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The theatre as therapy for military veterans? Exploring the mechanisms which impact psychosocial well-being and social connections during theatre-based programmes

Ackley, J¹., & Wilson-Menzfeld, G.^{1*}

¹Northumbria University, Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, Northern Hub for Veterans and Military Families' Research.

*Corresponding author: Dr Gemma Wilson-Menzfeld, Northumbria University, Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, Department of Nursing, Midwifery and Health, Coach Lane Campus East, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK, NE7 7XA. Tel: 0191 215 6054. Email: gemma.wilson-menzfeld@northumbria.ac.uk

Gemma Wilson: ORCID ID 0000-0001-7362-7048; Twitter handle @gwilsonmenzfeld

Jonathan Ackley: ORCID ID 0000-0002-8091-4499

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Abstract:

Background: In many countries, performing arts and theatre practices are being employed with Armed Forces Communities. However, very little evidence exists outlining the psychosocial benefits of this practice. Therefore, this study aims to explore the perceived impact of theatre-based programmes on psychosocial well-being, and social connections, of U.K. Military Veterans.

Methods: This qualitative study carried out semi-structured interviews with six military veterans who had participated in at least one theatre-based programme.

Results: Four themes were generated from this study; providing a purpose, therapeutic storytelling, social connection, and the impact of the programme ending.

Conclusions: This study provided unique insight into the benefits of theatre-based programmes on the psychosocial well-being of U.K. military veterans. The programmes were perceived as being beneficial for future employment opportunities, but the ending of these programmes was difficult for some and must be considered alongside provision.

Keywords: Theatre as therapy, Military Veteran, well-being, social isolation, loneliness, transition

A significant number of serving personnel leave the military on a regular basis, with an annual 10% turnaround. The vast majority of ex-serving personnel transition into civilian life successfully (Murphy, Busuttil, & Turgoose, 2018). 'Successful' and sustainable transition into civilian life includes factors relating to employment, health, and finance (Rolfe, 2020), although transition can be a difficult period for some. These challenges during transition can be consequential of cultural differences (Shepherd, Sherman, MacLean, & Kay, 2020), as well as service-related experiences, including deployment, which can have a negative impact on their mental health (Rhead, 2020). However, these aren't the only factors presenting potential difficulties.

Another key challenge during this transition period is the absence of social connectedness (Kintzle, Barr, Corletto, & Castro, 2018) and its potential to trigger experiences of social isolation and loneliness (Mental Health Foundation, 2010). Both social isolation and loneliness have recently gained increased international attention for the impact on both physical and mental health (Campaign to End Loneliness, 2020; Holt-Lunstad, Smith, Baker, Harris, & Stephenson, 2015), the effects of which have been recognised within the armed forces community for a number of reasons (Stapleton, 2018; Wilson, Hill, & Kiernan, 2018).

Using a systematic narrative review method, Wilson et al. (2018) synthesised existing evidence exploring loneliness and social isolation in military veterans. There are multiple, uniquely, intrinsic and extrinsic factors that are prevalent when considering military veterans' experiences of social isolation and loneliness. Perhaps most pertinent are the experiences of military service itself and the relationship that exists between social isolation and loneliness and mental health (Kuwert, Knaevelsrud, & Pietrzak, 2014; Wilson et al., 2018). Changing mental or physical health status during transition is one potential factor which may increase the likelihood of social isolation and loneliness during transition is changing physical or mental health status (Beach & Bamford, 2014; Heine & Browning, 2014; Victor & Yang, 2012). However, this relationship is two-fold with social isolation and loneliness also worsening physical and mental health (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015; Victor & Yang, 2012). Loneliness is a strong risk factor for depression which remains stable over a lifetime.

Upon leaving the military, one of the main challenges that veterans face is establishing themselves into a new community (Kintzle et al., 2018; Royal British Legion, 2014b). This relocation may result in an absence of social connectedness (Kintzle et al., 2018) through losing social connections and the intense bonds and friendships formed during service (Cooper, Caddick, Godier, Cooper, & Fossey, 2018; Woodward & Jenkins, 2011). These intrinsic and extrinsic factors, specific to military veterans and the armed forces community, must be taken into account when designing interventions aimed at tackling loneliness and social isolation of military veterans (Leslie et al., 2020; Wilson et al., 2018). Such considerations have been implemented by Occupational Therapists using performing arts as psychosocial therapeutic practise (Yuen, Mueller, Mayor, & Azuero, 2011).

