The possibilities and limits of impact and engagement in research on military institutions

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Abstract: Military geographical research often requires direct engagement with military institutions. Although the morality of such engagements is often debated, the details of engagement in practice have been less scrutinised. Scrutiny is important, as military engagements can shape research-derived critiques and can influence the communication of research outcomes to both military and academic research communities. Military engagement comprises the communication of data, theories and concepts about military activities and phenomena, with military personnel and institutions, in textual, representational and interpersonal modes. The paper examines Geography's history of research engagement to show the complexities and debates around this seemingly straightforward idea. It then introduces a research project and wider research programme on the UK Armed Forces Reserves which provides the empirical context from which we draw our observations about military engagement. We then consider two issues, language and institutional cultures, for their insights into the complexities of military engagement. We conclude by considering the politics of engagement in contemporary critical military geographical research.

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Introduction

The evolution of Geography's disciplinary interest in military and security phenomena has been well documented (Flint 2004; Palka and Galgano 2005; Woodward 2014; Forsyth 2019). This interest has entailed diverse engagements by geographers with military institutions and wider defence and security communities. A spectrum of opinion about the political and scholarly implications of these engagements stretches from advocacy for the application of disciplinary and practitioner insights to the solution of military problems (Lohman and Fuhriman 2019), to critiques of geographers' and Geography's contributions to the extension and consolidation of military power (Wainwright 2013). However, beyond debates about the moralities of such engagements, little attention has been paid to the detail of engagement in practice, how such engagements can shape the critiques that emerge through our research, and how they influence the communication of research outcomes with both military and research communities. This is a significant question for military geographical research; in order to fully understand the constitution and expression of military capabilities across space and over time, researchers often have to engage directly with military institutions as a necessary prerequisite for understanding more precisely how military power works (Dalby 2010; Gregory 2010; Rech et al. 2015).

This paper is about the praxis of engagement with military institutions for geographical research. Military institutions comprise state armed forces operating on land, sea and air, plus state institutions of military governance (e.g. defence ministries). Although in this paper we do not discuss engagement with wider communities such as military lobby and interest groups, and military manufacturing and services industries, we note their status as military institutions too. We define engagement in research terms as communication about, dialogue concerning and the sharing of research-derived information with individuals or interest groups beyond academic research

communities. Military engagement comprises the communication of data, theories and concepts about military activities and phenomena, with military personnel and institutions, in textual, representational and interpersonal modes. The paper starts by examining Geography's history of research engagement to show the complexities and debates around this seemingly straightforward idea. It then introduces a research project on military Reserves which provides the empirical context from which we draw our observations about military engagement. We consider two issues, language and institutional cultures, for their insights into the complexities of military engagement. We conclude by considering the politics of engagement in contemporary critical military geographical research.

Geography, engagement and research impact

Geography's long advocacy of engagement with the people, places and practices that constitute our research focus rests in no small measure on a moral argument about the necessity of seeing social research as an exchange for mutual benefit. This moral foundation resists practices that may bring harm and is attentive to the power relations implicit within the dynamics between researcher and researched (Rogers et al 2014). Ideas of co-produced, participatory or action research have become central to the discipline's understanding of engagement (see contributions to Kindon et al 2010).

Academic institutional structures and practices shape that engagement. For example, researchers in UK higher education contexts work within the requirements of national research evaluation exercises, in which engagement and impact (i.e. changes directly attributable to research) are encouraged, measured and assessed (Pain et al 2011; Boswell and Smith 2017). In turn, the developing engagement and impact agenda has been critiqued for its implications for academic practice (Slater 2012, Williams 2012). Research engagement is generally acknowledged to be inherently a political activity, in that it will always entail negotiations over access to and authority over information and the narratives through which research data speaks.

Military institutions are public sector organisations. Whatever the pathologies of neoliberal economic regimes across the contemporary UK public sector, public sector organisations remain profoundly important for the citizenry's quality of life because they provide public goods such as healthcare, education, transport, public safety, trade regulations, electricity, water, social support, environmental protections, and of course national defence. Funded through taxation, such organisations are accountable to the publics they serve. This public accountability includes transparency to evidence-based examination, evaluation and critique. It is unsurprising therefore that engagement with public sector institutions constitutes a significant part of the wider

conversation around research engagement and impact in Geography (see, for example, the high proportion of REF2014 impact case studies in Geography which have a public policy focus (REF2014)). That said, it is widely recognised that engaged research with public sector organisations can be difficult to achieve and sustain (Woods and Gardner 2011; Williams and Pierce 2016, Blackstock et al. 2015).

