

Ageing, veterans and offending: New challenges for critical social work

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The relationship of ageing and the study of veterans of military service who have offended is uncharted territory. What is available to us are accounts operating in disparate areas of ageing and offending and veterans and offending. This has rich implications for 'critical social work' to add weight of research and theory to the significance of ageing identities of veterans for professional social work. This has challenges for the knowledge base for a critical social work given the significance of veterans' identities and experiences.

Ageing identities themselves have been grounded in social policy discourses and professions of health and social care and the institutionalisation of state care policy since the advent of the Welfare State in the United Kingdom. However, an intensified erosion of these structures has led to an interiorisation of the ground upon which a viable ageing identity can be constructed for veterans. Biggs (1999) has investigated how ageing is constituted in the consciousness of persons. Indeed, the struggle for meaning when accompanied by issues of 'pain' caused by external events may be facilitated or impaired by constructs that permit the smoother processing of the experiences (of being a veteran) as an identity formation via recognition by others.

Simon Biggs (1999) encourages social workers of older people to gain empathic appreciation of their clients' life worlds and enhanced affiliation with them through the use of biographical narratives that highlight their individuality and humanity which lies at the heart of understanding what it means to be a veteran. It can be argued from this proposition then that the ageing veteran never finally becomes but is left as an unfinished project, in a state of transition. In reality, however, typifications of ageing veterans intertwine with masculinity,

femininity, sexual orientation and race which serve to regulate and define the social spaces that older people use.

The chapter contextualises and critically explores the complicated relationship of those social spaces to interrogate ageing and the relationship of veterans and assesses emergent research. The chapter is a deliberate ‘teasing out’ of the challenges for critical social work sensitised to the experiences of older military veterans who have offended. The conclusion makes a case for agenda for critical social work that takes seriously the experiences of older veterans in the criminal justice system.

The power of discourse, ageing and identity

Taking theoretic influence from Judith Butler’s (1975, 1990) explanation of identity as not something that someone *has*; instead something that someone *does*, we view here identity as a complex entity and exchange between a person and society. Identity then may be conceived of as a bridging concept between the two. Moving from an explanation of identity formation being a product of a socialisation process, it is imperative to make valued considerations of the macro discourses at work and how the involvement of political and cultural discourses in the shaping of individuals.

Hall’s (1997) various detailing of the importance of making observations of discursive formations encourages us to inquire into the recurrence of similarly styled messages abundant across multiple texts. The confronting of the audience with an assemblage of messages of knowledge, strategy or imperative of similarity reinforce the constructed reality. Debate remains on the preferred route to disentangling identity creation in this context, as Creed, Scully and Austin (2002) summarise, whether ‘actors constitute themselves through discourse or are choreographed by discourse’ remains a matter of analytical interpretation. The exposition here

draws upon the latter as a way of considering the impact of supra-individual discursive formations of age, offending and post-military life. Particular dominant discourses will exist, but it is also our task to be attuned to the discursive silences and potential for some knowledge and understanding to be subjugated as a consequence of prevailing cultural 'scripts' that shape understandings over the veteran, the lawbreaker and how and in what ways ageing imbricates both.

Public, political and academic discourses on ageing, offending and the veteran are positioned. We may look and see that current discourse on ageing, offending and post-military life, these identities have their basis in a credentialing process. A discourse constrains the identity because the discourse is influenced by privileged scientific explanation, historical precedents and moments, or cultural forces. For example, discourses of ageing and identity have often been built up upon biological foundations, discourses of offending prioritising individual mal-adjustment as a source of causation behind criminality, and veterans' identities often constructed through a valourising of previous experience and 'warrior', 'hero' and 'masculine' credentials. Identities, then, are contrived based upon how discourse forces distinct social positions. For critical social work, care is needed to determine what forces contour discourses, and the effects they have on identities.