The process of enacting stories, both verbally and non-verbally, combined with the social engagement, has the potential to relieve elements of stress, anxiety and low mood disorders (Stuckey & Nobel, 2010). There are arts-based theatre programmes for members of the armed forces community across Canada, the United States of America (USA) and the United Kingdom (UK). Most of these programmes aim to act as trauma therapy, particularly for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (Ali & Wolfert, 2016; Ali, Wolfert, Lam, & Rahman, 2018; Belliveau, 2017; Belliveau, Cook, McLean, & Lea, 2019; Belliveau & Nichols, 2017; O'Connor, 2017).

Therapists, theatre makers, and Canadian veterans created a play called 'Contact! Unload' based on the real life experiences of the participants involved (Belliveau, 2017; Belliveau & Nichols, 2017). Recounting and re-enacting their stories was a therapeutic process that allowed individuals to simultaneously develop coping mechanisms and resilience. This, according to James and Johnson (1996), creates empathy through group sharing and is a form of drama therapy. Interestingly, the predominance of monologues focused on pre-military traumatic experiences, although each participant had experienced 'life and death' traumatic events in combat situations (Ali et al., 2018). DE-CRUIT, a theatre and performing arts organisation designed for the improvement of mental well-being in U.S. military veterans, used Shakespearian monologues to bring attention to the participants' own traumatic events (Ali & Wolfert, 2016; Ali et al., 2018). After analysing Shakespeare's own use of combat or military related trauma, the participant would then construct a unique monologue based on a personal traumatic event. This was then performed by another participant in front of an audience. The Drive project in the UK works with communities such as wounded soldiers and limbless veterans, to deliver west-end performances, and educate children (The Drive Project, 2020). Also, working with the Drive project, Bravo 22 company, is the Royal British Legion's Recovery Through Art programme, and has, over the last eight years, produced plays that recount the real life experiences of military veterans from the UK (Royal British Legion, 2014a). Re-Live is another UK based organisation that has worked with military veterans (O'Connor, 2015; O'Connor, 2017).

Despite these ongoing theatre-based programme, and the impact showing the benefits of re-enacting traumatic events for mental health, there has been limited research on how theatre-based programmes can enhance wider well-being of military veterans who have transitioned from the military, as well as on the impact of these programmes on social relationships, loneliness, or social isolation. Therefore, this study aimed to explore experiences of theatre-based programmes on psychosocial well-being of U.K. military veterans. Specifically, this study aimed to examine the therapeutic role of theatre-based programmes on U.K. military veterans; to gauge the perceived impact of the programme on psychosocial well-being; and to understand the role of social connections within the programme.

Method

Design:

A qualitative method was employed in which semi-structured interviews were utilised. The study was granted ethical approval by Northumbria University's online ethical approval system (Ref: 16426).

Sample:

Six participants took part in this study (5 males; 1 female; age range 29 – 64; mean age 47). All six participants were military veterans. Services included the British Army and RAF as well as the French Foreign Legion. This sample size was considered appropriate to examine both in-depth and potentially contrasting experiences (Pietkiewicz, Smith, Pietkiewicz, & Smith, 2014) and adheres to the guidelines set out by Braun and Clarke (2013) for small projects.

Participants were recruited from a population of military veterans who had been involved in at least one of the available theatre-based programmes. The theatre-based programmes were run by a national charity specifically aimed at helping military veterans' recovery through the arts. Professional theatre writers and directors were hired to produce the standards needed for a professional

production, and, to make sure the veterans' stories were replicated truthfully. To help develop acting skills, professional actors and dramaturgs were used for the first part of the programme. Professional counsellors were on hand throughout the rehearsal process and performances to offer help and guidance if any participants exhibited psychological distress. The programmes were set up to improve the confidence and motivation of military veterans by supporting rehabilitation and aid their transition into civilian life, as well as improving the overall emotional well-being of the participants.