The figure of the 'policymaker' has emerged as key to facilitating engagement with public sector organisations. The advice ecosystem which has evolved to support engagement offers a wealth of advice and checklists of do's and don'ts for researchers seeking to engage with policymakers (see for example Crawley 2013, ESRC 2019). Most universities (including our own) have institutionalised systems to provide advice and support for policy-maker engagement by academics. This ecosystem maintains its credibility through a discourse suggesting that achieving engagement with policymakers and thus influencing public policy are *possible.* Whilst this discourse recognises the labour and challenges involved, it works hard to sustain the idea of possibility.

In this paper, we are concerned with the nature of this possibility. Our focus is on engagement with military institutions around a specific area of public policy, in this case the expansion of the UK Reserve armed forces. We are concerned with the detail and practicalities of engagement with military institutions particularly around policy change, how this engagement in turn might shape the critiques and arguments emergent in research, and how engagement influences the communication of research outcomes. Our concern is not with whether or not this research was in fact sufficiently engaged or had measurable impact. Rather, we want to interrogate our experience in order to prompt fuller debate about what engagement might mean for military geographical research.

Engaging as researchers with military institutions

Our thinking on the possibilities and limits of engagement in military research contexts draws on two sources. The first is our collective experience (we calculate about 85 years' worth between us) of doing academic research on military, defence and security phenomena (plus, for two of us, direct experience as military personnel); we consider ourselves well informed about the challenges of doing military research. The second resource for this paper is one of those awards, the *Keeping Enough in Reserve* (KEiR) project funded by the ESRC (2014 – 2018). The research was funded in collaboration with the UK Ministry of Defence (MoD) and British Army as part of the Future Reserves Research Programme (FRRP). The FRRP also funded three other projects (Giga et al. 2018a, Cunningham-Burley et al. 2018a, Catignani and Basham 2018). The FRRP focused on the effects of the MoD's Future Reserves 2020 (FR20) programme, a significant UK armed forces policy shift

concerning the expansion of military Reserves (primarily but not exclusively the British Army), and a change in their role and relationships to the regular armed forces (MoD 2013). The FRRP was commissioned explicitly with policy impact in mind (ESRC 2013). As is usual for ESRC grants, applicants to the programme spelt out the value of their prospective findings to their non-academic (primarily military) beneficiaries, and the pathways through which impact would be achieved.

Our KEiR and other research experience suggest that military research engagement requires a vocabulary. We often used the terminology of 'critical friend' to describe our position. As Wright et al. (2019) point out, critical friendship requires both adopting researcher reflexivity *and* a critical approach which calls institutions into question, whilst also accounting for the possibility of their change. Central to the concept is the idea that critical friendship cuts both ways, allowing both for the idea of friendly dialogue and support, but also for the possibility of critique of the other (Bastick and Duncanson 2015), a practice that is not without its ethical and political dilemmas (Holvikivi 2019). Above all, the idea of critical friendship articulates an aspiration to be open to the possibility of dialogue even in the midst of critique, which in turn is highly significant to contemporary debates about the importance of recognising positionality and conduct within critical military studies (Basham and Bulmer 2017, Baker et al. 2016).

The challenges of sustaining critical friendship with a diverse group of individuals from military institutions sharing a very specific cultural framing of the world, is illustrated by our experiences with communicating about qualitative methods, their utility and their validity. This methodology, and its underpinning epistemology, were little known or understood amongst our military contacts. It sat at the core of the KEiR project, with rich data generated from in-depth interviews with 54 reservists, 25 repeat interviews, and 9 focus groups totalling 50 respondents. The response of an Army officer to one of our conference presentations containing some of this data was typical; he felt obliged to remind us that the presentation 'seems fine but what I would add is that the comments are personal and not necessarily reflective of the whole.' Similarly, at an Army research dissemination event, feedback told us that 'each anecdote is personal and a counter view could be found'. At another event, a small group of MoD civil servants arrived late and therefore missed our opening briefing on the basics of qualitative methodologies in social science research. They then proceeded to query the validity of findings on the basis of an *a priori* critique from a positivist epistemological position. Wearying though responses like this were, as the critical friends concept reminds us, critique is a two-way street; it was healthy to be reminded of the strangeness to others of some very taken-for-granted research practices and methods. We were aware, too, that from time to time the message about qualitative validity did start to penetrate. For example, towards the end of the FRRP, a senior retired Army officer made some very public and visible statements to his

peers and subordinates about the utility of interpretative methodologies, the benefits of these methodologies in teasing apart seemingly unknowable or intractable issues and contradictions within Reserves experiences, and the utility of such experience-based evidence in policy communications. Ultimately, the key FRRP findings based on the four projects' results around the challenges reservists face were all drawn directly from qualitative data and analysis (Catignani and Basham 2018; Catignani and Connolly 2018; Cunningham-Burley et al. 2018a, b; Giga et al. 2018a ,b; Woodward et al. 2018 a, b).

