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**Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)**

Original citation:

Gray, Harriet (2016) *Domestic abuse and the public/private divide in the British military*. [Gender, Place and Culture: a Journal of Feminist Geography](#), online. pp. 1-14. ISSN 0966-369X

DOI: [10.1080/0966369X.2015.1034247](https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2015.1034247)

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Available in LSE Research Online: May 2015

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Article for themed issue?: Militarisation as Diffusion The Politics of Gender, Space and the Everyday

Domestic abuse and the public/private divide in the British military

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Divisions between the social spheres of public and private are always fluid, mutually constitutive, and politically and socially formulated. Within the British military, such divisions are further framed through the needs of operational effectiveness. In the pursuit of operational effectiveness the public/private divide functions at times as porous, in large part through the military's provision of services such as housing, welfare and policing to personnel and their families and through the notion of a close-knit military community, and at others as firm, bolstering operational effectiveness through recourse to militarised ideas of the private sphere as the fixed space of hearth, home and femininity which is to be protected by military force. This article employs narratives of domestic abuse as a window through which to analyse enactments of the public/private divide in the British military. The analysis draws upon interview participants' experiences of abuse and of help-seeking to illustrate the complex and

fluid ways in which the prioritisation of operational effectiveness frames and delimits the public and the private within the contemporary British military in relation to domestic abuse. The impacts of this upon victim-survivors' help-seeking experiences are discussed.

Keywords: public/private divide; military families; operational effectiveness; domestic abuse, help-seeking.

Introduction

This article is an analysis of civilian women's experiences of domestic abuse in marriages to servicemen in the British military and theorises the fluid enactments of the public/private divide in this context. I argue that in relation to domestic abuse, the socio-spatial boundaries between public and private, always dynamic and shaped by public processes of power towards social and political ends, are in the British military framed additionally through two interlocking factors: the needs of operational effectiveness and the power disparities between subjects positioned in differential social locations in relation to this operational effectiveness. Despite the fact that civilian women married to servicemen are not themselves members of the military, such militarised enactments of the public/private divide play a role in shaping their experiences of domestic abuse. This discussion therefore has implications both for the ways in which military private space is understood, and for efforts to ensure that victim-survivors can access appropriate welfare support.

This article draws upon qualitative research into abuse perpetrated by servicemen in the British military against their civilian wives. Forty-five participants took part in semi-structured interviews around the UK and in Germany in 2013 and 2014. Eighteen were civilian women who have experienced abuse in relationships with men serving in the British military – 13 in the army, 4 in the RAF, and 1 in the navy. Three were male British Army soldiers who have perpetrated abuse against their wives. Finally, 24 participants were support workers with experience of supporting these groups in a range of capacities, both civilian and

across the military welfare and policing services of the three forces.¹ It is beyond the scope of this article to explore the impact of rank and of race/immigration status on abuse; however it is worth noting that while participants' ethnic backgrounds and immigration statuses were diverse, all perpetrator participants and all of the abusive former partners of the victim-survivor participants were below officer rank. While this was unintentional, support worker participants assured me that it reflects the demographics of the vast majority of their clients, a fact which likely reflects the different coping resources available to variously classed victim-survivors rather than significant statistical differences in perpetration across the ranks (Pain, 1997, 239). Participants were accessed through welfare services at which they either worked or had sought support. In the interests of safety all victim-survivor participants had left their abusive relationships at the time of the interview. Perpetrator participants were/had been enrolled on a domestic abuse perpetrator programme. When extracts from interviews are used throughout this article, information which could be used to identify participants has been changed or omitted.²

While my analytical focus is on space and not abuse *per se*, it is necessary to briefly sketch my understanding of domestic abuse. Following Stark (2007), domestic abuse is characterised by a pattern of 'coercive control', built by perpetrators over their partners through a range of strategies, often including physical, sexual, psychological, emotional and financial abuse. Domestic abuse is a form of gendered violence; as many scholars have argued, it is shaped, facilitated, understood and at times legitimated by socially constructed gender relations (Harne and Radford, 2008, pp. 7-17; Harrison and Laliberté, 1994, 52; Johnson, 2008, 8; O'Toole, Schiffman, and Edwards, 2007, xiii; Stark, 2007, 210-211) and, in various ways (although beyond the scope of this article), by intersecting axes of power such as race, class and sexuality (Bograd, 1999). The public/private divide is implicated in this

gendered form of control in a variety of ways, making domestic abuse a productive window through which to consider the fluid constructions of this binary.

