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Female Veteran Transition: Exploring Gendered Power Relations, Discipline and Decision Making

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how military life affects the decision making of female RAF veterans during transition into the civilian world. By adopting a longitudinal approach and analyzing interviews conducted over 3 years this study explores the relationship between how normalized gendered militarized behaviors and idealized military aspirational identities affect choices made during transition out of the military. Disruptions to this idealized identity brought on by the decision to leave the military trigger recognition of and adjustments to the sense of self. Female veterans' consistency of self is supported through this disruption by drawing on deeply valued aspects of aspirational identity while rejecting others. The study has contributed to theory by demonstrating how gendered discipline and power combine to influence female veterans' ways of being and support aspects of aspirational identities as they transition into civilian life and face disruptions caused by differences in gendered expectations within military and wider society. By design, this research focused on a limited number of female veterans' experiences as they left the RAF, allowing a hitherto underexplored veteran cohort to be better understood.

1 | Introduction

Traditionally veteran research has been dominated by men and a masculine perspective which has led to a focus on policy and practice which assumed women's experiences and needs mirrored the male majority (Godier-Mcbard et al. 2021). This view led to the generation of what were believed to be neutral policies surrounding transition (Ashcroft 2014) but which were implicitly gendered (Acker 1990) and focused on presenting transition out of the military as a process of loss rather than opportunity (Micklewright et al. 2026). Despite female veterans making up almost 14% of all veterans and projected to grow (Jarvis and West 2024) much remains unknown about women's experiences in the military, their decision to leave and how they transition into civilian life (Eichler 2022).

The assumption that female veterans' experiences and needs were the same as men's was questioned by the UK Defence Committee (2021). It noted that women's experiences *in* the military can be at odds with men's and suggested transitioning *out* of the military and subsequent adjustment to civilian life can also be different (see also H. West and Antrobus 2021; Bailey et al. 2023). Research by Baumann et al. (2022) has identified challenges faced by female veterans during service can affect transition, including PTSD, holding a lower rank, and loneliness. In addition, female veterans have been found to face greater unemployment (E. Parry et al. 2019) and take lower-paid jobs than male colleagues (Godier-Mcbard et al. 2021).

Using a combination of Foucault's theory of disciplinary power (Foucault 1991, 1994) and Butler's (1989) performativity, this study offers a valuable theoretical perspective to understand how female veterans experience transition into civilian life. We will demonstrate how female service members internalize disciplinary practices such as hierarchical structures, reward systems, panoptic surveillance and bodily regulations. These create a disciplined military identity, (resilient, professional and loyal) that persists and shapes decision-making, identity formation and

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career aspirations beyond service life. This disciplined military identity is analyzed as female veterans navigate transition, carrying with them learned performances (e.g., projecting a competent image), as they conform, resist, or negotiate gendered expectations (military and civilian female) beyond their service. It does so by foregrounding the voices of female veterans (Bulmer and Jackson 2016) to connect professional and social decision-making and outcomes to a disciplined military identity. In doing so, this study aims to inform debate about why outcomes and support for female veterans needs to be considered differently.

Over three years, 16 female veterans were interviewed to reflectively explore (Alvesson 2003) their military experiences and transition to civilian life. The findings show how discipline and gendered performativity are seen to impact concepts of the self during transition through behaviors and patterns of decision-making, learned and rewarded in the military environment (Hale 2012) which are continued into or reflected onto expectations of life beyond service.

1.1 | Identity, Disciplinary Power and Gendered Organizations

The military, along with prisons and insane asylums, was one of the original institutions that Foucault (1991) recognized as sites of disciplinary power that through their associated values and norms shape individual identities, behaviors, and decisions. The UK military continues to contain many structural and relational attributes (Scott 2010) through which disciplinary power is wielded from legal and ethical requirements to hierarchical structures (Acker 1990) which set personnel apart from civilians. Although all roles within the UK Armed Forces have been open to women since 2018 (MoD 2016), nearly 88% of personnel are male (Gov.uk 2024) and concepts of masculinity (Adey et al. 2016) viewed through the lens of masculine military identity is deliberately gendered (Woodward and Winter 2004) to support the war-fighting role. This ensures military culture remains a rich site for gendered performativity where "masculinities are constructed, reproduced and deployed" (Morgan 2006, 444).

However, the predominance of a homogenous masculine military culture is not regarded as deterministic; such a reductionist view fails to consider the multiple military masculinities that coexist within the institution (Higate 2003; Connell 2005) or recent policy developments that support women (Defence Committee 2020). This and the institution's porous boundaries help mitigate the totalizing and subjugating effects of military culture, ensuring the military is not a total institution (Goffman 1961). Nevertheless, military culture operates through a combination of powerful relations (Lukes 2005), mechanics (control of space, activities and time) and technologies (judgment, hierarchical observation, and examination) (Foucault 1991), which can shape and influence behaviors and identity (Thornborrow and Brown 2009). For female servicewomen and veterans, this means that to "fit" or adapt into the dominant culture (Treanor and Marlow 2021) women may have unconsciously adopted or exaggerated militarized masculine identities (Eichler 2022) to succeed. For example, attitudes towards self-discipline and exceptionalism or displays of strength and resilience.

The French feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir's (1949) position that gender is a learnt behavior that reflects social relations of power and gendered inequalities within society provides a useful foundation for understanding the masculine military environment and the effects power can have on identity. As gender can be seen to be part of a "contingent socio-political system" (Butler 1997, 181), cultural norms associated with gender continue to be embedded in the Western psyche to largely configure women as "nurturing, emotional, supportive and intuitive, and men as rational, competitive and analytical" (C. Priola 2016, 145). Dandeker (2001) describes how the institutionalized mindset created in the military environment supports the functional imperative of its role—an acceptance of military exceptionalism over the civilian through legal status to enact violence on behalf of the state. This potential for violence is intimately associated with the masculine warrior ideal (Duncanson 2009) and reinforces a hyper-masculine homogenic identity that sustains military authority (Millar and Joanna 2017) that can lead to individuals seeing themselves as superior to civilians (Ricks 2007). Such a view can incorporate multiple masculinities and femininities, but it is still one where those who conform to the ideal dominate, leading others to follow (Duncanson 2009). In such environments, women have historically found ways to hide their femininity by adopting the appearance, behavior, and persona of a man—a historical example being Hannah Snell, who fought with the Royal Marines at the Battle of Devicotta in 1749 (The National Army Museum 2020).