Participants were purposively recruited from these two organisations; however, a convenience sampling strategy was used within these organisations to fulfil the sampling requirements. This type of sampling is sometimes thought to produce a reduced quality of data because of the bonds that exist (Marshall, 1996). However, according to Brewis (2014) convenience sampling can be a good way to elicit more truthful, private and personal views because of these same bonds. Inclusion criteria for participation in this study was specific to the inclusion criterion of the theatre-based programme: (a) being over 18 years old, (b) having either served in the military or were a family member of an individual who had served in the military (c) having suffered emotional or physical problems since leaving the military, and (d) having taken part in at least one theatre-based programme ran by the two organisations involved.

Data Collection:

The researcher (JA) has experience working on both theatre-based programmes. In both instances, the researcher had worked as a filmmaker and made acquaintances with some of the participants during this time. The researcher contacted individuals involved in the theatre-based programmes. Individuals were given a verbal overview of the study and a copy of the information sheet. They were able to ask any questions that they had about the study or the process of participation and asked if they would like to take part. If participants agreed to take part, they were asked to complete the consent form and return via email. To collect in-depth qualitative data, a semi-structured interview schedule was developed (Figure 1). Prompts were provided throughout. Participants were told that they could stop the interview at any point. They were also signposted to suitable support services should they need it. All electronic data was stored in a password protected folder on a password protected computer. Consent forms and transcripts were stored separately. Upon transcription, interview data was anonymised and given a pseudonym, therefore ensuring confidentiality. The audio files were destroyed after the transcription process.

- What made you join this programme?
- What have you most/least enjoyed about the programme?
- Did you have any performing arts experience before taking part in this programme?
- Did you make new social relationships with other participants on the programme?
- Was it easy/not easy/difficult to establish new social relationships upon embarking on this programme?
- During the programme, did you get any sense that your emotional well-being was improving and, if so, can you describe when you felt like this?
- How would you describe the unity within the group of participants?
- How would you describe the relationship you had with the non-military professionals leading the programme?
- Can you think of any of the activities you did on this programme that fully or partially enhanced your personal relationships, if so, what were they?
- How would you describe the impact this process had on you overall?
- Can you describe, if any, the differences in your overall emotional well-being before and after attending the programme?
- Have your social relationships improved after taking part in this programme, if so, how?
- Could you please describe your personal relationships when you served in the military?
- Could you please describe any difficulties, if any, you experienced upon leaving the Armed Forces in regard to your social relationships?
- Can you please describe any issues, if any, you had with people understanding your previous military experiences?
- Do you have any other questions?

Figure 1: Interview Schedule

Each interview was conducted over the telephone and lasted between 30 minutes to 1 hour 20 minutes. The participants lived in different parts of the country so using the telephone was seen as the most practical way to conduct the interviews. This flexibility is also extended to the participants while allowing them more control over their privacy (Cachia & Millward, 2011; Holt, 2010). However, this method is not without potential limitations, the deliberate reticence to interject by the researcher and lack of visual cues can reduce the flow of information (Holt, 2010). The interviews were digitally recorded using a Tascam DR-40 audio recorder. The interviews were transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis:

Data were analysed using reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Due to the aims of this study inductive, semantic, and realist Thematic Analysis was adopted (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Within reflexive Thematic Analysis, patterns are generated from the data into them (Braun & Clarke, 2019) themes and sub-themes. JA familiarised himself with the data by transcribing the data. Both researchers collaboratively familiarised themselves with the data, generated codes and then initial themes, reviewed themes, and defined/named the themes, before finally producing the report.

Findings:

Four themes were generated from this study: providing purpose, therapeutic storytelling, social connection, and the impact of the programme ending (Figure 2).

Themes
Providing a purpose
Therapeutic storytelling
Social connection
The impact of the programme ending

Figure 2: Themes generated from the semi-structured interview data

Providing purpose

Before participating in the theatre-based programmes, individuals often presented with mental health issues, physical health issues, housing problems, addiction, and suicidal ideation or intent.

*'I'd had a problem with drinking beforehand, that's how I got homeless'
(James)*

*'It's a rollercoaster of a thing you know suicide attempts and all sorts
of stuff' (Emma)*

Perhaps a key attribute to the success of the programmes is the ability to create a sense of purpose for participants. For some, the programmes provided a sense of purpose in terms of routine, skill development, and pride in participation. After years of serving in the military, with a structured daily routine, entering life as a civilian with a newfound freedom of time can leave a void (Lloyd-Jones, 2018) with a US study finding that 42% of veterans struggled to find purpose in their lives (Sayer et al., 2011). This space, where routine and purpose once existed, is now left to the individual to fill which can prove quite difficult. Heintzelman and King (2019) believe routine can provide a chance to engage in goal-orientated activities that provide purpose and enable a sense of direction.

