In defence of research.

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Dr Zoe Morrison, of the University of Aberdeen Business School, writes about her research with the armed forces reserves

BSA members currently working in the UK as academic researchers are often asked about the impact of their work. Few would question that as sociologists we seek to influence future policy through under-standings of current practices. As researchers, a more interesting question might be how policy developments are impacting upon our own practices.

To explore this question, let's consider the example of defence. Every five years or so, the outcomes of a Strategic Defence and Security Review are published as the definitive statement of policy direction until the next review. Whilst other government depart-ments will influence ways in which the security resources outlined within the review are deployed, the focus is on enacting rather than renegotiating the content.

When I first started researching experiences of change in the armed forces, I frequently drew upon military and work sociologies. As a social scientist working with defence, I often found myself feeling defensive. My colleagues working on health-related studies did not necessarily see a connection with my other interests, as the military world seemed discrete from civilian society. For many, it was a world they did not know or did not endorse. Opportunities for conference presentations were few and some reviewers were harsh, dismissing the relevance of such a small group in society. Similarly, the defence comm-unity is a small one and it can take time to build collaborative relations as the new girl on the block.

Two reviews have since been published and defence policy continues to evolve. The research questions of interest have changed, as have the politics behind the policy.

One significant policy shift has been the increasing emphasis on more effective collaboration between different constituents of the defence and security services. Increased use of labour flexibilisation strategies has involved a headline-grabbing phased redundancy programme for full-time service men and women. This downsizing has been accompanied by increased recruitment and deployment of part-time military personnel (reserves). Reservists are being offered enhanced roles, new training opportunities and improved terms and conditions of military employment, together with an accompanying increase in expectations. A new emphasis on working together, known as the Whole Force Approach, is resulting in a blurring of boundaries between civilian and military roles, and related policy changes have extended across the full extent of the defence workforce.

Implementing these policy changes is challenging. One response to these challenges is the Future Reserves Research Programme, funded by the British Army, the Ministry of Defence and the ESRC: http://tinyurl.com/h4b92qg

As work began, the potential for the whole to be greater than the sum of the parts became clear, and a decision was taken to integrate its four complementary projects into a single programme of work. This approach allows the programme to draw on a range of social science perspectives, from work informed by sociological and geographical studies of the military (Professor Rachel Woodward, Newcastle), family and medical sociologies (Professor Sarah Cunningham-Burley, Edinburgh), to the sociology of work (Dr Sabir Giga, Lancaster) and security studies (Dr Sergio Catignani, Exeter). The programme further benefits from input by an Advisory Group of senior colleagues, including the BSA's own President Professor Lynn Jamieson.

The programme is one example of increasing integration between military and civilian work. Academics collaborate with defence staff to help identify and understand issues affecting members of the reserves across and between their different life worlds, including family life, civilian employment and military service. Defence staff are getting to grips with sociological concepts that may be new to them and consensual ways of working that are sometimes unfamiliar yet productive. Military personnel have been generally positive when participating in interviews and discussions, and seem to have valued the opportunity to talk with someone who is interested in their experiences and understandings.

As a new team we have encountered some bumps along the way. Obtaining ethical approval has been slow. We've found that familiar everyday research practices may require review and revision, such as how we balance the expectations of civilian and military funding partners, and how we research with dispersed communities. Opportunities for conference presentations still need careful consideration and the case for researching this small section of society has been questioned.

Fortunately, we're committed to moving forward together. As findings begin to emerge, we are turning our attention away from issues of process to the exciting applic-ation of conceptual frameworks informed by sociological scholarship in its myriad forms.

The increasing complexities of the policy spaces sociologists explore may require us to step beyond our preferred ways of working and familiar traditions. There may be times when we need to cut across the tribal configurations of our own professional habitus to fully consider difficult social questions. Can we do more to exploit the potential of team social science to investigate our big issues? And if so, what difference will we make?

Defence policy has impacted my practice, almost certainly in ways I am not yet fully aware of. The encouraging point is that senior UK defence personnel are receptive to the contribution of sociology, and the programme is an example of sociologists influencing social development. The military are an enduring institution within societies throughout the world. Even as a function of democracy, the politics of defence will never be easy. Only through evidence-based argument and theoretically grounded discussion can we influence institutional norms, tacit assumptions and embedded conventions so that the military may be more reflective of the society it serves to defend.

As sociologists do we only study the aspects of the world that concur with our politics? If so, are we not ourselves seeking to prioritise and normalise our own viewpoints? I have learnt to understand policy over time, even if at times the politics behind that policy are personally difficult.