Arguably, such performativity continues to reproduce gendered normativities in the workplace and maintain divisions of power (O'Brien et al. 2024) and behaviors which reproduce hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) and homosociality (Bird 1996). As such, masculine culture remains powerfully salient, despite a broader definition of masculinities being acknowledged (Higate 2003). This can be seen by the low number of women seeking and achieving representation within the Armed Forces and the combat arms in particular (The Economist 2025). Acker's (1990) theory of gendered organizations, where gendered thinking influences the foundation of work and organizational structures through "processes, practices, images and ideologies, and distributions of power" (Acker 1992, p. 567) can help explain the persistence of these inequalities and how such processes, practices and distributions can act as means of control over gender, body, and sexuality (Smith 1979) which permeate into the public consciousness (Phillips et al. 2022). It is also important to note that both women and men may feel pressure to conform to traditional feminine/masculine ideals, such as good mothers or male breadwinners, and that they may do so reluctantly (Laney et al. 2015) and that this can perpetuate gendered divisions (Russo 2024). Within the military environment, such thoughts and behaviors have historically been encouraged and constructed along gendered lines and symbolically reproduced through discourses, culture, and agentic choices. For men, this has been shown to demonstrate they feel a need to live up to hyper-masculine ideals with long-term consequences (Thornborrow and Brown 2009), although for women, the consequences are less understood. although such behaviors and ways of being can reinforce as well as resist divisions that reproduce and reify gender inequalities (Prividera and Howard III 2006), these are often accepted unknowingly by individuals through a

process of cognitive dissonance (Festinger 2006). Moreover, caution must be applied as Robinson (1996) has previously argued any view of "subjugation" fails to acknowledge conditional and temporal aspects of the psychological contract between the individual and the organization. A view which sees military personnel and concomitantly veterans as cultural dopes (Lynch 2012), stereotypes (K. Parry 2022) or stigmatized (Allen et al. 2023; Phillips et al. 2022) could limit understanding of the complexity and agentic aspects of veteran transition. This study therefore views disciplinary power (Foucault 1991) as a bi-directional combination of gendered performativity (Butler 1989) relationships, mechanisms and techniques that act on the individual to control and shape identity and behaviors through hierarchical observation, normalizing judgments, and examination but are not regarded as totalistic in their effects (Scott 2010).

1.2 | Gendered Identity Work and the Liminal Space

Identity work is the behaviors and associated ways of being that an individual performs to conform to or contradict a set of socially contingent normative frameworks, which are often associated with traditional concepts of gender (Butler 2004). The agentic construction of masculine and feminine identities is therefore neither neutral, static, nor definitive (V. Priola and Brannan 2009). However, limitations of agency are accepted due to an "unpredictable other" (Knights and Clarke 2017, 342) who can accept, be indifferent to, or reject presentations of the self. In these disruptive moments, which can be described as liminal or in-between (Turner 1987), a loosening can result in multiple identities, such as wife, mother, officer, being tested by incorporating elements of fantasy, the historic or the imaginary that can support feelings of distinctiveness and security.

Here, liminality is applied against a culturally specific experience (transition to civilian life) that understands identity as fluid rather than linear (Ibarra and Obodaru 2016). It is this fluidity and the contingent and contextual judgments of others that shape how individuals negotiate the liminal as they adjust to civilian life and negotiate social relations (Corlett and Mavin 2015). This is achieved by adopting or adapting different behaviors, thought processes, and even language based on conceptions of new/old normativities (Giddens 1991). If these new ways of being are accepted, they can help the individual regain a sense of emotional and social stability; however, if disruption is experienced, the lack of continuity between self-perception and socially accepted identity can trigger self-reflective recognition and further self-adjustment. Furthermore, lack of acceptance can be interpreted as a threat to the valued identity which has been adopted (new or old) and can instigate "habits and routines" to use as a defence against anxieties (Giddens 1991, 39) creating tensions and conflicts (Hoyer and Steyaert 2015).

During change, understanding which elements of an individual's sense of self are retained and maintained through identity work and which are discarded as no longer consistent with dominant normativities can help illuminate the relations of power embedded in organizational life (C. West and Zimmerman 1987). This is why coherence, credibility, and consistency concerning identity performances are of particular interest as retaining behaviors could indicate sites of perceived power whereas a modification could signal a change in understanding in relation to the self and surrounding normativities, be they local, cultural, or historical (Conroy and O'Leary-Kelly 2014).

Whilst military identities are seen to embody socially available meanings that are cultural, local historical, and therefore masculine (Godfrey et al. 2012) they are as C. Priola (2016) suggests also considered, for the purposes of this study, to relate to gender in a way that incorporates masculine and feminine behaviors, as opposed to biological differences. It is, however, recognized that cultural meanings can be unpredictable as they are socially contingent and therefore always in a state of becoming (Knights and Clarke 2017). This "*becoming*"even in highly conservative military environments where traditional cultural meanings are used to reaffirm concepts of power and discipline, change is constant as tensions between civil society and military dogma exist and behaviors and identities can be fluid, repaired, maintained, revised, or even reclaimed (Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003).

During transition out of the military, identity coherence can be difficult to achieve in the face of changing power relations and societal gendered behavioral expectations and norms (Gabriel et al. 2010). As inconsistencies between remembered and new experiences are introduced and incorporated into accounts of the self, paradoxes are absorbed through contradictory sense-making frameworks to produce gendered identities that could be considered stable but not necessarily coherent (Thornborrow and Brown 2009). Indeed, the gendered "image" or the idea of the self that is produced or imagined in response to civilian normativities can be at odds with previous deeply held understandings of militarized masculinities which were expected (Bulmer and Eichler 2017) and rewarded within the military environment.

While existing and emerging behavioral possibilities become part of the subject's considerations when faced with new or similar experiences, fluidity of identity occurs because understanding of the self is partial, necessarily limited, contingent on time, experience, and malleable based on changing meanings in the present (Alvesson and Willmott 2002). This means that identities can be difficult to grasp as "we always risk understanding who we just were, rather than who we are now," (May 2014, 80). Added to this, the social distance that exists between civilians and veterans can translate into a lack of understanding and support (Hines et al. 2015) and when valued identities are not recognized by significant others, that identity can be threatened (Knights and Clarke 2018). In such circumstance, the removal from a social world that engendered a particular identity construct could compel people to protect and crave relational links that support their identities (Bardon et al. 2015) despite paradoxes and inconsistencies. This may explain the resilience of aspects of valued masculine military identity, for example, those associated with dedication and sacrifice through rituals and routines (Higate 2003) or continued organisational loyalty (Connor 2010). As a result, conceptions of self-discipline or exceptionalism remain

important in terms of identity work for veterans and in the construction of who they feel they were, who they are and who they desire to become (Alvesson et al. 2008) and this can drive decision-making and behaviors through identity work.

By operationalising Foucault's (1991) disciplinary power and Butler's (2004) performativity, participants' adjustment to civilian life can be analyzed to examine if or how aspects of their gender identity transformed as they adjusted to civilian life. For example, personnel have been found to value skills and attributes that help them retain their professional military selves in civilian life, such as punctuality, discipline, resilience (Kulkarni 2020). Often, these take on aspects of gendered performativity (Butler 2004) as veterans demonstrate and assert superiority or difference over others (Goldstein 2018). These behaviors and ways of thinking and being, demonstrated through identity work within the participant interviews, enabled the analysis. That such behaviors can act as a mask for vulnerability is part of the dichotomy of veteran transition (Grimell 2024) and is interspersed by the double-bind female veterans face professionally during and after service (Harel-Shalev and Daphna-Tekoah 2016).