There is a paucity of research on domestic abuse in the British military; only one previous pilot study exists (Williamson and Price, 2009). Significantly more research has been conducted in other national contexts, in particular the USA (see, for example, the review of the literature by Rentz *et al* [2006]), where studies suggest that abuse is more prevalent and severe in military than civilian families (103). In the UK, young British male veterans are more likely than civilians to be convicted of violent offences (MacManus *et al.*, 2013), most commonly violence within a domestic setting (NAPO, 2009). The dominant focus of most research on the topic – in the USA (Taft *et al*, 2011; Smith Slep *et al*, 2011) and in the single British example (Williamson and Price, 2009) – is on the impact of deployment. While deployment is no doubt important, in particular in the context of the recent invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, I suggest that ‘common sense’ connections between deployment and domestic abuse limit our ability to see the elements of everyday military normality which shape abuse in important ways. While it is likely that some of the ‘everyday’ issues I discuss in this article are not unique to the British case – indeed scholars have charted the flexibility of the public/private divide in the Israeli (Herzog, 2004) and US militaries (Segal, 1986), and have critiqued the Canadian forces’ prioritisation of military objectives over the human rights of the service community (Harrison and Laliberté, 2008) – there do exist important specificities of the British example, such as civilian welfare state provision and the particular policies of the British forces.

The contemporary British military policy approach to abuse parallels the civilian in many ways, in particular after the Ministry of Defence (MOD) reviewed its policy under the broader 2009 government strategy ‘Together we can end violence against women and girls’. Current MOD policy defines abuse as:

Any incident of threatening behaviour, violence or abuse (psychological, physical, sexual, financial or emotional) between adults who are or have been intimate partners or family members, regardless of gender or sexuality.

(DCDS(Pers) Service Conditions and Welfare, n.d)

This policy advocates a ‘zero tolerance’ approach, explicitly stating that domestic abuse should not be treated as a ‘private matter’ (DCDS(Pers) Service Conditions and Welfare, n.d. 9, 11). Like much contemporary civilian support practice (Harvie and Manzi, 2011), under current policy military welfare personnel are expected to offer an apparently apolitical, reactive approach to individual cases of abuse focused on social work and criminal justice interventions.

While military and civilian policy approaches are largely comparable, it remains important to pay attention to the ways in which these policies are interpreted and implemented. In particular, the present research is interested in the ideas about space through which such policies operate within a given context. In what follows, I begin by exploring space as a complex and fluid social and political construction, with a particular focus on the gendered construction of the public/private divide. I discuss the ways in which abuse has been understood and experienced in relation to this divide, noting that it is classified as public or as private through *public* processes of power which work on multiple scales from the intimate to the geopolitical, including gender, race and class structures. I go on to discuss the ways in which the public/private divide functions specifically in relation to British military families living in base and patch³ communities, arguing that it is framed by the needs of operational effectiveness. I show that although civilian women married to servicemen are not themselves members of the military, their experiences of abuse and of help-seeking are shaped by this militarisation of the public/private binary. I then present three sections which draw closely upon my interview narratives to demonstrate these theoretical propositions.

Domestic abuse and the socially constructed public/private divide

As this article focuses on the role of the public/private divide as a socio-spatial construct in shaping experiences of domestic abuse, it is important to note that space is neither inert nor apolitical but is imbued with power and politics, constructed by, and in turn constitutive of, social relations. Space is a 'social product' (Holmes, 2009, 82), 'constituted through social relations and material social practices... [and] the social is spatially constructed too' (Massey, 1994, 254). Gender plays a crucial role in the conceptual and material construction of space and the spatial construction of the social (Massey, 1994, 3; McDowell, 1999, 12, 30-31).

