there is an implicit understanding that the degree of
610 commitment, loyalty, and sacrifice they give while serving their country will be reciprocated
611 by the MOD, as part of this social contract. A breach in such a contract would be felt very
612 deeply.

613 Finding satisfying employment is a key aspect of successful transition (Keeling et al.,
614 2018), and this has been reported by other researchers in this field (e.g. Ashcroft, 2012; Ahern
615 Worthen, Masters, Lippman, & Ozer, 2015). In UK, the ex-Service community (i.e., veterans
616 and their adult and child dependants) who are of working age (16-64) are less likely to be
617 employed and more likely to be economically inactive and unemployed compared to the UK
618 general population of the same age (The Royal British Legion, 2014). Our data contained only
619 a few reports of struggles with finances, and while a study by Binks and Cambridge (2018)
620 reported that veterans struggled to obtain financial loans and credit agreements, and struggle
621 with finding a new civilian identity, financial problems at least, were not an issue for the
622 majority of our sample.

623 At present in NI, there are a number of organisations which provide employment
624 support to NI veterans and signpost trusted contacts within employment agencies (Armour et

625 al., 2017). However, given the findings of this research, much more investment is advised
626 both in the content and quality of this support. What could also help would be a change to
627 how transition is conceptualised, so that it is not something that simply begins post discharge
628 but much earlier, and deemed a significant life course transition. Further research could help
629 to understand what additional support may help NI veterans find satisfying employment in
630 NI, in recognition that it is a vital component of the transition process and important for social
631 and financial well-being (Proyer, Annen, Eggimann, Schneider, & Ruch, 2012; Vogt et al.,
632 2019). Its importance therefore, should not be underestimated.

633 If we look at employment in more detail, there appears to be three main issues to be
634 addressed. The first is the difficulties in accepting the civilian work culture, which can be
635 problematic if one is seeking to find a profession which shares the same values, such as
636 discipline, structure and team work. These are similar experiences to veterans in other
637 countries; Ahern et al. (2015) found military veterans struggled to find suitable roles in
638 civilian life and could feel alienated and disconnected from civilians, and as a result, could
639 experience identity conflict (Smith & True, 2014). Using data from a nationally representative
640 US household survey, Schulker (2017) found that US veterans tend to work in areas that align
641 with their technical military functions. Our findings indicate that some NI veterans have also
642 struggled with civilian work culture, and this points to the need for job roles in organisations
643 that share a similar ethos of structure, discipline and team work, as this would increase job
644 satisfaction in civilian employment. It is clear that military culture can remain a crucial part
645 of a veteran's sense of identity, and cannot be switched off suddenly. This speaks to the
646 importance of advance career planning and advice to find a good person-environment fit in
647 those preparing to leave the Armed Forces (Wilson-Smith & Corr, 2019). Moreover, there
648 could be value in exploring what lessons could be learned from Israeli Military, where service
649 personnel have to manage civilian and military roles and identities interchangeably (Lander,

650 et al., 2019). Career counselling services could be particularly beneficial as they could begin
651 to reverse the military de-acculturation process (Westwood, Black, & McLean, 2002; Zogas,
652 2017). As well as this, programmes aimed at educating potential employers about the benefits
653 of having employees with military training and experience are needed (SSAFA, 2018).

654 The second issue is that employment agencies do not advertise ex-Armed Forces
655 specific job vacancies in NI. As a consequence, recruitment consultants will have little
656 experience and knowledge about the skills that military training can bring to the business
657 world (The Telegraph, 2019). Any jobs that are advertised online with ex-service personnel
658 in mind will be located in GB and not NI. The third issue is that of security; as some veterans
659 are very reluctant to reveal their previous employment history to staff in NI job centres and
660 recruitment agencies. In the veteran well-being study conducted by Vogt et al., (2019) newly
661 separated US veterans experienced high vocational and social well-being as they reintegrated
662 into civilian life, but this is not the experience for a number of NI veterans in this current
663 study.

664 NI veterans are cognisant that the threat to life remains real for both ex-Service
665 personnel and security forces in NI, because while the Irish Republican Army and other
666 paramilitary organisations announced they were ending their ‘armed campaign’ in 2005,
667 dissident republicans continue to use violence against the Security Forces (BBC, 2016;
668 Bradley, 2018). Because of this, NI veterans remain very security conscious and are very
669 reluctant to reveal their military service to strangers. Given that leadership can have real
670 impact by improving resilience through cohesion, support and solidarity (Bleich, 2017), it is
671 a very legitimate argument that veterans may feel more confident and supported, and less
672 abandoned, if there is visible, strong leadership at the highest levels of government. A
673 veterans’ champion in the NI government and support from all political parties could manage

674 public perceptions and begin to address the lack of knowledge and biased opinions of civilian
675 employers towards veterans and also push for more psychological health and trauma support.

676 **Conclusion**

677 NI has come a long way and is moving towards peace and equality, with a power-
678 sharing legislative assembly in existence and the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI)
679 which had been seen as a Protestant police force, as of 2018, has Catholic recruitment standing
680 at around 32%. Unfortunately, dissident paramilitary organisations continue to attack and
681 threaten security forces, politicians and civilians. In the devolved government in NI, half of
682 the seats are held by Nationalists, many of whom would protest at any attempt to provide ex-
683 Services personnel with additional support that is over and above what any other NI citizen
684 can avail themselves of. Second, the security threat is real and this makes veterans very
685 reluctant to come forward for help, as they feel they cannot freely and openly approach
686 potential employers to find employment. Many military personnel transition easily (Morin,
687 2011), but for those who may struggle in NI, stress is being increased by the lack of tailored
688 and comprehensive support services, and the existence of personal security threats and 'no-
689 go' areas because of ongoing dissident republican activity (BBC, 2016).

690 Veterans across the world experience barriers to employment when entering civilian
691 life. Such barriers may be less onerous if they are able to connect quickly to a network of
692 support from other veterans (Keeling et al, 2018). The reality is, that the political landscape
693 needs to change much further in NI in order for all veterans, especially the most vulnerable,
694 to feel safe enough to seek out the help of others, and in time, enjoy financial and social well-
695 being. Veterans are a cohort of our population that would benefit greatly from more visible
696 leadership and backing from the government to ensure they feel safer, valued and supported.
697 What may help in this regard is if the four nations of UK re-affirm, and make explicit, the
698 social and psychological contract they entered into with the members of their Armed Forces,

and acknowledges and honours their obligation to support serving and ex-serving personnel alike. To this end, previously made recommendations (SSAFA, 2018) about the need to significantly invest into improving employment support for Armed Forces veterans should be taken into account, and current understanding of transition and transition support services, re-conceptualised, re-evaluated and improved.

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