2 | Material and Methods

Sixteen participants (Officers (13) and Aircraftwomen (Aviators) (3)) were interviewed over 3 years. There were no limitations to the age, length of service or specialization of the participants. The oldest participant was 55 and the youngest 29. The average age the participants joined the RAF was 20, their average age on leaving was 42; the average time served exceeded 20 years. Time served ranged from 10 to 39 years. Nine participants joined the RAF before 2000, seven after. Two participants retired, declining offers to extend their service, one left on redundancy, and thirteen (81%) voluntarily chose to leave before their terms of service ended.

Initially, convenience sampling based on physical accessibility was employed (Easterby-Smith et al. 2008); however, veterans are a mobile population spread across the UK (ONS 2023) and globally. As a result, participant selection was extended through the snowball technique and social media, and interviewing was offered online to facilitate greater participation and maintain contact with those who moved overseas. Two to three interviews per participant were undertaken. The first focused on why the participant chose to join the military and their experiences in service and leaving. The second and third explored their post-service experiences and reflections on transition into civilian life. The longitudinal aspect of this research allowed participants' economic status, feelings towards the RAF and self-conceptions to be tracked and analyzed. The average time between interviews was 10.5 months.

Participants gave informed consent and were reassured of confidentiality. Pseudonyms and generalization of service details (Table 1) were used to ensure anonymity. A feminist

TABLE 1 | Demographics.

Participant	Joined	Rank	Education	Marital status[a]	Children	Economic status/sector −12 months to final interview		
Lisa	Pre 2000	Officer	Graduate	Married[a]	Yes	CR	CR	FT
Claire	Post 2000	Officer	Graduate	Co-habit[b]	Yes	TO	PT#	FT#
Jennifer	Pre 2000	Officer	Graduate	Married[b]	Yes	S	SE	SE
Maria	Pre 2000	Officer	A levels	Married[a]	Yes	S	FT#	SE
Annabelle	Pre 2000	Officer	A levels	Married[b]	Yes	Res#	CR	Res#
Kim	Pre 2000	Officer	Graduate	Married[b]	Yes	S	Res#	
Jessica	Post 2000	Officer	Graduate	Married[b]	Yes	S	CR	SE/Res#
Nicola	Post 2000	Aviator	GCSEs	Single	No	FT	FT	
Alexandra	Post 2000	Officer	Graduate	Married[b]	No	S	TO	
Sally	Pre 2000	Officer	A levels	Married[b]	Yes	PT#	Res#	
Susan	Pre 2000	Aviator	GCSEs	Married[b]	Yes	PT		
Amy	Post 2000	Officer	Graduate	Married[a]	Yes	SE	SE	
Emma	Post 2000	Officer	Graduate	Married[b]	Yes	CR	CR	
Karen	Pre 2000	Aviator	O levels	Divorced[a]	No	TO	PT#	
Sarah	Post 2000	Officer	Graduate	Married[a]	Yes	S	Ed	
Michelle	Pre 2000	Officer	Graduate	Single	No	S	FT	

Abbreviations: CR, caring responsibilities; Ed, education; FT, full time; PT, part time; Res, reservist; S, serving; SE, self employed; TO, time off.
[a]Partner a fellow service person.
[b]Partner still serving at time of interviews; # defence sector (Inc. reservist).

research philosophy was adopted to recognize female veteran voices and experiences worthy of study and could produce knowledge (Hammersley and Atkinson 2000). This philosophical approach influenced the study design by extending the research beyond transition to include joining and in-service experiences. This enabled an exploration of how social hierarchies, gender and power operated in the military and wider society (Lukes 2005). It is acknowledged that identity was co-constructed during the interviews (Kulkarni 2020) and that power dynamics of elite interviewing, reflecting the status of the interviewer and the participants existed (Pettigrew 1992). As the lead researcher was a veteran, insider status was acknowledged and helped build trust based on shared normative understandings (Easterby-Smith et al. 2008). However, challenges such as "over rapport" (Hammersley and Atkinson 2000) can influence analysis and this was countered by the objectivity of the second author. Interviews were conducted recognising potential sensitivity around discussion topics (Dickson-Swift et al. 2009).

The interviews produced over 2000 min of audio data, which were manually transcribed by the lead researcher. Narrative analysis was managed through NVIVO to establish a critical perspective and allow for consideration about why particular stories were being told at times against changing cultural values (Cortazzi 2012). Themes were generated from the data utilizing iterative techniques described in Table 2, adapted from (Bryman and Bell 2015).

Adopting a poststructuralist perspective, participants' stories were understood as forms of sense-making (Ricoeur et al. 1984). Foucault's theory of disciplinary power was operationalized by identifying textual markers in the narratives including hierarchical observation (e.g., performance appraisals), normalizing judgment (colleagues' comments and expectations) and examination (fitness tests and annual reviews). Butler's concept of performativity was applied by coding behaviors that enacted, resisted, or renegotiated gendered norms; for instance, working long hours to demonstrate commitment, rejecting posting cycles to prioritise family life, or adopting care responsibilities. Together, these lenses enabled a gendered reading of militarization (Hale 2012), highlighting how masculine and feminine identities were constructed and contested in participants' storytelling.

During coding, repetitions, expressions, and associated emotional responses linked to these markers were grouped and analyzed through this combined theoretical lens. Initial codes were then organized into themes that use military discipline and identity as a baseline: (a) rejection of discipline/identity leading to disruption, (b) rejection leading to aspiration for change, and (c) continuation of discipline/identity leading to consistency. These were synthesized into three identity constructs: (1) Disrupted, (2) Aspirational, and (3) Consistent, which participants experienced during transition (Table 3).

For example, participants who had once accepted fitness standards or frequent posting cycles early in their career (military discipline) as a means to achieve promotional success (masculine norms) began to resist/reject these norms of behavior due to changing personal and family needs (non-military masculine and feminine norms). Such accounts signaled both rejection of

TABLE 2 | Coding process.

Ser No	Narrative analysis coding and conceptual framework process	
1.	Data familiarization	Transcribing and reading the interviews and returning to the literature to refamiliarize or learn about emerging topics.
2.	Reflection	Critically question the data set, through a gendered lens that privileges hegemonic masculinity.
3.	Conceptualization and creation of descriptive concepts to inform the generation of themes	Repetitions in narratives identified for example, heroic narratives. Local expressions identified for example, rank, nicknames. Metaphors and analogies identified for example, assumptions unpicked, for example basic training experiences. Similarities and differences of experiences were identified (between participants and within individual narratives)
4.	Concept identification	Initial codes identified and themes generated.
5.	Reviewing concepts	Iterative approach to coding. Cross-checking to confirm if they reflected data and context.
6.	Defining and naming concepts and themes	Continuous analysis and refining of concepts, allocating concepts to themes related to several aspects of identity
7.	Linking	Identify patterns between participants and within individual subjective narratives. for example, similarities of identity constructs (idealized military masculinities) and narrative techniques (heroic narratives) across different career pathways/transition experiences
8.	Produce the report	Selection of powerful excerpts, referring to the analysis of the research question and literature.