Ageing and identity have undergone significant exploration by gerontologists and others to advance understandings of identity formulation. Discourses of ageing and identity circulate across a variety of texts and sources, be they media discourses, medical discourses, political discourse and economic discourse. Public discourses of age has assisted, in many examples, in the forming of cultural scripts that see older age as negatively stereotyped (Lin et al., 2004); with lower status afforded to an older age than middle age individuals. Ageist categorisations such as 'elderly' are in essence the product of a social manufacturing process

(Coupland, Coupland & Grainger, 1991). Coupland (2009, p.855) captures the basis of this in suggesting:

Our biological and chronological ageing are, in objective terms, immutable and indisputable, at least until we start to see chronology as a socially created and endorsed meaning system, and until we realise that biological ageing is only one of several metrics that we can impose on ourselves and others.

The convening of negative older age stereotypes in the way that they dominate public discourse has given way to a homogenising effect whereby older age comes to reflect a particular set of characteristics. These characteristics contribute to an identity – often one which reflects cognitive impairment, culturally estranged, a lack of physical dexterity, health frailty, financially burdensome, and generally dependent upon others/the State.

Older people are positioned through language across multiple texts and sources. What we see is a particular discursive formation of ageing drawn from legislation, policy, media representations, academic research and institutional rhetoric. Such discourse has had an unhealthy effect on the identity of the older person. Through a positioning of the older person as dependent and devoid of positive characteristics, then individual agency is diminished and control is taken (see, for example, Hugman, 1999).

Understanding ageing and offending – the identity construction of the veteran

The shaping of societal narratives of crime have invariably focused upon the sources of risk and danger being seated among specific social groups across the lifecourse. As Altheide (2002) describes, symbolic meanings are provided by a range of sources for public consumption such as news and fictional entertainment; and that children, in particular, can be construed as integral in discourses of fear. For example, punitive shifts in the management of children and young

people have occurred alongside evidence to suggest leniency among older offenders. Smith and Schriver (2017) confirm that ageing impacts sentencing decisions, with possible explanations for leniency emerging from judge's own attitudes towards the ageing process and the likelihood of the threat, their perceived blameworthiness and practical implications of sentencing decisions. Where it is the case that leniency is exercised in this way, an effect is apparent. If the penal role of the state is concerned with the expression of shared moralities, then there will likely be a replication of this sentiment in the imaginations of onlookers of the penal process. Sentencing itself, alongside a host of other interventions, create social identities at the same time as communicating a particular moral message particularly about ageing veterans.

We may ask what is a veteran? In its general definition, a veteran is not specific to the experience of military service. However it is a term that is firmly placed in parlance describing post-military life. Who is a veteran? Well, this can come to mean a person who has spent one day or their whole working life in military service and subsequently left the armed forces. What these questions pose for us is that despite a vagueness in the explanation behind the term, *the veteran* often comes to be represented as a particular homogeneous entity (see Burdett et al., 2013 for analysis of non-alignment between self-identity and popular definitions). This is clearly not the case, however public discourse is structured in such a way to imply specific characterisations. Despite occupational histories of a veteran not being visibly distinguishable from another person, *an* image of *the* veteran is known to the public. Media representations nourish this by their focus on the visibility of veterans at certain times and their participation in specific events. The veteran is unmasked through membership to certain categories and involvement in particular tasks and rituals. In observing these memberships and participation, further exploration is possible along the lines of chronological age.

In the wake of military operations, media and public attention are often drawn to the plight of injured service personnel (Kleykamp & Hipes, 2015). This is not something new, with interest in the injured and/or 'fallen' soldier resounding through media platforms following the Vietnam war, the Iraq and Afganistan conflicts to name but a few. Injuries sustained in conflict are often visible and life-changing, in addition to the 'hidden' scars of a psychological nature. In many cases injuries constitute the termination of a career in the military. In a modern era, the 'chronologically young', (usually male) wounded amputee has become ubiquitous with what a veteran is and their identity mediated in this way. As many find themselves enduring such injuries, this group have become generative of veterans of modern conflict and victims of asymmetric warfare brought about through improvised explosive devices. The prominence of the young wounded veteran at the other end of the lifecourse has also gained traction through causes, charitable work and global events such as the Invictus Games (Shirazipour et al., 2017). Insights into the personal biographies of wounded veterans continuously emerge that authentically represent the horrors of warfare and the journey of overcoming the adversity of injury at a chronologically young age. Discourses of welfare, admiration and support operate within such a domain. Identities are not shaped in such a way that elicit messages of pity, or dependence (often seen in cases of illness and injury among the general population); instead, as authors such as Pitchford-Hyde, 2017) contend, the injured military veteran has become synonymous with strength, determination and courage – the very values and expectations of the military institution they once belonged to.