Nowhere is this more pronounced than in the heteronormative, liberal construction of the dichotomous public/private divide, described by Pateman (1989, 11) as 'ultimately, what the feminist movement is about'. Exemplified by thinkers such as John Locke, this is an ideological division between the political realm of the public and the apolitical, private realm of the family home into which it is inappropriate that the state should encroach. Feminist scholars (e.g. Elshtain, 1981; Kelly, 2003, 32-58;; Massey, 1994, 180; Pateman, 1989) have long highlighted the heteronormative, gendered and gendering nature of liberal notions of the public/private divide, in which women are associated with the private and men with the public. They have shown how the public/private divide has contributed to making invisible women's experiences of abuse by concealing behaviour which occurs within the feminised psycho-social and physical spaces of privacy, enabling men to exercise power over women without consequence (e.g. Duncan, 1996; Kelly, 2003; Landes, 1998; McDowell, 1999, 88; Warrington, 2001). This is reflected, for example, in the long history of police reluctance to intervene in domestic abuse (McDowell, 1999, 88). Some feminist scholars have therefore conceptualised the private sphere as a site of the entrapment and exploitation of women,

where ‘the privacy of men [has been protected] at the expense of the safety of women’ (Kelly, 2003, 34).

While the feminisation of the private and the masculinisation of the public continue to influence understandings of abuse in Britain, this division should not be understood in simplistic or constant terms. Despite the terminology, it is not the somehow inevitable location of ‘domestic’ abuse within the private sphere which produces its invisibility. The public/private divide does not exist in any objective form, but only has meaning within social relations (Brickell, 2000, 165). The private sphere is an *imaginary* space that is ‘not separated from public, political worlds but is constituted through them: the domestic is created through the extra-domestic and vice-versa’ (Blunt and Dowling, 2006, 27). The private sphere thus functions through *public* workings of gendered, racialised, and classed power, and given this, its geographical and psycho-social space is not fixed but has ‘a certain plastic tendency that enables its boundaries to expand and shrink’ (Caluya, 2011, 204). This plasticity operates across scales, as the intimate is intrinsically interwoven with the international (Brickell, 2012, 585). Cuomo (2013), for example, drawing on the work of Young (2003), illustrates how the spatial logic of ‘masculinist protection’ – a model of security which focuses on the exclusion of physical threats from feminised private space regardless of the self-defined security needs of the targets of this ‘protection’ – operates on multiple scales from nation state to family home.

The public/private divide is politically structured, and it has concrete political implications. Ideas of ‘home’ can be instrumentalised by political projects in opposition, for example, to the workplace, to the front line or to ‘enemies’ both inside and outside the nation state as the political moment demands (Pieris, 2012, 771-773). As Pain explores, notions of public and private shape the fear of violent crime experienced by social groups in geographical space – fear which is formulated through structures of social inequality and

which impacts the movement of gendered, racialised and classed subjects through space (Pain, 1997; 2001). On a global scale, Hyndman (2001; 2004) describes a shift in international discourse from perceptions of the internal affairs of nation states as ‘private’ and beyond the concern of the international community to an understanding of ‘people’s bodies, homes, communities, and livelihoods... [as the] battlefields of contemporary conflicts’ (Hyndman, 2001, 215-216). This shift opens the way for greater international political intervention into states considered to be ‘troubled’.

However private it is felt to be, then, the conceptual and material site of home is ‘permeated by government’ (Allen, 1999, 749), as aspects of our ‘private’ lives from sexuality and marriage to property ownership and childrearing are regulated by the forces of the public (Allen, 1999, 727; Berlant, 1998). Women’s ‘private’ experiences of violence are constructed through and shaped by the forms of violence experienced in the public sphere, including structures of racism, classism and homophobia (Holmes, 2009). Domestic abuse is therefore not so much a ‘private’ form of violence as it is a form of violence which, in some settings and against some subjects, is ‘continually privatised’ (Rasool-Bassadien and Hochfeld, 2005, 8).

Operational Effectiveness: public, private and the marginalisation of civilian wives

Militarism is a deeply gendered project which is underpinned in both practical and ideological terms by the gendering of everyday social and family life (Dowler, 2012; Goldstein, 2001; Enloe, 2000). As a result, the public/private divide – always fluid and politically constructed – operates in particular ways in the military community. Clearly, the notion of operational effectiveness is not the only factor shaping the public/private divide in the military context; myriad other factors, including many consistent with the civilian sphere, play a role. While the fluid enactments of public and private in relation to militarised geopolitics are broad and multifaceted, and will be experienced differently by military

families living away from base and patch communities (and, indeed, by civilian families, in whose lives militarised geopolitics are implicated in various ways), given the limited scope of this article in what follows I narrow my focus to discuss the framing of the public/private divide through the discourse of *operational effectiveness* specifically in relation to abuse experienced by British military families living in base and patch communities.

