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Portfolio for Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology (DPsych)

Transcending Trauma: Connecting to Life in the Face of Death

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Terminology

Mortal peril expresses the notion of nearly dying, where there is a serious threat to life.

'Near death experience' refers to participants nearly dying or believing they were about to die and does not imply a spiritual experience (e.g. a white light at the end of a tunnel). This distinction was explained to participants during recruitment processes.

The following acronyms are used:

PTSD: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

PTG: Posttraumatic growth

TMT: Terror Management Theory.

IPA : Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

RMC: Royal Marine Corps

DA : Discourse Analysis

ET : Existential Therapy

ACT: Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

CBT: Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

Throughout this study, a distinction is drawn between different uses of the word 'trauma' - either as a) an event that is traumatic or b) the mental state that may follow from such an event. Trauma, traumatic event and adversity are used interchangeably to indicate the former a).

Unit and group cohesion are used interchangeably.

When capitalised, the term 'Regiment' refers to the Parachute Regiment; 'The Army', refers to the British Army; Paras and paratroopers are used interchangeably.

Use of the term ‘man’ does not reflect a disregard for BPS ethical language guidelines. It used mindfully since all participants are male and there are no females in the Parachute Regiment.

For the transcriptions and analysis, participants were given pseudonyms using names starting with the first 8 letters of the alphabet: A-H. Quotes used in the analysis are identified by the first letter of their name followed by page number and line number. E.g. [A21:255] indicates a quote from Alex, on page 21, line number 255 from his transcript.

For clarity and ease of reading, in the discussion chapter, the current study’s participants will be distinguished from other studies’ using a capital P (Participants)

Acknowledgements

This work is dedicated to my eight research participants who, in the true spirit of paratroopers, exceeded all expectations. I can only hope I have done justice to your incredible stories.

My deepest gratitude also goes to the Parachute Regiment for the support and encouragement of this research.

I would like to thank my supervisor Dr Jacqui Farrants who was wise, insightful and most-importantly good-humoured throughout this process. Laughing in the face of research proved highly beneficial and thanks for the cake tip.

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As someone slightly challenged in the Windows Office department, I must highlight the invaluable help of Jane Moriai. You prevented endless anxiety, in anticipation of the formidable formatting task that awaits every researcher. Thank you for preventing the unattractive melt-down that would have ended with my laptop in the microwave.

Although no one will believe it, Gavin you provided unswerving support and patience during my dramatic career change and at times exclusive focus on and obsession with this research. Thank you always.

Finally though not least, I would like to thank all of the many, who contributed to this research. In particular those who cannot be named but to whom I remain completely indebted for giving me an exceptional glimpse inside a world more usually closed to outsiders. You know who you are!

City University Declaration

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Preface

This portfolio reflects just three of the potential opportunities in the working lives of counselling psychologists; research, publishing and clinical work and represents the culmination of a long, sometimes painful yet exhilarating process of qualification.

During this time, working as a trainee in two bereavement services and a cancer clinic among others, I was struck by the overarching sense of optimism and renewed interest in life, which often accompanied the understandable devastation, loss and trauma my clients encountered. This reinforced my own profound belief in human beings and their (often underestimated) ability to overcome even the worst of life's challenges if given the support appropriate to individual needs.

I was accompanied on much of this journey by my eight participants whose distinctive, colourful and vivid personalities, carried way beyond each interview and thus remained constantly in mind throughout the whole process. This was in no small part due to their unrivalled ability to bring their experiences to life by being unexpectedly open to sharing the often horrific details of what had happened to them via resourceful, energetic and articulate descriptions.

Part 1. The research focuses on the experiences of eight former British paratroopers (Paras) who remained psychologically well despite encountering extreme and traumatic events in combat.

Part 2. The journal article expands on myth-making as protective and connective - one of the more unexpected sub-themes emerging from the research data.

Part 3. The advanced client study features the case of an individual who had attempted suicide, finding no reason to live in his world of fear, mistrust and social alienation.

The theme linking these three portfolio sections is that of human connection, an aspect of 'being' without which we might struggle to exist. This work highlights its crucial role in wellbeing and the potentially devastating consequences of its lack or loss.

Part 1 – The research

The research challenges what is often a default (and widespread) assumption that dysfunction is inevitable following traumatic events (particularly for combat troops). It explores the possibility of encountering severe trauma yet remaining psychologically well and even experiencing growth as a result. It is presented through the eyes of eight British paratroopers, selected on the basis of their mental well-being having squared up to the Grim Reaper in combat. This focus is not intended in any way to minimise or undermine the experiences of those who have not been so fortunate and who suffer terrible psychological difficulties following trauma. It does however aim to offer a broader view of potential human responses to adversity than that of simply dysfunction.

Given mental ill-health is not the only possible outcome, a general expectation of being traumatised by certain experiences, may render individuals more susceptible to negative consequences. Potentially, the knowledge that other more productive outcomes are possible might be helpful. The reasons why some people thrive while others struggle in adversity continue to evade understanding, but it is hoped that this exploration of these Paras' experiences might illuminate aspects of this issue in some small way.

It is also hoped that these findings might potentially contribute to enhancing individual resilience to life's challenges whilst highlighting the idea that it is possible to benefit from even the most appalling experiences life can throw at us. Furthermore understanding that challenge, adversity and wellbeing not only co-exist, but may be mutually dependent, could be liberating in our increasingly risk-averse society.

Since the thesis write-up aimed to present the process as it unfolded, the more standard practice of including all background research in the literature review regardless of when it came to light, was set aside in favour of a more organic presentation. Thus, in an effort to remain transparent about the process, some omissions discovered latterly are presented in the Analysis and Discussion chapters for the first time, rather than being edited into the Literature Review. Reflexivity sections are written in the first person to connect more directly with the reader and to reflect their subjective nature.