TABLE 3 | Codes and themes.

Initial codes	Themes	Consensus of themes	Theoretical justification
Not wanting to maintain fitness	Rejection of military discipline	Disrupted identity	Fitness standards operate as a form of disciplinary control over the body (Foucault 1991). Rejecting them resists the masculine norm of bodily regulation and constant readiness.
Not wanting to continue following posting cycles	Rejection of military discipline	Disrupted & aspirational identity	Posting cycles reflect military control over time and space (Foucault 1991). Resistance signals rejection of the masculine expectation of total availability and mobility.
Not wanting to work long hours	Rejection of military discipline	Disrupted identity	Long hours signify conformity to the ideal masculine "greedy institution" worker (Acker 1990; Butler 1989). Refusal resists gendered performativity of self-sacrifice and loyalty.
Experiencing stress	Lifestyle change—Aspiration	Aspirational identity	Stress responses reveal cracks in disciplinary compliance, prompting alternative identity performances that aspire to balance or care (Butler 1989).
Experiencing boredom	Change/aspiration	Aspirational identity	Boredom disrupts the idealized heroic military identity, prompting re-negotiation of self beyond masculine military ideals (Thornborrow and Brown 2009).
Experiencing stagnation	Change/aspiration	Aspirational identity	Stagnation challenges the disciplinary promise of progression; participants seek new performative roles outside military norms.
Competing/changing responsibilities	Rejection of military discipline	Disrupted identity	Caring and family responsibilities embody feminine performativity (Butler 1989). Their conflict with postings/workload signals rejection of masculine discipline.
Wanting more agency/ independence	Rejection of military discipline	Aspirational identity	Desire for agency resists hierarchical observation (Foucault 1991) and reflects aspiration for self-defined gendered performances.
Questioning legitimacy	Rejection of military discipline	Disrupted & aspirational identity	Challenges to legitimacy contest normalizing judgments (Foucault 1991) and disrupt conformity to masculine authority structures.
Fit with organization	Rejection of military discipline	Disrupted identity	Perceived misfit indicates resistance to hegemonic masculine norms structuring the organization (Butler 1989; Acker 1990; Treanor and Marlow 2021).
Experiencing loss of military identity	Disruption	Disrupted identity	Identity loss reveals dependence on disciplinary regulation; its absence destabilises self-conception.
Experiencing ambiguity	Disruption	Disrupted identity	Ambiguity reflects breakdown of disciplinary certainty and gendered role clarity.
Experiencing pride in military	Consistency	Consistent identity	Pride reflects continuity of internalized discipline and valorization of masculine ideals (heroism, loyalty).
Valuing military friendships	Consistency	Consistent identity	Camaraderie embodies homosociality (Bird 1996) and reproduces military performative belonging.

(Continues)

TABLE 3 | (Continued)

Initial codes	Themes	Consensus of themes	Theoretical justification
Valuing military experience	Consistency	Consistent identity	Recognition of military experience demonstrates continuation of disciplinary capital into civilian life.
Wanting personal growth	Change/aspiration	Aspirational identity	Personal growth represents aspiration to reconfigure gendered performances outside military discipline.
Wanting a different work-life balance	Change/aspiration	Aspirational identity	Seeking balance resists the "ideal worker" norm (Acker 1990) and signals alternative gender performances.
Wanting clearer boundaries	Rejection of military discipline	Disrupted identity	Clearer boundaries oppose the military's control of time/space (Foucault 1991), disrupting masculine norms of total commitment.
Experiencing new rules	New social norm—Disruption	Disrupted identity	New rules highlight disjuncture between military and civilian disciplinary regimes.
Experiencing a lack of trust with the organization	Disruption	Disrupted identity	Breakdown of trust destabilises compliance with disciplinary power and its gendered legitimacy.
Wanting greater freedom of expression	Rejection of military discipline	Aspirational identity	Desire for expression challenges military silences and gendered constraints (Butler 1989).
Experiencing new friendships/ social norms	Disruption	Disrupted identity	New civilian friendships expose contrast with military homosocial discipline.
Reserve service	Continuation of military discipline	Consistent identity	Reserve work maintains continuity of disciplinary routines and military performativity.
Sense of purpose	Continuation of military discipline	Consistent identity	Purpose reflects enduring identification with disciplinary ideals of service and loyalty.
Transferring military behaviors	Continuation of military discipline	Consistent identity	Transfer of behaviors shows persistence of internalized discipline and gendered identity performances.

military discipline and the emergence of alternative gendered performances, necessitating shifts in self-understanding and producing disrupted or aspirational identities.

The movement from codes to themes was guided by the operationalization of disciplinary power and gender performativity. For example, references to "fitness tests" and "posting cycles" were not treated as neutral descriptions of work routines, but as markers of disciplinary control (Foucault 1991) and of masculine military norms, which could be accepted or rejected, but nevertheless prioritised bodily regulation, mobility, and unquestioned availability. When participants resisted these demands which prioritised service needs over the self the accounts were coded as acts of rejecting military discipline and gendered behavioral expectations. These accounts informed the theme of "rejection of discipline and masculine behaviors" often while participants still recognized these demands were necessary in service-life. This step ensured that codes were consistently interpreted through the theoretical lens rather than grouped descriptively.

3 | Findings and Discussion

This section presents the themes generated by the interview data noted at Table 3. It begins with aspirational identities shaped by an idealized military self that is represented as resilient, selfless, loyal, and respected before showing how these were disrupted by competing responsibilities and the realities of service life. It concludes by examining how consistency and disruption shaped values and loyalty in both new and enduring aspirational identities.

3.1 | Aspirational Identities

Participants overwhelmingly regarded the military as an opportunity to reject the confines and pedestrian nature of civilian life and associated feminine gendered norms. They aspired to a different identity that embraced adventure, danger and heroism aligned with an idealized masculine military identity that upholds and values such behaviors (Lapointe 2013) and is respected within and without the organization. Many spoke of *belonging to* the RAF before entering regular service, with 11 of the 16 participants having multiple family members who had served or were serving when they enlisted, whereas others had belonged to Air Cadets[1] or became affiliated at university. As a result, several participants regarded themselves as part of the wider military family and were familiar with and accepting of its disciplinary processes, including behaviors and standards, before their first day as regulars.