*'It had got me out of the house. Or got me out of my accommodation
as well as something to get up for in the morning, do you know what I
mean?' (James)*

The benefits of the routine provided by the theatre programme was described by many. Some participants spoke about the programme as being like a job, for others it provided a challenge, and for some it had produced self-motivation to get work

*'I loved it [...] I don't know how to put it into words... I hadn't been living
my life like I should have been. So, I was getting out there to try to get
work' (Lewis)*

*'I think that's one of the things that I do struggle with is if I don't have
something to aim for something to do. So, uh something to sort of
challenge me you know and that's. That was uh something that I got
from the theatre. Was that of a new challenge' (Pete)*

Through this structure, and the skills developed, the programme was seen as providing scaffolding so that they were ready for future work. It also facilitated the development of confidence through learning new skills.

'Well, it is a new skill; you're learning something new. I er, it puts a certain confidence on you... I thought, once I'd done all that, I could just walk into a film set and be the star or something (laughs)' (Martin)

Participation for some led to a sense of pride and acceptance; something which had, upon leaving active service, been missing. This increased self-belief has also been found in other performing arts research along with increased confidence, greater sense of self and the chance to learn new skills (Animbom Ngong, 2017; Pyman & Rugg, 2006). The ability to learn and successfully exhibit new skills was also spoken about and, importantly, the data suggests that this confidence was not transient, in fact, some participants spoke of how it had expanded it into other areas of their lives propelling them onto new projects.

'It puts it into a new, new category of proudness. And how it makes you feel' (Martin)

Some participants saw purpose in their involvement through other peoples' reactions to the theatre-based programme, which left them feeling proud.

'I'd bump into someone I know, and they'd be asking if I was ok and if I was working. And I wasn't and that would make me feel a bit down. But with [the programme] I'd be like 'Oh actually, I'm in a play at the [NAME]'. And they'd be like 'wow, that's amazing'. It was just great that I could say that I was doing something constructive [...] I felt quite really proud of it' (James)

An individual's sense of purpose in programme participation was also found through using their own experiential narrative to educate on life within the military, as well as educating the audience around their own experiences of physical and mental health issues experienced during, and after, their time in the military.

'The elation was unbelievable because everybody stood up and cheered. The way it affects people as well. The audience, even the [civilian] production staff [...] You've got no idea have you of, of what the military do' (Emma)

'Re-enacting my story. Yeah uh is that I'm raising awareness in the audience you know [...] There is a lot of ignorance about sort of uh that spinal cord injury and about all the other sorts of um issues that we talk about you know. The military lives and the issues and things. So, uh for me that's one of the real positives about it all is just raising awareness of those issues [...] you know breaking down those little sort of barriers of ignorance' (Pete)

These findings align themselves with the results of other theatre programmes designed for military veterans in motivations to participate in theatre programmes to educate others (Belliveau, 2017; Belliveau et al., 2019; Belliveau & Nichols, 2017; O'Connor, 2017). Belliveau and Nichols (2017) specifically examined the impact of the Contact! Unload programme on audience members and concluded that the use of theatre was successful medium educating and engaging the public in issues experienced by veterans. The effectiveness of this type of storytelling is also found in other, wider, theatre programmes through effective, transformative learning which raised social consciousness and enabled reflection (Madsen, 2018; Schneider, 2017).

Therapeutic storytelling

Similar to the findings of other programmes, the retelling of personal stories became a prominent and important aspect to the process of recovery and a key motivation to be involved in the programmes (Ali et al., 2018; Belliveau et al., 2019). The participants described the cathartic experience of storytelling through the theatre productions, and the way in which this story telling developed their confidence. This was particularly due to repeated story telling throughout rehearsal, as well as in front of multiple audiences. This storytelling was not only part of their on-stage rehearsals and performances, but as part of the team building activities.

Participants described the benefits of therapy and building confidence through learning how to tell their story, of telling and re-telling their story within rehearsals and on stage, as well as telling their story to others. This story telling was most described as being a “cathartic” (Emma; Pete) experience. James, below, describes the benefits of telling his story on stage.