It is in the detail of our military engagement that it becomes possible to trace more clearly its effects on the critiques that emerge through research, and its influence on the communication of research findings. To illustrate, we focus in the next two sections on issues of language, and on issues of institutional practices.

Engagement in practice: language, terminologies and discourse

The issue of language, terminologies and discourse is a key feature of the practice of engagements with military institutions. We refer not to specific technical vocabularies, acronyms and professional colloquialisms that circulate within any institution (including our own), but rather the conversations (sometimes arguments) that developed over the choice of specific terminologies.

These conversations started with our original project subtitle: 'the employment of hybrid citizen-soldiers and the Future Reserves 2020 programme'. Use of the term 'hybrid' had been chosen to indicate engagement with the geographical and sociological concept of hybridity, something which we understood as central to the reservist experience (see Higate et al. 2019). We were told, very directly, that the Army Scientific Advisory Committee (which was involved in the ethics approval process and thus reviewed the research outline)

> are not keen on the term 'hybrid citizen-soldiers' as Personnel are simultaneously citizens and soldiers. A more representative term would be 'civilian-soldiers'.

At a certain level, this was just a request for a slightly altered subtitle. But another reading of this instruction was of its effects in removing the possibility of visibly marking via a project subtitle a very specific way of considering reservists, and imposing another. Our methodology involved seeing reservists not through the dominant discourses of civilians who also happened to be soldiers, but as people embodying a new hybrid form of citizenship performed through their military participation without the protections that full military membership might bestow. This in turn was an idea

flagged very clearly in MoD documentation around the new ways of recognising reservists that the FR20 promised. So this discussion was not just about words.[1]

The conversation about terminologies continued through the project. For example, in an abstract for a conference paper (submitted to MoD for pre-approval), we used the phrase 'the armed forces' ability to continue deploying violence on behalf of the state.' This reflects the classic (and very commonly used) Weberian conceptualisation of military forces as legitimate enactors of violence at the behest of the nation state. The response came back from a senior officer that the MoD were 'uncomfortable' that the 'definition/purpose of HM Forces is to deploy violence on behalf of the state'. The officer explained that whilst 'lethal violence is used, it is not the purpose of Defence per se'. Again, although this could be viewed as just a steer on phrasing, the fact of discomfort with the explicit mention of lethal violence speaks to much broader debates about changing state practices and regard for public sensibilities in contemporary war. But as the Oxford Research Group's *Remote Warfare Programme* project argues, contemporary warfare is both a material reality and a discursive act whereby terminologies used to describe acts of state-initiated lethal violence assist in the distancing of military activities from critical public view (ORG 2019). Ultimately, having explained our use of the Weberian conceptualisation, we proceeded as planned. Our point is to illustrate how military engagement can potentially shape the very terms through which critique is articulated.

Terminologies and language are constituents of discourse. One of our research findings was the way the MoD's Whole Force Approach and the FR20 policy as a constituent part could be interpreted through the lens of military privatization. The language and discourse of privatization was not welcomed. Although we proceeded with this line of argument (see Jenkings et al. 2019), our arguments were met with silence. Another set of research findings mentioned the FR20 policy in the context of defence expenditure reductions linked to the UK Government's austerity programme. We were warned that 'the key aspect that will be responded to is your focus on Reservists as a cost-cutting measure which is not MOD policy.' Similarly, when we talked about the recruitment problems faced by the Reserves there was clear push-back against the idea that this was a serious issue (despite clear evidence to the contrary; see NAO 2018, Bury and Catignani 2019).

A conclusion from these examples might be that military institutions have to sustain specific, and hegemonic, discourses on their activities (just as universities do, for example), hence the resistance to some terminologies. But our point here is about engagement, and the limits to critical friendship

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[1] We used the revised subtitle in our MoD research ethics application, and then subsequently reverted to the original.

when there is such a difference in how the world can be described and explained, and how change can be conceptualised.