At its most simply defined, operational effectiveness refers to fighting power and the ability to win battles, the capacity to use lethal force, or the threat thereof, to ‘achieve the ends set’ (British Army, 2010, 1.4). Despite this apparent simplicity, operational effectiveness is a nebulous concept which stretches beyond the battlefield to shape the identities, morals and values that serving personnel are called to embody at all times (British Army, n.d., 3). Militarised discourse casts operational effectiveness as an essential national priority, one which is ‘beyond debate, naturalised and immutable’ (Woodward, 2004, 133), the firm limit beyond which issues such as environmental protection (85-87, 133) and equal employment and diversity policies (Basham, 2009) cannot be prioritised.

In the British military, the public/private divide is framed by the needs of operational effectiveness. While the prioritisation of operational effectiveness is consistent at the level of the military authorities, its shifting requirements result in multiple experiences of the public/private divide at the local level. At times, the requirements of operational effectiveness call for the reification of the private sphere as a sacred space which must be protected by military force. The discourses which justify militarism and militarisation in the British context rely upon a gendered logic of protection in which the state enacts the role of masculinised protector of a feminised populace from perceived external threats (Cuomo, 2013; Young, 2003). The notion that it exists to ‘protect ‘hearth and home’’ (Atherton, 2009, 827) forms a central part of the rationalisation of British militarism is a recurring theme in studies of militarised identities (e.g. Basham, 2008, 154), and emerged in my own research, for example in the following statement from perpetrator participant Dean:

Dean: having the wife and children sat at home... is one of the things, when you're away on tour, it keeps you going... my wife, my kids, this is why I'm doing what I'm doing, they're not gonna end up talking Iraqi or Afghani ... [If soldiers were all single] would you get the same effort?

For Dean, the private sphere represents a sacred space which is to be protected from external harm, although beyond the scope of this article, harm which is explicitly racialised. Explicit in Dean's narrative also is the importance of this private sphere for the purposes of operational effectiveness; without it, soldiers would not put in the same degree of effort towards military goals.

Despite this there are other ways in which, in the pursuit of operational effectiveness, the public/private divide is enacted as porous. The military institution involves itself in the lives of its personnel in ways unseen in most other employment contexts, leading scholars such as Segal (1986) and Hockey (1986, 21-24) to label it a 'greedy' or even 'total' institution. Commanding Officers who become aware that personnel in their command are experiencing personal problems, for example with mental health, illegal drugs or their family, are likely to intervene in order to protect the military's investment in that serviceman. Andy and Peter, both former military and now civilian support workers, explained:

Andy: It's cost them a [lot of money] to be trained and they don't want to throw that away 'cause it's tax-payers money. So if they can empower change that can be sustained, they will engage with services.

Peter: Don't turn up to work, or your kit's not ready, or you're not fit for work: they're on you, right, and you will be forced into the system.

Despite the fact that civilian women married to servicemen are not in the military, the institution's involvement in the lives of its personnel often stretches to include their families. The heteronormative institution of the military asks a lot of its families, requiring many spouses to regularly uproot their lives, often sacrificing the chance to have their own career.⁴

To entrench the required commitment from both personnel and families, the institution provides a range of facilities including housing, welfare and law enforcement. Andy, in a statement that highlights perfectly the connections between family support and operational effectiveness, explained:

Andy: [The military] needs... a man fit to fight. Which means the family is happy... they make sure the dental service is provided, medical services, certainly abroad ... So if the family's happy, then the guy's gonna be happy; you got a happy soldier, you got a productive soldier.

In addition, spouses often find that their social networks revolve around other families within the 'military family', something which scholars have suggested has helped militaries to win the loyalty of wives and therefore to bolster the operational effectiveness of their husbands (Enloe, 2000, 154-197). Victim-survivor participant Mereoni told me:

Mereoni: The army is your family... regardless of you being just the one nuclear family, in general the army is your family.

The interview narratives above illustrate Hockey's and Segal's arguments that the military requires a level of involvement and commitment from its members and their families, and involves itself in the 'private' lives of its personnel, in ways and to degrees not found in most other occupations. This is not, however, uniformly so, but is framed through the needs of operational effectiveness in fluid and context-specific ways.