‘Telling my own stories about being in the military, you know. People actually wanted to listen to them. So I would get involved’ (James)

I just enjoyed telling my stories and getting a reaction. Especially when we went on the stage we got you odd giggle or...’ (James)

Similar findings were observed by Torrissen and Stickley (2017) in a theatre study involving participants with mental health issues. According to Emunah and Johnson (1983) performing in front of an audience is transformative and gives the participant power, allowing them to no longer feel like victims. There was also a cathartic element experienced by the participants during the storytelling; knowing that people wanted to listen to their stories allowed them to acknowledge and release some of their emotions.

Being part of this theatre-based programme and telling their story also supported participants to develop their confidence.

‘[I noticed my confidence growing] straight away, just noticed it straight away’ (James)

‘My confidence was at rock bottom [before the theatre]’ (Martin)

‘It does give you that sort of uh that sort of uh confidence to uh yeah cause it’s something that I would have ever imagined me doing. Not because I didn’t think I could but just it didn’t really sort of, it didn’t appeal or it just it just wasn’t on my radar you know. So, the theatre yeah. Although I do like going to the theatre, I never sort of wanted to be performing’ (Pete)

This confidence was defined as coming ‘out of your shell’ (Lewis), and getting ‘comfortable with everybody’ (Lewis). This confidence was regularly described as a result of being part of a group and therefore sharing your own experiences and listening to others.

‘I panic normally with everything like, if I don’t know anybody or anything, normally, I don’t like being involved in anything because I just shy away from it all. However, being part of the group that I knew were going to a similar thing or worse or whatever...so it helped me.

Massively. Just erm, on there... Just knowing that other people are going through the same thing' (Martin)

Strengthening previous research in this field, this study brought the therapeutic nature of theatre to the fore (Ali & Wolfert, 2016; Ali et al., 2018). By allowing individuals to tell their story to the peers, and an audience, repeatedly, the theatre programme was perceived as being therapeutic for participants and helped to develop their own confidence. The use of spoken narrative in military veteran recovery programmes, as well as the need to look further than the more traditional approaches, is recommended by Thomas and Bowie (2016), who claim that simply being part of their new community isn't enough. Such novel approaches have been adopted in Community Psychology research; indeed, storytelling was effectively used to understand oppression and psychosocial suffering in indigenous elders (Quayle & Sonn, 2019). Throughout this study, participants spoke positively about the emotional and psychosocial impact of re-telling their stories, and whilst no-one spoke of these experiences in a negative capacity, it is important to note that re-traumatisation has occurred on other studies where veterans have opened up candidly and publicly about their stories (Belliveau et al., 2019) and needs considering when undertaking story telling activities in any capacity.

Social connection

Participants often described the theatre-based programme as allowing them to develop confidence and social connection. Social connection was an integral part of the experiences within the programme. The theatre-making process requires the ensemble of actors to spend a lot of time together and some participants had both trust and acceptance worries when they began the programme. They worried that others would not welcome them.

'I was a bit worried that [the people involved in a new production] might not accept me coming in as you know as an outsider. But no, they were brilliant they were all kind of very accepting' (Richard)

This was one barrier to the programme commencement and has the potential to prevent others from accessing the programme. However, once involved in the programme, individuals spent a lot of time working with a group of individuals and developed lasting friendships.

'I did make quite a few friends and I'm still friends to this day' (Lewis)

'And you, your relationship and social relationship gets better and in more in depth and you know who you can trust but things like that' (Emma)

The manifestation of mutual trust between the participants allowed them to get to know each other in more depth, while building stronger bonds, as explained by Emma. She stated that one of the ways trust was brought about was by learning together, which is integral to any successful theatre production as the actors learn together about the characters and the world in which they live. Acceptance was also an element of social connectedness. This could be an important part of the participants' development because it could be important to feel accepted in their current physical or mental state by the people they once trusted.

Developing friendships through the programme was a positive element for all the participants. Given the sometimes-intense nature of serving in the military it is unsurprising that strong friendships are formed. The positive friendships formed during their active service was spoken about in much depth, including how these friendships had lasted over time. For some, making new friendships outside the

military didn't compare favourably to the ones formed in it, however, friends made during the programme were said to be similar to the ones made while serving in the military, complementing findings from other studies in the field (Belliveau et al., 2019). The believed quality of a persons' network is seen to be incredibly important as they are related to reductions in stress related disorders (Perkins, Hughey, & Speer, 2002).