The second source of reference in distinguishing the identity of the veteran is through the witnessing of commemoration and remembrance events. Often televised, these events attract public and military involvement with former members of the armed forces frequently taking part in processions, wreath laying or being among the gathering of the public. It becomes possible to reference many (not all) veterans in such situations through their display of personal

medals, awards and insignia on civilian clothing (although some medals may be awarded to non-members the military). Televised interviews often draw upon the binaries of the veterans participating – the young and the older veteran. This approach is utilised to capture the contrast and similarity between conflict in different historical periods, such as the World Wars and the more recent war and the ongoing conflict in Afganistan. At the same time, this subtly links the veteran’s experience to a person of a particular chronological age. As each year passes the propensity for the *older* veteran to slowly rescind from televised conceptualisations of the veteran in the media framing of commemoration and remembrance. The year 2012 saw the death of the last surviving veteran of World War I in the world– former member of the Women’s Air Force, Florence Green. This came three years later than the death of Harry Patch, who was the last remaining soldier to have fought in the trenches of the Western Front of the Great War; an individual who had attracted much attention by media agencies (Webber & Long, 2014) Veterans of World War II remain an important dimension of news coverage of events such as Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday, however, given the recent and ongoing conflicts of Iraq and Afganistan, and their associated newsworthiness, media framing appears to have shifted in its impetus. The chronologically older veteran has an increasingly inferior ability to compete in modern newsmaking of commemoration and remembrance given the critical mass of veterans of more recent conflicts and wars.

Given the growth in public interest, political concern for, and academic engagement in the study of military veterans and offending, the National Association of Probation Officers (NAPO), in 2008, published a statistical insight into the number of ex-armed forces personnel serving sentences; some 20,000 was estimated. Inquiries and investigations into the extent of veteran offending, during this time, attempted to make quantative predictions, however, in the absence of screening by prisons and probation agencies of previous military experience, difficulties arose in delivering a reliable snapshot of the true extent of sentenced veteran

offenders. The Defence Analytical Services and Advice (DASA) reported in 2010 that approximately 2820 of those in custody in England and Wales had previously been members of the armed forces. More than half (51%) were over the age of 45 years, and 29% were over the age of 55 years (compared to 9% of the general prison population). Surveys and research findings have also attended to the types of offence that ex-armed forces serving sentences have been convicted of, and possible risk factors. Violent and sexual offences are noted as more pronounced among cohorts of sentenced veteran offenders (DASA, 2010; Howard League for Penal Reform, 2011; and see Murray, 2015; 2016 for a detailed analysis on this topic).

The Howard League for Penal Reform (2011) have examined closely the materials available in reviewing ex-servicemen in custody in England and Wales. As they describe, the issues associated with veteran groups in custody are not unique:

What is clear is that the conventional problems associated with criminal behaviour such as drug and alcohol abuse, homelessness, a poor ability to deal with emotions, low educational attainment and financial pressures, appear to be as common among ex-servicemen in custody as it is among the general prison population (p.8).

However, opportunities do present to operationalise mechanisms of support for ex-Armed Forces personnel in contact with the criminal justice system through an improved provision of help and support. Advantages of tailored support, and a duty of the Armed Forces to minimise problems in transitions from the services are deemed critical. The report also encourages us to think beyond media concentration on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder among those who have experienced conflict. While this is an important issue for some leaving the Services, as the author's note, "other issues including accommodation and financial management [...] excite less media attention. Nonetheless, no discussion of the problems faced by ex-servicemen should ignore PTSD. But neither should we assume this is a uniquely military problem" (2011, p.72).