Sarah described her family as having military blood, whereas Annabelle saw no alternative career beyond the RAF. Participants also discussed their sense of duty and desire to help people in need, which would at times require them to put the organization before themselves, reflecting the UK military's focus and UK strategic policy of neo-liberal interventionism present in the late 1990s (supporting humanitarian aid and peacekeeping). The women knew they were joining a disciplined institution which they felt had a strong ethical and moral core that reflected their principles, values and aspirational identities albeit within an organization, which contradictorily, was capable of deadly force.

The desire to join the military, combined with exposure to military norms in childhood or as young adults, suggests military socialization originated before regular service commenced. It is therefore unsurprising that effects were deeply embedded, reflecting a hegemonic military identity more inclined to action rather than inaction. This is reinforced by the military who construct strong military identities in opposition to weak civilians (Basham 2008).

> You get told from basic training; you're no longer a civilian ... it gets drummed into you throughout your career' you're different from them.
>
> (Nicola)

By presenting civilians as fragile beings, the military accentuates, and prizes physical prowess and mental resilience imbued with status and power. This indoctrination appears to chime with the participants' self-conceptions and aspirational military identities linked to concepts of masculinity and how they presented themselves: "*I was quite sporty, outdoorsy, quite fancied something adventurous*" (Amy). However, complex aspects of instrumentalism were acknowledged, and levels of pragmatism accepted in terms of, disciplinary power and the relationship between the individual and the organization as Karen acknowledged, "*they treat you just as a number.*" Only Sarah and Annabelle reflected on the autonomy they lost by enlisting; the remainder accepted the military's discipline, hierarchal structure and panoptic control of their lives, including how they dressed and behaved, as part of the "effort-bargain" demanded by the organization in exchange for status, purpose, and legitimacy, or employment, through which they could secure their aspirational selves. Most participants did not associate joining the military with a loss of personal freedom, rather, their narratives contained multiple examples of what they had hoped to gain from military life instrumentally and personally.

Joining narratives coalesced around enlistment[2] representing a continuance of a military life or a pathway to a valued aspirational identity. These were overwhelmingly represented by a disciplined masculine military ideal, including that of protector (Duncanson 2009) or adventurer that appealed to the participants, only a few reflective participants recognized these narratives as gendered. Moreover, joining was not always described as an agentic decision, even if aspirational identities were a core motivation. Several participants introduced the concept of "accidentally joining" the disciplined military, an abdication of agency which sat at odds with feminist self-concepts of individuals who did not want to conform to civilian gendered norms. Cross-participant analysis demonstrated how these stories required the participants to conform, resist, or negotiate between masculine decisiveness and feminine passivity whilst also enabling them to navigate self-conceptions and decision-making beyond their military careers. For example, Claire questioned her decision to join a disciplined hierarchical organisation by commenting post-interview, "*I was always a bit of a hippy, what was I doing*?" By describing herself as a "hippy," the antitheist of the self-policed disciplined identity required of service personnel, Claire builds a bridge to an *alternative* lifestyle beyond military service. However, rather than seeing such contradictions as a symptom of cognitive dissonance these stories had a dual purpose acting to reject disciplined military power manifesting through the mechanics and techniques of power over corporeal selves, time and space, while allowing the participants to locate in their narratives the seeds from which alternative identity formations could grow.

3.2 | Disrupted Identities

At times the lived realities of military life reflected aspirational militarized identities from being winched aboard a cruise liner in the South Atlantic to going on exercise with the Royal Marines inside the Arctic Circle or being on convoy duty in Iraq. However, these moments were not enough to sustain greedy aspirational identities that were continually buffeted by negative gendered experiences of service life, which overwhelmed their leaving narratives in a contested but arguably undisciplined rejection of unquestioning loyalty and commitment. Although the participants' reasons for leaving varied, they were broadly categorized as follows: lack of promotion (rejection of disciplinary practices and conformity to hierarchical structures), boredom and competing competition of responsibilities (rejection of a disciplined singularity of primary purpose), and a separation of moral and ethical values between themselves and the wider defence and security environment (rejection of moral and ethical superiority espoused by the institution). Analyzing each of these reasons through a gendered lens reveals instances of contested performances of disciplined masculine military identity, producing disrupted identities and a recognition that the aspirational idealized military identity was unachievable. This resulted in disruptions, fissures, and inconsistencies in a hitherto reasonably consistent identity construct as their ideal and lived experiences diverged.

As one of the few ways achievements are recognized in the Armed Forces, the promotions system artfully combines mechanical and technological forms of power through time (too old or too young) and judgment (annual appraisals), but is also implicitly gendered, recognising and rewarding the ideal militarized masculinity. Nevertheless, few participants explicitly related their promotion challenges to being female. Some complained of being too young or old to be considered for promotion, however, it is argued that although this categorization is applied to men and women, it can mask gendered bias. For example, participants, especially those who were mothers, described a posting and promotion system which reflected classic gendered perceptions of disciplined greedy institutions, which demanded unconditional availability and loyalty.

> They wanted to post me away from my husband ... there are no childcare facilities down [there] at all. There's no crèche, there's no nursery, and its weekend work and evening work, and I explained to them that I had a small child. The desk officer said, 'you're going to have to decide what you want from the RAF and who is going to take the lead between you and your husband'.
>
> (Lisa)

Placed in a position where they felt pressured to choose between family and the military the women rejected disciplinary norms. This refusal to conform to military discipline (go where you are posted) and associated normative behaviors (uncomplainingly accept what the military is offering you) resulted in negative value judgments being made by those in positions of power as the women failed to meet military expectations. Here Sally and Lisa recount how senior officers argued that time away from work represented a lack of commitment to the RAF which affected their promotion prospects.

> Do you really feel that you can be competitive with your fellow Officers who've not chosen to take a career break? You've taken periods off for maternity; it was your choice to have a family; it was your choice to take a career break. Do you really feel that you can be competitive? I think what is best for you is to take a demanding staff tour to re-prove yourself to the Air Force.
>
> (Sally)

> I met with the senior officers who compared having a baby to having a hip replacement. They told me that I couldn't expect to pick up where [I] left off.
>
> (Lisa)

In this environment, participants described doing their best to "fit" (Treanor and Marlow 2021) the military ideal, presenting themselves as ideal employees who prioritised the RAF by working long hours, accepting short-notice postings driven by service needs (accepting military control of their time and space) for which they expected to be rewarded. *"It was only 4 months in 7 years that we were at co-location units" (Sally).* Participants described how they tried to present themselves as an ideal worker, performing undesirable jobs to compensate for how competing responsibilities as partners and/or mothers affected their commitment to work. Alongside this, further descriptions of militarized control of time and space were common as the women described "*sacrificing*" time with family in favor of work. For many, a point was reached where their mental health and wellbeing were at risk.