One of the means in which friendships developed in this study was through the opportunity for participants to tell their own story, as well as the opportunity for participants to tell each other's story as part of rehearsals and team building sessions, relating closely to the therapeutic story telling described above.

'...Storytelling. Yeah actually standing up on your own and telling a story... And again, I come back to the listening thing. One of the games or activities we did was you would sit in a group or, you would pair up for a few minutes to get the person opposite you to tell you everything as much as they can about them self and their story....And then you move around the room and basically you all are telling each other your story and then they say stop. It's like, right, I want you to tell me his story' (Richard)

This exercise cultivated listening skills, but also allowed the participants to hear their own story from someone else's perspective, and in someone else's words. This seemed not only to support social connection, but the therapeutic story telling from another perspective, and creating a sense of bonding.

'Because some of them were very shy to start but by the end... It's like everywhere though isn't it. You know when you start work at any job, you're very shy aren't you... but by the end, everyone was best of friends' (James)

'It helps you mix... mix really quickly and really... so you have a laugh with each other straight away. It does stress some people, but I think it's absolutely brilliant how they do that and the formal thing as well' (Martin)

James, spoke of others being shy at the start of the process. This was compounded by Martin who noticed that the initial 'get to know you' games caused stress for some participants. The games and performing arts practices used at the beginning of each programme are designed to get people out of their comfort zone and to integrate group members. Both James and Martin agreed that, by the end of the exercises, the group were mixing together in a harmonious way.

This trust and acceptance were also facilitated through peer support, and camaraderie. Emma describes a feeling of belonging, togetherness, and a feeling that everyone is looking after one another.

'You're all like-minded people. The feeling of belonging being in the military family again. And new experience so that's... that's always good and, you know and you're all learning together because there's not a lot. Not a lot of us have done it before' (Emma)

For Emma, forming social relationships with military veterans was helpful because of a sense of understanding and compassion. For her, military veterans could relate more to her experiences and

could understand better (with little explanation). She also talks about the sense of trust and depth in relationships she could establish with ex-military as opposed to civilians. The shared military identity was imperative in this bonding, as well as the importance of having a shared identity and shared experiences (Wilson et al., 2018).

The friendships as part of the theatre-based programme included individuals that had served in the military, individuals from the wider armed forces community, and civilians. The presence of the military culture and the environment were of great importance, and many missed the social connections they had during their military career. Participants described how their military friendships are different to friendships made outside of the military.

'They're like more than friends. You know what I mean, you make friends in civvy street, you just see them when you want or they want to see you when they want to but these (military friends) you eat live and drink with them kind of thing, being a soldier' (James)

Like sense of purpose and routine, the social connections developed during the programme were reminiscent of their military social ties. This occurred for two reasons: firstly, their shared military experience and camaraderie, and secondly due to the close proximity and trusting setting of the theatre programme. The importance of being in this environment, surrounded by veterans and members of the wider armed forces community was extremely important.

'I've met loads of really nice friends from them from [the theatre programme] and that, so it was really good [...] Because of the back of the background everybody had the same background. Be it Veterans, be it serving, be it military wives. We all had the same background we all had a common area sort of thing' (Emma)

'It starts feeling more like the you know the kind of lifestyle I was used to as in like the way people can have a laugh with you and the way people took a joke and the way people conducted themselves and spoke it was just kind of like being back in the army again but with people who were a lot older than you because it was a couple of old boys there. But they were good lads' (Lewis)

One participant described the feeling of not being judged by rank.

'Everyone's you know you talked to them but before you know it there's none of that [disrespect based on military career]. You're just all friends you just all, you know good... Any sense of nervousness is gone. You know you are, no matter what your rank was in the military or whatever it doesn't matter everyone is just friends' (Martin)

Richard describes the previous relationships he had, and how he since became isolated once he left the military. Richard made lasting friendships within the theatre production.

'When I was actually with my regiment you couldn't walk five yards without recognizing somebody in you know talking and having a laugh and they'd always be sort of Mess do's in the corporal's mess where basically like a lot of drinking and having fun [...] the social side of it was great. When I took the move away from the regiment to [PLACE] it was a bit different. I didn't really know anyone. I moved to a quite

remote place... So I don't have any neighbours now. I was kind of isolated myself' (Richard)

That is not to say that it was only military friendships that were made during the programme. Participants also described the friendships made with staff and volunteers who had no history of military service, or link to the armed forces community.