Interest in veteran offending has also been captured in media reporting of government surveys and comparative commentary from elsewhere (e.g. North America). In their 2011 *Report into the Inquiry into Former Armed Service Personnel in Prison*, The Howard League for Penal Reform began to point towards the significance of the chronologically older veteran offender. This has been noted as important in respect of the potential for military service to defer offending behaviour until later in life, or that the onset of offending behaviour may occur some time from discharge from the military. However, public and academic interest and analysis in the older veteran offender is not as advanced as perhaps it could be. Reasons behind this may be an extension to the situating of the veteran in the public imagination and how discourse choreographs the identity of the veteran. We have seen earlier the persistence of contemporary portrayals of the veteran as chronologically younger. Depictions of the veteran offender in public discourse mirror this also. What the public know about veteran offenders may be slight, but also particular in its character. Public discourses of the younger veteran inform public discourses of the veteran offender, and therefore the veteran offender is cast as young in chronological terms of age. This is upheld by representations that garner public interest, such as the accounts surrounding perpetrators of prisoner abuse at the Abu Graib facility and former Royal Marine Alexander Blackman who was convicted of murdering a Taliban prisoner in 2013 (The killing had took place in 2011 when Blackman was aged 36). In these instances the violent veteran offender is positioned as being of younger age. The focus of younger-aged offending by military veterans is further evident in academic scholarship such as that by MacManus et al. (2013). Their study focused on servicemen aged under 30 years and concluded that the proportion of young servicemen with a conviction for violent offending was much higher than among men of a similar age in the general population (20.6% vs 6.7%).

Despite statistical evidence to the contrary, representations that position the veteran offender as chronologically younger are abundant and therefore contribute to what is known in respect of age, of the veteran offender.

Criminal justice and critical social work

Criminal justice and its relationship to social work has been a site of turbulence in England and Wales for a number of decades. As Barry (2000, p.575) remarks, it has “had to adapt to the needs of politicians and policy makers”. The purpose and status of criminal justice social work have, as Smith (1998) concludes, lurched from ideological binaries of welfare, assistance, help and support, to surveillance, enforcement and case management. Supporting offenders through welfare-engaged means was a foundation of early probation work when tracing its origins to the late 1800s. This ethos was something formalised and preserved in various legislative developments such as the Probation of Offenders Act 1907 and the Criminal Justice Act 1925. The task of probation very much remained faithful to individualised and tailored support and supervision during the inter-war period and after. The work of the probation officer, however, began to evolve in such a way that was informed by more academic, positivist approaches whereby psychological expertise was deployed to investigate and act upon analyses of human behaviour (Canton, 2013). By the 1950s, the founding cultures and ethics of probation work, namely missionary roles and approaches, had been replaced through the harnessing of positivism and rehabilitation as driving principles, in addition to continued legislative reforms that professionalised roles in the probation of offenders. Work with offenders though remained social work although an assault on such aims was to come as the 1970s dawned. A widespread pessimism of the utility of rehabilitative programmes to reform offenders signalled the collapse of the rehabilitative ideal in the 1970s. Home Office research in addition to the now infamous

study conducted by Martinson (1974) was profound. Further, the Criminal Justice Act 1972 introduced community service which had a jarring impact on some probation officer's view of criminal justice social work (Nellis, 2007).

Crime control agendas of the 1980s were characterised by messages of the Conservative government being a 'government of law and order'. A continuation of an increase in the use of prison custody marked this era, as did the publication of the Statement of National Objectives and Priorities (1984). The SNOP was significant in reshaping the core aims and purpose of the probation of offenders. Whitehead and Statham (2006, p.113) capture the essence here:

The Probation Service was being told without a vestige of ambiguity that it was a criminal justice not social work agency; it must devote itself to public protection and think about victims; it had a professional duty to challenge and confront offending behaviour; it must work closely with partners in the criminal justice system and the voluntary and private sectors in the fight against crime; and it must have credible products to offer the courts and deliver quality reports.