> it was like realising a relationship you're in is very much one-sided and you overcompensate. I would volunteer for all the crappy jobs that no one else wanted to do. I really tried to juggle it, not letting anyone down. Then slowly the realisation that it was very much one-sided, and that the expectation was on me.
>
> (Lisa)

Often, participants looked to successful women in the organization for inspiration and divided these higher-ranking female colleagues into two groups: those who ***did not*** have children and were able to focus on their careers and achieve promotion success and those who ***did*** have children but outsourced parenting responsibilities to achieve career success. Both pathways suggest prioritising career over family life (time and space) and mimicking disciplining bodily practices and emotions (normalized masculine behaviors) over gendered feminine norms was the route to achieve promotion. Such divisions and separations between those who had no children, those who chose boarding schools or hired live-in nannies versus those who kept their children at home ignored disciplined silences of contested realities (between idealized performances and heart wrenching decisions). These acted to divide female voices within the organization, amplifying masculine ideals and offering no career pathway to success for women who looked to incorporate traditional feminine ideals/mothering roles alongside professional ones. The negative effect this could have on women's careers were openly recognized by line managers:

> He said, 'You know you would have been a Squadron Leader by now if it wasn't for the fact you had had children'.
>
> (Lisa)

> When I announced my pregnancy, my (female) Group Captain said, 'I thought you were a career woman!'
>
> (Sally)

Conformity to hierarchal structures left both Lisa and Sally unable to directly challenge their superiors over such prejudicial positions, but they were positions which were intimately felt with lasting consequences. Annabelle sums up the situation she found herself in as follows.

> You can't be a mum in the Armed Forces; you can pay somebody else to be the mum for you.
>
> (Annabelle)

In this environment, the masculine drive for promotional success, as a reward, in part, for disciplined performative practice, influenced decision-making, and affected the women's corporeal selves. Both Jennifer and Claire discussed how their desire for promotion influenced life choices, with Jennifer choosing to stay single rather than begin a relationship and "*end*" her career, while Claire delayed getting pregnant so that she would not let her squadron down by going on maternity leave. However, despite years, if not decades, of masculine performativity which mimicked masculine practices in the workplace when children entered the family dynamic, servicewomen often unknowingly conformed to civilian feminine social norms. This represents one of the first instances of disrupted identities for many as in direct contrast to their military selves, they assumed most of the caring responsibilities. Guilt, parental and professional, was commonly experienced as participants went to extreme lengths to present a preferred self, continuing to reflect the ideal disciplined singular masculine worker, despite their changed circumstances.

> Friday afternoon when everyone else in the team had gone ... I'd still be there knowing I had childcare till 6 o'clock [pm]. You find yourself in a position where you're choosing between work and children, and sometimes I would choose in favour of work. I wouldn't feel good about doing that.
>
> (Jessica)

> If I had meetings, even overseas meetings, I was still breastfeeding, I took my daughter with me, and my parents would travel with me.
>
> (Sally)

These challenges were not always unexpected. Emma explained in her interview that she had never expected children to be compatible with military life. However, even for those who did not have parental responsibilities, careers seemed to plateau, opportunities narrowed, or the social contract became broken. Although the mundane increased, such as being expected by male colleagues to organize tea and biscuits for meetings, excitement dwindled, and the women (like all service personnel) remained subject to regular disruptive postings. For Alexandra, this combination of boredom, everyday sexism, and mundanity began to erode her disciplined conformity to the institution, and she began to consider alternative careers and lifestyles.

> I thought ... I'm going to leave because there's loads more out there that excites me.
>
> (Alexandra)

Underappreciation, postings, and sexism were a toxic combination affecting the participants' adherence to institutional obligations, but so were boredom, stagnation, and a divergence of moral values. For mothers, the clash between presenting themselves as disciplined professionals and parents revealed gendered tensions they had hereto been unaware of. This was alongside recognition that the organizations espoused values and ethics were not reflected in their lived experiences. Karen for example felt people within the organization were being allowed, encouraged, or even rewarded to treat each other badly which she felt was at odds with the organization's core ethos. Claire and Nicola recognized a separation between the organization's ethos/values and their own in relation to how and why it enacted violence at the behest of the state. Together the outcomes of gendered expectations of disciplined performativity and perceived ethical divergence between the organization's espoused and lived values led to disrupted aspirational identities which were, for the participants, no longer compatible with a disciplined military life. Moreover, as previous research (Knights and Clarke 2018) has shown, the affirmation of significant others within the workplace is crucial for women's career success and its absence can damage women's career prospects. In the examples given here the women were unable to secure a valued disciplined military identity as they failed to meet performative expectations of normative militarized behaviors, or allow the military to control their space, activities or time which resulted in negative hierarchical observations, judgments and examinations.

3.3 | Consistency Through Aspirational Identities

Participants did not fit readily into any one transition pathway, making categorizing and defining their exit journeys initially challenging. However, although participants reported a mixture of fear, relief, trepidation, excitement, and expectation about leaving the RAF, applying the gendered lens to their narratives helped distinguish overlapping transition pathways in relation to aspirational, disrupted, and consistent identities. All three identity concepts drove decision-making concerning career choices and priorities as participants sought to reassert a semblance of consistency, such as Emma "*I am a housewife, but I used to be in the military*" while navigating the expectations of challenging others, as Alex explained, "*my mum is apoplectic that I am leaving, ... she said [this] to me*, '*But you won't have an identity anymore*'."

For some, the wider Defence and Security sector and entrepreneurial activities provided participants with the most easily recognizable pathway to identity consistency through a continuation professionalism and ambition that reflected aspects of their disciplined militarized selves and for those remaining in the security sector maintaining links to mechanisms of power through time, space and management of activities. This section will explore these pathways, firstly discussing the defence and security sector before moving on to entrepreneurship.

Seven participants chose to work as MoD Civil Servants, contractors, or within the RAF Reserves. Annabelle, a strident militaristic participant, chose the latter only to resign approximately 6 months later, before considering joining again. Despite attempts to conceal her changed status from regular to reservist, she was sensitive to how others perceived her, feeling they treated her differently.

> ... I've had to sort of go: you are not a real Squadron Leader anymore ... there's a difference between a reservist and a regular. I get to choose if I want to go and get shot at, but that's not what being in the military is about. You don't get to choose. You get told.
>
> (Annabelle)

Her explanation reveals the challenges of maintaining an aspirational identity in the face of institutional normativities reinforced by a hierarchical system, which regards reservists as less than their regular colleagues because they have more control over their time and space and are judged deficient as a result. Indeed, Annabelle found it impossible to maintain or increase her status through promotion and find a better work/life balance through reserve service. Rather she experienced correlational identities (mother and military officer) elusive as masculine hegemonic military practices, reflecting the hierarchy found within disciplinary power structures, and continued to dominate and overwhelm through judgments, observations, and examinations.

Employment in the MoD civil service can also present veterans with a familiar environment with seemingly correspondingly

similar mechanisms and techniques of power. This allows them to benefit from their economic military capital and experience, and maintain a purpose aligned with their military values while only being partially subject to military discipline. However, although this environment may be familiar tensions and challenges can emerge, as Claire discovered as she found techniques of power, civilian/military behaviors and values and subsequent judgments, working differently to what she expected.