Rules, processes, institutional cultures and the practice of engagement

The insights of military geographical research are facilitated by engagement with military institutions. However, the possibilities and limits of engagement are shaped by institutional rules, processes and cultures. A significant one for researchers is the Ministry of Defence Research Ethics Committee (MODREC) process.[2] The issues raised for FRRP research by the MODREC process are explored in detail elsewhere (Catignani and Basham, in press) and we will not detail them here, beyond noting MODREC's limited utility for added value in ethical rigour. We focus instead on rules, processes and institutional cultures around communications practices across the research process.

Our first observation is that the hierarchies of rank through which military institutions structure responsibilities can impact upon engagement activities in a variety of ways. For example, the FRRP framework envisaged that a military liaison officer would assist projects with respondent recruitment by contacting Reserves units, introducing researchers to commanding officers, and clarifying that the necessary permissions had been granted for the research to take place. Assistance in unit and respondent recruitment was of course welcomed, but problems persisted with identifying contact points, making contact and obtaining the necessary confirmations. These problems in turn reflected military institutional cultures. The liaison officers (there were five consecutively across the period of the FRRP) were themselves positioned within a hierarchy, and were sometimes asked to do things which they felt were above (or below) their paygrade, tasked rather than self-selected for the role and alert to the consequences of their actions if something went wrong. Institutional cultures also shaped expectations about how interview requests should be communicated to units and reservists. Indicative of a hierarchical orders-based institution, an early draft of the FRRP interview selection and management guidelines noted that 'Unit commanders are requested to brief their study participants before their interviews', an idea which FRRP programme research teams insisted had to be removed to ensure the respondent spontaneity that is so central to qualitative research interviews. To our military interlocutors, a senior officer 'lines to take' briefing is standard operational practice and could be very helpful; to researchers, it has the potential for coercion.

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[2] For all members of the research team, this was the first time that we had been through the MODREC process because previous research projects had not required it.

Communications practices are integral to engagement. Seemingly minor issues, like the best mode of communication to use, raised difficulties. The use of personal Gmail or Microsoft Outlook accounts by military personnel for military business was commonplace, because as Reservists they were unable to access their military emails unless on military premises. This significantly hampered the flow of communications until this practice was brought to our attention. In turn, our university spam filters would regularly block emails from military personnel using their personal email addresses because they came from what appeared (to the spam filters) to be random unrecognised email accounts. This is ostensibly a trivial point, but not in the context of delivering a piece of publicly-funded research under quite strict protocols, where delays became a significant issue.

Engagement in military research contexts almost inevitably requires engagement with institutional assumptions about the messages to be communicated. This assumption spilled over in unexpected ways. For example, a research team member who had been invited to appear at a parliamentary event on the Reserves, was caught up in a frantic email exchange at a senior level concerning, in the first instance, agreed messages and the possibility of being prepped prior to appearance, and then subsequently a distancing from the MoD on the grounds that the researcher might (unwittingly) make remarks in contradiction to official statements. On another occasion, the possibility of mapping the geographical extent of Reserves units around the UK was discouraged on the grounds that the exposure of 'white spaces' on maps would in turn indicate limitations of coverage, thereby troubling MoD statements about the extent of the Reserves across the country. An end-of-programme research dissemination event was the subject of endless discussion; whether or not to hold it because of the robust critique evident in some of the programme findings; whether to hold it on Armed Forces Day or not; who to invite from within the MoD and armed forces; whether journalists could or should be included or excluded because of hopes and fears about positive or negative publicity. Ultimately, after the date was confirmed and the venue, it was then suggested that it be moved to a later date. Some project teams decided at that point to withdraw if the date was changed. It went ahead as planned (but without press involvement). Our point is not that putting on dissemination events involves considerable negotiation, but that the assumptions and tone showed an underlying concern not for debating research findings developed in accordance with the original brief (see ESRC 2013), but with the possibility of negative public perceptions of the fact of robust debate about findings.

Communication practices also included assumptions that information would be available to researchers on a need-to-know basis. This reflects military communications protocols. The issue for research engagement was not one of requiring access to restricted information, but rather automatic and habitual assumptions that information would not be shared unless cleared by a

higher authority. Examples include lack of prior knowledge about a major recruitment campaign (Operation Fortify), the details of which would have informed research strategies, and lack of transparency about individuals approached for inclusion in the FRRP advisory group. There was structural resistance to sharing non-restricted pre-existing research on relevant issues commissioned and held by MoD, to the point that a MoD civil servant remarked during one programme meeting that they would find it useful to know about other contracted research. At another meeting, another MoD civil servant remarked, with great exasperation, that if the MoD wanted answers to many of the problems it faced over the FR20 policy, it might need to start sharing the information it held. The issue of information availability was an issue for engagement because the lack of transparency and efficiency reduced levels of trust; would it be worth investing time and energy in critical friendships if they were always going to be limited? Ultimately, the communication of information on a need-to-know basis persisted to the extent that we have no way of knowing, really, how effective our engagement was or whether (in ESRC terms) our research had impact as following the end of the FRRP channels for the communication of this information appeared closed.