This tension between porosity and reification of the public/private divide in the British military community is mediated by the marginalised status of civilian women married to servicemen. Such women are not full and equal members of the communities in which they live; their rights in the community are contingent upon their serving husbands. Military housing, for example, is rented only in the name of the serving spouse, who has no official obligation to consult their spouse on housing matters (AFF, 2013). If the relationship ends,

non-serving spouses have 93 days in which to leave military housing and, essentially, to leave the military community (MOD, 2012).

This material reality is reflected in the feelings of marginalisation and of non-personhood which many victim-survivor participants reported to me:

Frances: You're not your own person, you're wife X. You're not Mrs Anderson or, you know, you're 'wife of'.... It makes you feel like you're a second-rate citizen.

Amy: You feel like you are stripped of your own identity and are insignificant.

Melissa: I was just excess baggage. That's what [wives] are classed as, excess baggage.

Non-serving spouses' marginalised status is rooted in their tangential relationship to operational effectiveness. Their contribution to operational effectiveness is through their impact upon the serving spouse; in Andy's words above, 'if the family's happy, then the guy's gonna be happy; you got a happy soldier, you got a productive soldier'. As Harrison and Laliberté (1994, 192-198) suggest in the Canadian case, this means that problems experienced by families are relevant to the military only insofar as they impact upon the serving person's ability to do their job.

As I go on to illustrate in the sections which follow, while civilian women married to servicemen are not themselves members of the military, notions of operational effectiveness nonetheless underpin the ideas of public and private which shape their experiences of abuse and of help-seeking in various ways.

'You can't hide in a patch'

Some of my interview narratives illustrate clearly the potential for porosity in the public/private divide in relation to domestic abuse. For former military support worker Peter,

the close-knit nature of the military community produces ‘protective factors’ which reduce the likelihood of abuse taking place because ‘You can’t hide in a patch’.

Peter: For years I never locked my door... [abuse was] rare because there was a strong community ... Someone would know if there was this big kerfuffle.... [There was] a couple who were naturists. Their house, do whatever they want. Except that everyone could see in... That caused a real flurry in the community ... So that’s why things like [abuse] are spotted very quickly... Someone would notice; there was no hiding place.

Peter’s account is problematic in that it oversimplifies the relationship between domestic abuse and the public/private divide, assuming that the invisibility of domestic abuse is rooted simply in the fact of its taking place ‘behind closed doors’. However, it does reflect a porosity in the public/private divide which can enable effective help-seeking avenues for victim-survivors, including Rachel, who experienced abuse when based overseas:

Rachel: [The welfare officer] asked me straight, ‘has he done that?’ ‘Cause I had a black eye. And I was like, ‘yeah’, and they were like, ‘we’ll remove him from the house’.... He had to do a lot of work regarding alcohol issues and money management and have a look into his past to see why he’s the way he is.

After a second assault, Rachel decided to leave her marriage.

Rachel: I turned around and I said to [welfare] ‘if you don’t book me a flight out then I’m never going’ ... they had me out of there within 48 hours.

While I do not suggest that it was necessarily the conscious intention of the welfare workers who supported her, from the perspective of operational effectiveness Rachel’s leaving the marriage enabled the military to preserve their investment in the serviceman, as the family problems which potentially impacted his ability to serve were removed.

From the perspective of a service provider, civilian (formerly military) support worker Andy explained the benefits of the linked-up provision of employment and welfare when working with perpetrators to help them to end their abusive behaviour:

Andy: They'll get him off work, so it's really easy to work with the military. It's a vested interest for them. They'll keep him off duty on a Monday night... Mr Smith who works at Tesco ... he can't go to his boss and say 'Oh, I have to go on this group'.

As demonstrated by the interview extracts presented above, the public/private divide within the British military community is collapsed in response to abuse in certain circumstances. This porosity can allow for both the promotion of the needs of operational effectiveness and the effective support of victim-survivors.

'They protect their own. They close ranks'

This porosity, however, was not experienced uniformly by all participants, and several described incidents in which it was disempowering for victim-survivors. Participants reported a lack of trust in the confidentiality of military welfare providers, whose confidentiality politics are again framed and limited by the needs of operational effectiveness. One regimental welfare policy, for example, states that 'confidentiality may have to be broken because of the requirements of the law and *the exceptional needs of the Army*' (MOD, n.d.a, emphasis mine). Similarly, the Army Welfare Service's confidentiality policy has 'a few exceptions ... involving situations when there is risk to self or other, serious criminal acts including breaches of security *or if operational effectiveness is seriously compromised*' (MOD, n.d.b, emphasis mine).