> There are engineers who haven't had a manager for a year, and they've gone a bit feral .... There's people not wanting to take responsibility .... Civil servants are seeing me as a Squadron Leader still. But I haven't got the rank, and they are waiting for me to calm down, but I don't think I can because this is me.
>
> (Claire)

Claire struggled within this familiar but different space where time and activities were judged differently. She described this civilian environment as "*devoid of accountability*" in contrast to the military, which has a clear chain of command responsibility. When she tried to address issues, a lack of recognition or respect for what she felt was her positional and expert authority, previously signaled through military rank and title, was absent. This hierarchical misalignment resulted in a heated encounter and a crisis of confidence, bringing emotional turmoil "*I spent most of Thursday night in tears, going*: '*What have I done*?'" She questioned whether her temperament and values fitted with the civilian organization.

> It's not for me. I don't think I can be that mediocre and just accept that nothing is ever going to change because there's no will or desire to change it.
>
> (Claire)

Claire's narrative contains multiple accounts of the military being elevated over the civilian, and as her masculine leadership and management style failed to gain traction with colleagues, she adapted; but she spoke of a lack of trust, differing behavioral expectations, priorities, and judgments, even when working with military colleagues.

> He [the RAF Officer] didn't know how to judge me, so he took me to be the lowest common denominator ... I laid out my experience and my rank [and]the conversation got easier.
>
> (Claire)

As a MoD civil servant, Claire found it increasingly challenging to occupy what became an enduring disruptive liminal space, and despite being someone who prided themselves on being able to consistently manage in the harshest of military environments, her identity was challenged, resulting in a crisis of confidence and a period of sick leave.

A third way to maintain a military identity is through the civilian defence sector. Marie was flattered to be headhunted into this environment, which delivered the trappings of masculine success: status, company car, and increased salary. Speaking before she took up the role, she was confident she would be able to draw on power/knowledge relationships within a familiar environment in which she expected the techniques and mechanism of power to work in a similar way to those she had experienced when serving.

> I'm going into a job that I very much understand, and I'm going to be briefing the people that I used to brief when I was in the Air Force.
>
> (Marie)

Similar to Claire's experience, after 12 months in her new job Marie found her work/life balance had deteriorated, she faced sexism not experienced in the RAF, found her status eroded, and her integrity questioned. These experiences acted to attack her sense of self (honest, hardworking, and tough) and threaten her well-being, which she attributed to the toxic masculine work environment. Whereas previously the military's disciplined hierarchical structure (rank and professional reputation) had protected Marie from egregious gendered bias in this different but similar environment, she was left "*feeling a failure, feeling guilty, feeling useless*." Only through a re-evaluation of her priorities and values was she able to act by resigning, describing the decision to do so as "*empowering*." Integral to this feeling was an interview with a senior manager whom she confronted about the culture and the effect it was having on morale. Challenging the techniques and mechanisms of power within the organization helped Marie regain her self-confidence and fitted into a recurring theme within her narrative - her self-perception as someone who speaks her mind and stands up for colleagues, a heroic identity that aligns with conceptions of a disciplined military self.

Entrepreneurs need to be disciplined in terms of time, space and activities they engage in. They are often viewed as heroic, and the application of a gendered lens and subsequent thematic analysis demonstrated how this pathway allowed participants to mirror valued aspects of a military identity, heroic and successful, (and be observed and judged as so) that was reminiscent of military life.

> I am designing how I want it [the business] to be; I am making ideas for the future ... working for myself." ... "I am managing director of my own company that is pulling in, even if it is only a couple of hundred thousand [£] that is a lot more than I was on before.
>
> (Maria)

> I sort of came to the conclusion [that] I could set up a business and raise lots of money with a view to creating a sustainable business, ... so I can't give all the revenue to charity, but I would like to give a substantial [amount] to a charity.
>
> (Amy)

Participants felt they had something to prove in terms of their capability and were driven by financial rewards and the need for status. However, aspirations extended beyond redressing a lack of promotion in service as they also sought a better work/life

balance alongside professional autonomy. Entrepreneurial activities allowed participants to develop an identity distinct from the military while also containing opportunities for continuity in terms of their values, how they measured success along masculine norms (Lewis 2015) and their work ethic. In this sense, setting up their own business demonstrated their capacity for bravery, capability, and sacrifice—all traits associated with disciplined military professionals, and which allowed them to maintain aspirational identities.

The application of a gendered lens and understanding of how power runs through relationships enabled the analytical framework to be extended to participants who were economically inactive. For example, participants who remained connected to the military through their partners/husbands and as a result found themselves continuing to live under the same or similar techniques and mechanisms of power as when they were serving found the experience challenging. They often found their military identity invisible as they were judged as civilians with no military experience. With gendered performative aspects of military membership such as rank and clothing denied to them and replaced by traditional feminine attire and status their stories initially revealed how their military selves were challenged, yet they maintained continuity through periods of disruption by drawing on the very identity denied to them to understand their new place.

> People talk to you differently. I struggled letting the 1250[3] go because if I went into PSF[4] ... and said I was Flight Lieutenant Jones and showed my card even though I was in civvies I think people assume a different level of ... not intelligence, knowledge I suppose. They assume that you've never served—[that is] the thing that surprise me.
>
> (Jessica)

> ... the second I go anywhere there is uniform I struggle because I'm in civvies and they don't necessarily know who I am and I am there and it's like, there isn't a "don't you know who I am?" but there's the realisation that they don't know who I was.
>
> (Annabelle)

Such experiences reflect military exceptionalism, an exclusive, implicitly gendered military way of being, underpinned by knowledge and status, hitherto unknown or unacknowledged by the participants and from which they suddenly found themselves excluded. Being civilians and judged as "just a wife" by military personnel contradicted their sense of self, creating a "double jeopardy" as their social value was reduced.

> Initially it was really exciting doing the school run and then some of the realities started kicking in .... my opinion was respected, people would listen when I spoke, people would come to me for advice. I now spend a lot of my time with two gorgeous little people [her children] who half the time don't listen .... I have achieved what I wanted... I can do much more with them so that's unquestionably mission accomplished and it's brilliant—it's just everything else that is the issue.
>
> (Jessica)

Jessica's narrative is indicative of the dichotomies between participants' past and present. She created an affirmative narrative that acted to secure her RAF identity: *"people came to me for advice*," overlooking negative aspects, failing to get promoted. Through this congruence, identity work is conducted as Jessica counters uncertainties, rebuilding and maintaining a professional and aspirational self through an idealized concept of motherhood. She saw doing the school run as "*mission accomplished*" but nevertheless remained unsettled "*it's just everything else* that is *the issue*." In this case *"everything else"* is the judgments and observations of others.