'[My relationships with the civilian professional staff] were absolutely brilliant. Because I found them really professional. I think you knew what they were doing. It was all new to us lot. They give me confidence as it went on and they'd tell you when they thought you were good and would give advice when you weren't so good so, you know. Yeah. loved them' (James)

This social bonding isn't exclusive to military theatre programmes however and is attributed by Snow, D'Amico, and Tanguay (2003) to the collective journey the participants embark on, encouraging each other along the way. Interestingly, new friendships and positive social interactions have also been discovered in wider theatre interaction extending to theatre goers (Lazaroo, 2017; Meeks, Shryock, & Vandenbroucke, 2017). Furthermore, Belliveau et al. (2019) described that these friendships were fostered through the unique theatre environment of working hard in performance rehearsals and the adrenaline rush through performing in front of an audience. Once more, Emma acknowledges this in that everyone is aiming for the same goal.

'You have a sense of belonging again. Or you're part of a team. I mean so you're all going for the same goal...(similarly to the military) Yeah, it's what you've got a job to do when you when you know you know when you're working you switch on you do your job and everything. And then when you play in it you still like got a bit switched on but you play hard as well. Do you not mean? Oh yeah, you always stand up to the mark to what you're about to do' (Emma)

This positive development of self and psychosocial well-being is also found in the participation of sports, particularly in team-based activities (Eime, Young, Harvey, Charity, & Payne, 2013). This, according to community psychologists, can occur because of shared values. These values within the group allow each individual's needs to be met (Lyons & Dionigi, 2007; McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

However, there were areas of social conflict. Firstly, these strained friendships occurred through spending long periods of time together.

'We'd all be in each other's pockets for so long, people started having a go at each other...' (Lewis)

Another potential drawback was the relationships between some of the participants and the professional civilian staff. Two participants mentioned that, at times, tension was created by members of the staff and caused one participant's emotional state to take a step backwards.

'So I had a big problem with non-military or non-service people. Telling me how I should be... telling me things or helping me... It was just a big chip I had on my shoulder' (Martin)

Again, given the intense nature of this particular programme, where both the staff and participants lived and worked together for three weeks, it is understandable that this friction could manifest, and

misunderstandings occur. That being said, it does raise an interesting issue regarding the possibility of re-traumatisation during the process and the vulnerable place some participants find themselves in.

The impact of the programme ending

One major drawback to this programme was its ending, and there was a feeling of sadness when the programmes ended which had an impact on participants in multiple ways. Participants generally felt a sense of loss once the programme ended. Individuals used the skills they developed in new arenas, some of these being paid work. However, even some of those who went on to other programmes felt a sense of loss with the end of the theatre programmes in which they were involved.

The nature of the programme was time limited. Participants described their sadness once the programme ended.

'It's something to look forward to, it was just great. I was very very sad when it ended, very sad' (James)

'I felt really low after the, after the programs were over. It's just a big dip a massive dip. You've been part of something so however long' (Emma)

For Emma, the group enabled her own participation outside of the home, but now she is alone and felt withdrawn.

'It is good when you're in a group like that being with them at the theatre, that's really good but now I'm on my own. It's really, it's very easy to withdraw and, you know, not go out and about' (Emma)

This feeling of being withdrawn, to a certain degree, could be seen as inevitable given both the climactic intensity of the process and the post-programme break-up of their newly found community. However, some used it as an opportunity to take on new challenges and a stepping-stone for further arts-based work.

'I went on there as a writer's assistant, assistant writer, as a paid role [...] I got paid as an actor' (Richard)

'I'm on a couple of art projects with the [organisation] and it is it's good because you teach... you're learning something new' (Emma)

'Just last week I was in another production with the opera company' (Pete)

In addition to opening up other opportunities, participants specifically recalled the skills developed during the theatre programme, some of which directly helped them with other opportunities.