While it is not necessarily clear that disclosure of domestic abuse would meet these conditions, the strength of concerns over welfare confidentiality was reflected in a survey of 179 partners of British military personnel in which a majority stated that lack of confidentiality would prevent them from disclosing relationship problems to military welfare

(Williamson and Price, 2009, 20), as well as by participants in my study. For quasi-military support worker Alicia:

Alicia: My husband beats me up today; I'll take it to the welfare office. Welfare office will address it with the chain of command, and then he comes back after work, 'cause he's been called by [his] CO, he'll come back and beat me up again this evening.

Concerns over confidentiality motivate some victim-survivors to draw tight boundaries of privacy around abuse, concealing it from both formal support systems and the close-knit 'military family', because they can neither control nor trust what will happen if their experiences are made public. Many described patch and base communities as gossipy places, 'like living in a goldfish bowl' (Amy, victim-survivor participant), in which gossip about abuse would 'spread like wildfire' (Sophie, victim-survivor participant). In some cases, they felt that military welfare providers actively sided with their abusive husbands, in victim-survivor participant Melissa's words, the military 'protect their own. They close ranks'.

Quasi-military support worker Marcus said:

Marcus: The military look after their own. They tell you that quite clearly... we're a family, we look after our own, but the head of the family happens to be... the serviceman. So that's who they're looking after.

My research provided several examples of how 'protecting their own' is experienced in practice. Victim-survivor participant Natalie described her frustrations when attempting to prosecute her abusive husband through the military court system overseas:

Natalie: They're all together. There's no separation from any of them. They're all, boys club together, even the prosecution, [Royal Military Police], everybody is together in the mess... Nothing in the army is separated... They're there to protect the soldier.

When victim-survivor participant Ursula ended her abusive marriage, she felt that the welfare workers supported her abuser:

Ursula: [Welfare] said ‘You have to leave’, and I said ‘But I don’t know where to go, if you tell me where to go, I’ll go’. I was crying ... [They threatened to call] the military police’, and I said ‘OK, but I’ve not done anything’.... they said they were gonna make something up. So I thought, well I’ve got no chance here. If a ... welfare worker says I’ve done something, and they’re just gonna make something up, and I say I haven’t, they’re not gonna believe me. So I had to leave.

For Natalie and Ursula, their disempowered positions as non-serving spouses meant that the porosity of the public/private divide impeded their ability to seek appropriate help.

‘The military is not involved in their private lives, and shouldn’t be’

While the two preceding sections have demonstrated the porosity of the public/private divide, my interviews also highlighted instances in which the heteronormative boundaries of the privacy of marital space are re-inscribed around abuse. Discussing the support provided to victim-survivors by military welfare services, for example, former military support worker Peter stated:

Peter: It is not the military’s role to get involved in [emotional abuse]. That’s a personal issue, there’s not three in a bed here which is the assumption, there are two, and that’s down to you ... The military is not involved in their private lives, and shouldn’t be.

In Peter’s narrative, it is inappropriate for the institution to get involved in cases of abuse, which, given their lack of relevance to operational effectiveness, are defined as private. Illustrating this, victim-survivor participant Natalie recounted an experience when the Royal Military Police (RMP) came to her house after an altercation had taken place between her husband and another soldier:

Natalie: The RMPs were stepping over my broken furniture when they’d come to get my husband to protect another soldier. And I was saying... ‘Are you not gonna protect me?’.... they were walking around, seeing my broken house, and just walking away from me and leaving me like that, while I’m getting attacked with drills in the middle of the

night, slashed bed, being tortured, fucking strangled, and I'm telling them, going in and telling them, 'can you please tell my husband to stop?'

In Natalie's experience, the lines of privacy were drawn around the abuse even as the RMPs walked through the evidence of it. Their concern for the violence threatened against the other soldier, relevant to operational effectiveness and therefore a public issue, made invisible Natalie's ongoing experiences of violence from her husband, defined as irrelevant to operational effectiveness and as private.