Even the most dedicated mothers, intensely motivated to be present for their children, struggled to represent themselves as "*just a mother"* because it contrasted so deeply with their embodied professional military identity.

> I struggled mentally and emotionally with the transition ... going from being fully employed with a wage and a purpose outside of the home to ... almost a nobody.
>
> (Lisa)

> I was suddenly just a wife and a mother, and I didn't have anything that was me.
>
> (Sarah)

Such feelings are deeply revealing about how the women continue to revere the military ideal and how this was intertwined with their sense of selves despite their failure to live up to its ideal and remain serving. It is this contradiction that makes the female veteran experience unique in that the desire to maintain a valued self often rests on unacknowledged or underappreciated recognized and judged disciplined military masculine identity in contrast to the socially reduced status of the female civilian, the feminine epitomised through motherhood. In an extreme case due to the security situation in Northern Ireland, one participant hid their military background altogether to the extent they created a fake Facebook page, erasing her identity and the opportunity for her valued self to be recognized. Alternatively, partners of servicemen found themselves in social situations requiring them to "*play the game*" and fit a "*label*" named "wife of ...." This status came with an insider's knowledge that former colleagues, including servicewomen, saw and judged them in accordance with the techniques of military discipline as "less than." This appeared to drive behaviors designed to counter derision as participants strove to be "more than," such as becoming the best wife or mother. This occurred in an environment where other wives treated them differently because of their veteran status, viewing them as spies or feeling they wore their husband's rank as opposed to legacies of their own service. These complex environments meant social integration proved difficult as participants noted the challenges of making new friends, stepping

outside their comfort zones, or finding common ground in what were uncommon situations where the same techniques and mechanisms of power operated on them in a different way.

In another seeming pivot from everything military, three participants chose to enter the caring or charity sector; however, whilst engaged in feminized professions, they nevertheless enabled the participants to engage in identity work, which maintained heroic narratives. Sarah, for example, explained she was driven to help people by returning to her medical roots. "*I don't have to work, but I want to be a nurse*." This career choice enabled Sarah to reassert her agency over the RAF while also attempting to adopt a pluralistic approach to her career aspirations, balancing work and family responsibilities and maintaining the heroic narrative. Michelle, already qualified, appeared to unproblematically continue her professional medical role in civilian life, while Nicola worked at a charity while studying for her A "levels to enter medicine." However, while the transition into the workplace appeared smooth, both Michelle and Nicola spoke about how they drew on their military skills and experience and shared similar frustrations operating alongside civilians they viewed as more inclined to "talk" than to "do."

> My behaviour hasn't changed in how I approach my work and my job. It's a bit annoying that people don't seem to have the same kind of urgency.
>
> (Michelle)

> I'm way more confident than everyone else. It must be the military ... they must have ideas; they can't just be sitting there and not have ideas! I say, 'come on, let's do this'.
>
> (Nicola)

While recognizing their colleagues' professionalism, dedication, and capability, Michelle and Nicola regarded the civilian workplace's slower operational pace as frustrating and missed the military's masculine-driven results-based culture, which often relies on the power of self-discipline. The perceived lack of drive in the workplace, which they observed, and judges as a lack of professionalism, was used to elevate Michelle and Nicola's military selves over their civilian colleagues. This perspective represents a continuation of an aspirational, idealized military identity transferred problematically into civilian life due to the frustrations and resentments it can breed. Yet while Nicola measured all things new by her military experiences, and could find them deficient in comparison, she also came to think of service life negatively *"you are too sheltered in the military from real life, from real people and real people's problems"* a reality she described as a *"dream world"* and wished she could "*unknow everything*" and go back to the way things were. Such contradictory or dualistic sense-making can be viewed as liminal expressions that represent the contradictory emotional complexity and embodied relationship veterans can have with their service and impact transition.

Regardless of the pathway taken beyond service life, and whether participants were applying gendered normative military techniques and mechanisms of power to others or experiencing the consequences, they responded by forming their understanding of place, identity and relationships through these Foucauldian tools. In doing so, militarized identity became a means to shaping performances, decisions and meaning-making.

4 | Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that female veterans' transitions and post-military experiences can be considered different from their male colleagues. By viewing agency and decision making as functions of disciplinary power implicitly linked to idealized concepts of military masculinity, this study has shown how female transition into civilian life can be affected. Cross-participant analysis revealed significant patterns in terms of how narrative identity work was used by the participants to reaffirm or counter dominant military ideals such as integrity (moral/ethical) or professionalism (working extra hours or maintaining standards) during transition and into post-military lives. Common themes emerged around status, masculine and feminine behaviors and the judgments of others, the consequences of which could be seen to influence the participants' professional and social choices and interactions. As they experienced transition the participants responded to identity consistency and disruption by drawing on aspects of their military and or female civilian selves to support their sense of self and aspirational identity. Crucially such identity constructs were measured against a disciplined masculine military identity, whether to achieve confirmation or contrast against the ideal. These moments of consistency and disruption were often centred around how others saw them through the prism of gendered normativities within the military and wider society.

Contribution to theory is provided by detailing how military disciplinary power and gendered identity affects decision-making, influencing female veterans' transitions in ways not previously documented. By applying a gendered lens to the concept of disciplinary power, the limits and consequences of disciplinary theory have been applied to transition. Narrative analysis, which foregrounded aspirational identities based on masculine military ideals, enabled the boundaries and repercussions of agency and discipline to be explored, thereby addressing a considerable research gap in female veteran transition. For example, the self-disciplinary drive female veterans have to succeed, professional or maternal, reflects the masculine promotional success embodied by rank and status found in the military's disciplined institutional hierarchy. Maintaining this self-discipline, as if continuing to be under surveillance by the very military discipline they left behind, acts to achieve a valued self even as they reject the military itself. Approaching transition with a greater understanding of military and wider societal normativities can help better theorise the consequences of gendered performativity and disciplinary power for female veterans in relation to how decision-making (professional and personal) is linked to their aspirational identities and how consistency and disruption can be navigated.

To assist with transition out of the military the careers transition service, which provides resettlement support to service leavers, could offer more flexibility by allowing individuals to defer use

if they enroll in higher education or have caring responsibilities. Civilian employers working with female veterans could, as part of their onboarding activities, sensitively explore cultural and behavioral differences between military and civilian organizations to help veterans adjust to new environments.

5 | Future Research

Participants were selected through a combination of the snowball technique drawing on personal contacts and social media requests deliberately drawn from the RAF as an under-researched group. Future research could examine cultural differences between the services and the diverse experiences of different ranks and specializations. Revisiting the participants to further explore their transition journeys and using additional qualitative data collection methods may also provide further insight (Keeling 2024).

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Endnotes

[1] UK Ministry of Defence sponsored cadet force.

[2] Enrolling in the Armed Forces.

[3] The military ID Card.

[4] Personnel Services Flight–Human Resources.

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