'The things I've learned... the skills and the experiences I've had, I've been able to use them in civilian life as well. So, I think that's important... more people should do it' (Martin)

'They had an annual conference so there were a couple of hundred people in a room and then five of us on stage and each stood up to talk [...] prior to that I would never have dreamt of it. I couldn't even speak at my brother's wedding and I was his best man' (Richard)

The acquired skills from performing arts were a prominent component to accessing these other opportunities. This could be that, indeed, the new skills contribute in some way to obtaining new

opportunities but also, the confidence gaining these new skills allows the participants to take risks in areas where new skills have not yet been developed.

However, some of the participants did not know how to move on from the programme, or how to seek additional opportunities.

'I used to think, what do they mean by gutted, that's something you do to a fish (laughing). But now I know what it means. Because, it's like nothing after that there was nothing ... but I got a thank you card at the end of it from all the production team saying thanks for all the hard work so that made it a bit better' (James)

'I'm feeling a little bit out of it at the moment, yeah. [The theatre company] hasn't done that much recently' (Martin)

The fact that there is little research suggesting that this phenomenon occurs in other, non-military, theatre programmes only highlight the emotional vulnerability of some military veterans. The Warrior Programme, a non-theatre programme for veterans, also recorded a drop in emotional well-being after the programme had finished. Fear (2015) suggested an aftercare programme of 'top-up' sessions to complement what was already on offer. The closure of these programmes must be considered as part of their provision in order to reduce emotional turbulence at its end, and to safeguard the positive psychosocial benefits arising from these programmes.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore experiences of theatre-based programmes on psychosocial well-being of U.K. military veterans, specifically, the therapeutic role of the programmes, the longer term perceived impact of the programmes, and the role of social connections within the programmes. Participants perceived the theatre-based programmes to have impacted them in multiple ways, through increased skills and confidence, therapeutically, driving their own purpose, social connections and trust, and employment opportunities.

This study illustrates the novel findings of this study, in that it examines the impact of theatre-based programmes on individuals' psychosocial well-being, and employment opportunities, as well as its relation to the wider literature in the field of community psychology and veterans' studies. However, despite the various benefits participants experienced through their participation in the programme, there were some drawbacks, namely potential barriers to participation, the programme ending and social conflict.

There are both strengths and limitations to this research. A strength of this research is the way in which the data was analysed using reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013, 2019)). This allowed the researchers to inductively analyse the data in an explorative manner which was beneficial due to the lack of existing research in this area. Furthermore, the collaborative analysis of this data promoted a rich reading of the data from multiple perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2019). There are also however some limitations to this study. This study was conducted with a small sample size and whilst this sample size was sufficient for the study design, these findings cannot be transferred to the wider armed forces community, and further research should be undertaken. Furthermore, all data collection was carried out after participants' involvement in these theatre-based programmes, and therefore, all experiences are retrospective reflections of their participation.

Future research would benefit from taking both a prospective and longitudinal study design, with a larger sample, to explore the perceived impact of involvement over time. Further research would also benefit from involving the civilian staff and volunteers to gain other perspectives, as well as to involve wider members of the armed forces community as all the participants in this study are military veterans themselves.

Whilst this is a small-scale, explorative study, there are recommendations that can be adopted from the findings of this study. It is imperative to consider the impact of the theatre programme on wider psychosocial wellbeing of participants, and in this respect, to consider the potential impact of therapeutic storytelling, social conflict, and the programme ending. As others have suggested, Fear (2015), an aftercare programme could be considered to complement the programme and support individuals to move on to other opportunities. Further to this, an introductory session could be included to improve the accessibility of these programmes and introduce individual to the content and social environment. Once more, further research is imperative in exploring and evaluating these recommendations further.

Conclusion

Multiple organisations across various countries employ arts-based theatre programmes for members of the armed forces community, with most of these programmes aiming to act as trauma therapy, particularly for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Using explorative semi-structured interviews, this study aimed to explore the experiences of theatre-based programmes on psychosocial well-being, and social connections, and the therapeutic role of the programme, for U.K. military veterans. This study provides an important contribution to this field by emphasising multifaceted benefits of being involved in this type of programme. It was evident that the theatre-based programmes impacted participants in multiple ways, including skills and confidence development, therapeutically, driving purpose, through social connections and trust, as well as employment. Future research is required to understand these experiences over a long-term period, and from additional perspectives. Recommendations for future theatre-based programme involving members of the armed forces community have been suggested, but once more, further research is imperative when implementing these changes.

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