The empirical examples cited above illustrate the ways in which the public/private divide in relation to abuse in the military community is at times constructed as porous, and at others as fixed. The needs of the military institution frame multiple shifts and reconfigurations in the fluid boundary between the public and private spheres, producing both porosity and separation, which are experienced in multiple ways by differently positioned militarised subjects. This has significant impacts upon the help-seeking experiences of civilian victim-survivors of military domestic abuse.

Concluding remarks

This article has drawn on experiences of domestic abuse in the British military community to explore enactments of the public/private divide in the contemporary British military. Analysis of the narratives of victim-survivors, perpetrators and support workers has revealed that enactments of the public/private binary – while always fluid and shaped by politics – are in this context additionally framed by the needs of operational effectiveness and by power disparities within the community. The axes of social power which operate within the public sphere, in particular the marginalisation of civilian women married to servicemen, have been shown to shape the construction of the private sphere in the military context. This research contributes to the work of feminist geographers which draws connections between the intimate spaces of the home and the public spaces of geopolitics, and which highlights the

role that gendered interactions within military families play in the enactment of militarism writ large (e.g. Brickell, 2012; Dowler, 2012). The study illustrates the impossibility of confining discussions of militaries and militarism to the ‘public’ spaces of military institutions and of international relations; the continual, political construction of certain spaces as public and the privatised others this produces are central to the operation of militarism on the geopolitical stage.

This study has salient implications for the help-seeking needs of civilian women who experience abuse in marriages to men serving in the British military. While the understanding of domestic abuse outlined in military welfare policy has much in common with increasingly dominant civilian approaches centred on social work and criminal justice, this article has drawn attention to the ways in which ideas about operational effectiveness work through notions of public and private space to shape the implementation of this policy at the local level. Clearly this is not the only factor shaping experiences of abuse in this context; however this article has shown it to be a salient issue with significant effects on victim-survivors’ help-seeking decisions. As the examples presented above highlight, in cases when the needs of a non-serving spouse experiencing abuse clash with the needs of operational effectiveness, those responsible for military welfare and discipline may be faced with trying to achieve a set of impossible compromises which may result in the marginalisation of the self-defined needs of civilian victim-survivors. Civilian women married to servicemen are not members of the armed forces; they have not signed any agreement which waives their right to be treated like any other civilian. Despite this, the narratives explored in this article suggest that the military has *assumed* the ability to waive victim-survivors’ rights in the name of its prioritisation of operational effectiveness above all other concerns. These problems are inbuilt into the system, and it is difficult to see how a branch of an institution with an investment in their abusers could be expected to provide effective support to victim-survivors of abuse. Further

work therefore needs to be done in practice to ensure that victim-survivors have sufficient access to domestic abuse support services which are not connected in any way to the military institution.

While the analysis presented above has complicated understandings of the public/private divide in the British military community, it leaves many unanswered questions and opens up avenues for additional research to be undertaken. Further research could explore how privacy is *experienced* within military marriages; how far do personnel and their families understand their relationships as a private, non-military space; and how this might be altered when both spouses are serving personnel, or when personnel are living in civilian accommodation off the patch? Additional research and analyses are called for in order to consider the ways in which the public/private divide within this context is constructed intersectionally through gender, race, class/rank and sexuality. Further reflection on the implications of the findings of this research for wider geographical work on the spatialisation of militarism and violence would also be valuable.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the participants who took part in this research for sharing their experiences with me. I would also like to thank the three anonymous reviewers as well as Dr Marsha Henry and Dr Katherine Natanel, Dr Ania Plomien, and the GI PhD workshop participants for their constructive feedback on earlier versions of this paper. In addition, I would like to thank the London School of Economics and Political Science, Funds for Women Graduates, the Annette Lawson Charitable Trust, and the Sir Richard Stapley Educational Trust for their financial support.

Notes

1. I refer to three types of support workers: 'military' support workers serve in the military in a support role; 'quasi-military' workers are civilians who work exclusively with service personnel and their families; and 'civilian support workers' work in mainstream services and not exclusively with the military.
2. In addition, minor grammatical changes have been made to some interview extracts for ease of reading.
3. A patch is an area of military housing for serving personnel and their spouses and children.
4. In 2011, 34% of British military spouses reported that they had moved house within the previous 12 months, 15% had accompanied their partners overseas in that time, and 61% of those found it difficult to find employment there (MOD 2011, i – iv).

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