The limits to engagement imposed by rules, processes and procedures also came about because of the very procedures introduced to the FRRP to enhance engagement but which were difficult to adapt within MoD institutional cultures. Routine practices within defence mean the rotation of personnel between postings on a fairly regular cycle (usually somewhere between 6 and 24 months). This 'churn' of personnel meant that continuity of engagement was at times difficult to sustain with, for example, senior military officers chairing the programme board (who rotated in and out) and – more vitally, in many ways, the military liaison officers who also rotated in and out. Not only were working relationships hard to develop and sustain over time, but there was also lack of clarity at specific points as to who, exactly, within the MoD (military and civilian), had responsibility for certain tasks. For example, under agreed communications and publications guidelines (which had taken considerable time to finalise because of disagreements on both sides as to what might constitute reasonable practice in our respective spheres of experience), we submitted papers and abstracts for MoD review 28 days prior to submission to a journal or conference. Leaving aside the questions that this practice raises about information control, issues with the churn of personnel meant that a paper which we had been assured had been 'cleared' for publication by MoD prompted a swift and sharp response on publication. We were informed that 'the position is significantly different' to that described in the publication, and that we had breached guidelines. On the contrary, the PI replied. It transpired that the issue of churn had meant that publication clearance had been devolved to someone who – unknowingly – had not realised that ideas explored in the paper ran contrary to the

established MoD narrative or 'lines to take'. Churn, therefore, as a feature of military institutions, was both a source of exasperation and a practice that enabled the publication of critical findings.

Conclusions

As should be clear by now, military engagement in the course of military geographical research is inherently political. The idea of researchers as critical friends opens up the possibility of dialogue and exchange in engagement, and although we have multiple experiences of engagement which could be defined in these terms, as we have shown in this paper, there are limits to this. As Yagil Levy (2005) notes, critical military research is vital in revealing to military policy and policy-makers the unintended consequences of policy. Yet we are under no illusions as to just how difficult this is to achieve; as social policy debates have indicated, critical research is readily side-lined, ignored or co-opted (see for example Naughton 2005, Keith 2008, Sheaff 2017), and this resonates with our experience.

Yet for all that the experiences recounted here were negative, we persist with the view that undertaking military research requires engagement. Understanding how military institutions and military activities function, how they shape geographies and are shaped by geography, requires close observation. To be critical requires us to be engaged in critique, rather than to be dismissive (Rech et al. 2015), and engagement in critique requires close engagement, period. Our experiences with KEiR, though, suggest that engagement has many forms. Although the structure of the FRRP indicated that formalised engagements with policy-makers would be the most appropriate mechanism to effect communication of research findings, actually it was in the informal encounters at the margins of formal activities that engagement appeared simultaneously as most intangible yet most effective. This includes, for example, our countless conversations with military personnel about the research and about Reserves restructuring whilst doing all the things we needed to do set up and make progress with our inquiry. The research process itself also constituted engagement which in turn opened up the possibility for change. As we noted in our introduction, engagement is communication about research, and the research interviews and focus groups had the effect of co-constructing ideas and theories about military reservist activities and phenomena. This in turn may have had unanticipated impacts; the MODREC committee were certainly concerned that it would, questioning whether participation in the research might affect reservists' willingness to continue in the Reserves. Our point is that military engagement for research purposes is necessary, but far less predictable than institutional, disciplinary or research council guidance might suggest. It is always shaped by a politics of practice and positionality, and researcher choices about pragmatics and principles.

We would also emphasise that ultimately the effects of the engagements described, and their impacts, may be unknowable. Conducting research on a closed institution structured around communications practices that assume secrecy and confidentiality has consequences for research in addition to those described above, because it makes assessment of the effects of engagement and impact frequently difficult, and often impossible. The implications of this for geographers engaged in military research are that ultimately the effects of our research on military institutions and practices will often be unknown and unknowable. At a time of much debate about the validity or otherwise of research excellence evaluations of impact, and of changes to funders' requirements for predictions of impact as part of the grant application process, we suggest that disciplinary advocacy of the possibility of impact and engagement could be tempered with more explicit recognition of this unknowability. We have focused in this paper on military geographical research, but suggest that this is an issue with far greater reach for geographical research and for geographers than is often recognised.

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