The erosion of social work training for probation officers, coupled with various legislative developments such as the Criminal Justice Act 1991 centred the goal of probation as deliverers of punishment in the community. Community-based sentences were no longer to be an alternative to custody; instead a penalty in their own right (Mair & Burke, 2013). A justice model now pervaded probation work, replacing traditional social work models that favoured therapeutic interventions (Barry, 2000). Risk management, casework administration and the delivery of punishment in the community enacted cultural changes and redefined roles and responsibilities. However, somewhat of a renaissance in rehabilitation emerged in the 1990s, as Gelsthorpe and Morgan (2007) report, through the 'what works' movement – a revived confidence in rehabilitation programmes bringing about opportunities to reduce reoffending. Targeted programmes, both individual and group-based, have come to dominate the probation work landscape. This occurs however alongside a continued unwavering requirement for

probation workers to risk assess and manage. Social work in criminal justice seemingly remains impoverished in this context where high volume case management is demanded.

The ascendancy of 'get tough' criminal justice policy has, as Andrews and Bonta (2010) and Smith (1998) lay claim, repealed the venerable lineage of the support of offenders and more broadly criminal justice social work. Offender management has in many cases replaced criminal justice social work in the nomenclature of working with offenders. This has undoubtedly had a profound effect at cultural and practical levels of such work. Further, such changes amount to a particular discourse having been created in relation to offender work. However, criminal justice social work has maintained a more secure position in the area of youth justice. The development of Youth Offending Teams (YOTs) has not seen a straightforward application of social work among offenders, rather as Goldson warned in his 2000 article,

[...] the degree to which social work will be able to retain its specific professional identity, its integrity and its child-centred focus within a multi-agency context in which the police and the probation service (itself the subject of an increasingly 'correctional' emphasis) enjoy a steadily developing influence is questionable" (p. 262).

Nevertheless, if criminal justice social work is to be seen most pronounced in the penal process, it is amongst the management of younger people. This is not to suggest that it is unwarranted or undeserved, on the contrary; instead it highlights a contrast across offender populations.

The ageing veteran offender: implications for knowledge base of critical social work

The debates about the older veteran offender appear to end at the points noted by the Howard League for Penal Reform (2011). What of their experience of punishments later in the life course? What of the health and wellbeing of the older veteran offender? What of the ability of

the older veteran offender to do what is asked of them in regimes of the prison or community punishment? What of their identity as one of duality of the chronologically aged offender and the ex-member of the Armed Forces? Whilst these questions can perhaps be best explored through empirical enquiry, we can perhaps offer up why we do not necessarily know answers to these questions. The combined effects of discourse that direct attention more strongly towards crime occurring in younger age and an increasing discursive positioning of veteran identities as younger adults, creates the trap whereby those who fail to meet the archetypes are rendered invisible. This inferiority to compete against domineering discursive formations brings about consequences, both for the individual and for public policy administration. Underrepresentation in discourse has already led to concern for an ageing offender population which has prompted a range of research studies and commentary to assess needs of this group. Further, as we have seen, organisations such as the Howard League for Penal Reform, in assessing the needs of the veteran offender population, have done so in order to examine more closely what some have described as a 'hidden army' in prison (Travis, 2009).

Taking the study of veterans and ageing, most research has focused on a lifecourse approach. However, it is contended here, that much research instantly locates an understanding of younger adults as veterans. This plays into an analytical elision and engages in reification in that lifecourse is conceptualised as too narrow and requires ontological flexibility to accommodate other marginalised groups in the study of veterans. For example, this arguably reproduces ageism in its neglect of older people as veterans, and as veteran offenders. We contend it is not intentional ageism but it leaves a huge analytical space for the experiences, for example, of older people and the knowledge critical social work can learn from.

Such lessons for critical social work include becoming a veteran is a critical turning point in identity formation, the way people age and wartime experiences remain a 'hidden' population, seldom researched or considered in studies of ageing (Settersten & Patterson,

2007). Thus, the relationship between ageing and veterans is slowly developing and illuminate that veteran's experiences are complex and that many hidden variables associated with wartime experiences affect the experience of ageing identity.

To address this, Spiro, Settersten and Aldwin (2016) constructed a conceptual frame for examining the long-term consequences of military service for ageing veterans. The authors situate military experience within a person's life trajectory and socio-historical context.

Drawing on a life-course approach, their conceptual model rests on four key foundations:

- i. the effects of military service is a life-long process;
- ii. military service leads to both gains and losses;
- iii. the effects of service are experienced within a matrix of social relationships that can protect or create 'risk' for veterans;
- iv. the effects of military service occur within a socio-historical context. This model alters the nature of questions that social work researchers should ask about military experience, expands outcomes from predominantly negative consequences to the full continuum of negative and positive effects, and advocates more grounded methodologies sensitised to eliciting experiences of military service.

Similarly, research into the older offender has begun to shine a light on the needs of those who are ageing and in receipt of custodial or community sentences. A lack of specific central policy for an expanding ageing group of offenders (those aged 60 years and over being the age group of highest growth), is concerning (RECOOP, 2017). As the Centre for Policy on Ageing and the Prison Reform Trust have indicated, there are numerous challenges of 'growing old' in contexts such as the prison. The invisibility of such demographics of the sentenced population is, at the same time, a subjugation of the needs of the group. As Ginn (2012) reflects, an abundance of research and debate over younger offenders has brought about a lack of focus on older prisoners. In their analysis, Snyder et al. (2009) aver that the challenges of older adult prisoners are profound. Health-related challenges, restrictions on opportunities for social engagements, and obstacles accessing age-sensitive recreational and rehabilitative programmes

can come to characterise the experience of the older age prisoner. Physical and mental health needs, and access to treatment for acute and chronic conditions is cited routinely as a challenge facing older prisoners (Lemieux et al., 2002; Harris et al., 2007; Murdoch et al., 2008). Critics of the failings of adequate healthcare support for chronologically older offenders has cited root causes of issues stemming from the fabric of the building and environment (Moore, 1989), issues of recognition and an abundance of undetected illnesses and disorders (Fazel et al., 2001), the importance placed on this prisoner demographic in policy and strategy (Hayes et al., 2012), and the ideological challenges of delivering therapeutic interventions in a custodial and punitive environment (Kuhlmann & Ruddell, 2005).

The Howard League for Penal Reform (2011) has already contended the need to identify and mitigate against unmet needs in veterans' transition from the military. Doing so may bring about positive implications in terms of reducing the likelihood of contact with the criminal justice system. The estimation of 3.5% of the prison population being ex-service personnel (Howard League for Penal Reform, 2011) is sizable. Indeed, these will cover a range of age brackets, however our encouragement here is to reflect upon the opportunities for criminal justice professionals and social workers for the older veteran offender. where the convergence of issues and needs of the veteran, and the issues and needs of the older offender converge, experience of punishments may be more profound – a lesson for critical social work to widen the knowledge base for future research.

Conclusions

Amidst a discursive formation that situates an emphasis on criminal justice social work prioritising young people, crime and offender policy that focuses on young people rather than older people, and the emergent casting of the veteran identity as a 'younger' prototype, where

does this leave the experience of punishments for the older veteran offender? Although studies based solely on older veterans, or older offenders, offer many epistemological insights for critical social work in an understanding of the ageing process, they also have limitations. Findings from studies may reflect the idiosyncratic nature of social work and assessment of clients within one sizeable social work system; hence generalisation of knowledge is limited without both a fluid lifecourse of different age groups and utilisation of comparative examples.

Using such an approach helps provide a comparative understanding of the effects of military service that vary by historical context, by diverse social conflicts and offer signposts that research findings of today's ageing veterans may not apply to future cohorts of ageing veterans. For the next generation of social work studies, it will not suffice to dichotomise military experience for ageing veterans as present or absent. In comparative perspective and using a lifecourse approach of different age identities, there may be a need to systematically engage with ageing veterans about where and for how long older people served, whether they participated in active combat, and what stressors they were exposed to.

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