Part 2 – Journal article

The journal article presents myth-making as one of the crucial ways in which these Paras forged protective connections through time, supported by the British Army's regimental system. This arguably enabled them to transcend the impact of traumatic events and emerge not only mentally well but having grown from their experiences, facilitating crucial reconnections in the longer-term. As the interviews progressed, I was struck by how often these Paras made reference to popular culture - film, literature, poetry as well as their own Regimental history - as a way of making sense of their experiences. The article argues the case for myth-making as psychologically connective and thus protective for these men. Strongly supported by the British Army regimental system, myth-making is experienced through the powerful identity of being a Para. This article is intended for the Journal of Traumatic Stress. Although presented here in a style consistent with this portfolio, it will be submitted in accordance with the journal's own guidelines (see appendix A in Part 2 of the portfolio). Aside from formatting, all JTS article requirements are met.

Part 3 - Professional practice: Advanced case study

The advanced case study is designed to reflect clinical skills, a nuanced understanding of the chosen therapeutic model in relation to the client and to demonstrate self-awareness within the therapeutic process. It explores the therapeutic collaboration between myself and a client initially committed only to killing himself. After struggling to connect meaningfully to the world following

trauma sustained throughout childhood, he had become trapped in an unbearable adult existence alienated from everyone around him. Due to the complexities of his issues, a flexible, integrative model was chosen with an existential attitude at its core to address the fundamental questions he posed; what is the point? Who am I? Why do I exist? The study charts our journey progressing through helplessness, fear, vulnerability, confusion and extreme mistrust into a more valued way of living and of creating meaning which underpinned and inspired new and more fruitful connections to himself and to others. This case study was published in the Counselling Psychology Review in March 2015 as a result of being awarded the BPS DCoP Trainee Prize 2014 (appendix R).

Part 1 – The research

The experience of acute mortal peril and its impact on the paratrooper's subsequent life

Supervised by Dr Jacqui Farrants

Abstract

Media coverage of recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan has contributed to the perception that combat troops generally return home traumatised. This coverage has perhaps raised awareness of the horrors soldiers endure, lending weight to the notion that posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in particular, is almost inevitable in combat troops. While a terrible condition, it affects far fewer British soldiers than is generally perceived with the majority returning mentally well. Military research to date has been mainly quantitative, focusing on negative outcomes. Thus, aside from a few notable exceptions, combat experience (and more specifically, facing death) appears neglected in qualitative research. Misperceptions around the prevalence of PTSD, alongside curiosity about other outcomes following traumatic war-time encounters instigated this research investigating the experience of mortal peril and its impact on eight British paratroopers. Semi-structured interviews were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) revealing five super-ordinate themes: Identity; Tempering the Sword; Riding the Emotional Storm; The Tempered Self; and the Survivor's Search for Connection. Each yielded sub-themes spotlighting different aspects of the super-ordinate, eliciting an overarching sense of their experience. The findings offer insight into how death was encountered as embodied physical and psychological disconnection, within a distorted temporal world. They also illuminated how this was managed then psychologically overcome through intra and interpersonal reconnections. Longer-term experiences of disconnection at individual and social levels appear balanced by new connections supporting long-term psychological wellbeing emphasising the power of Para identity, while underlining the military/social divide. The findings also highlighted blurred boundaries between posttraumatic growth and PTSD and were consistent with existential philosophy on the nature of living and dying. It is argued that the participants' powerful group identity and cohesion, strongly sustained by the British Army regimental system, may promote psychological well-being in combat. Limitations and suggestions for future research are also discussed.

Introduction

Literature Review and Problem Statement

Chapter overview

This chapter provides a contextual overview of the wide-ranging theory and research relating to the topic of exploration, but contains more theory than is perhaps usual for an IPA study. This was a choice made in light of the dearth of formal research not only into the experience and subsequent impact of individuals believing they were about to die, but also into combat experience.

Although the primary focus of this study is the experience and on-going impact of nearly dying, it is investigated through the eyes of eight Paratroopers, specifically chosen on the basis of their psychological well-being after encountering highly traumatic events in combat. The theories/research explored were chosen because they are relevant to the research focus and/or consistent with IPA's underpinning philosophies (e.g. existential thinking in relation to life and death).

However, they were also deemed potentially significant in creating a broad framework of understanding these participants, and in light of the research questions. Any participant's cultural context may be deemed a significant factor in how they experience and make meaning of life (and in this case, nearly dying). Thus, while no assumption was made that these individuals would have an unconscious fear of death or otherwise, or have experienced resilience or fatigue, combat trauma or posttraumatic growth (PTG) they are arguably potentially relevant phenomena to this research.

The danger of incorporating such theory within the introduction is that it may influence the analytic process. However, IPA is a methodology which already acknowledges the impossibility of setting aside knowledge, attitudes and beliefs and takes steps to limit the impact this may have through reflexive practice. In order to ensure theoretical knowledge did not impede the analysis of participant narratives, continuous referrals back to the raw data were made. Although prior

knowledge of all theories is acknowledged, in-depth reading around these theories was kept to a minimum until after the analysis and no links were drawn between data and theory until the very final draft of the analysis chapter was complete. It is hoped that this allowed the themes to emerge freely, rather than resulting from theory being imposed on the data. However, due to the dearth of more formal research, less conventional sources of experience and information, such as biographies, newspaper articles and other personal accounts of the experience and impact of facing mortal peril for both civilians and soldiers are included.

The chapter begins with an examination of death and dying from perspectives which explore the impact of death as an inevitable part of human life and the ways in which we avoid, deny, embrace and compensate for it.

The impact of combat trauma is explored with an overview of mental health in the military and in particular, empirical research into Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), commonly (and mistakenly) believed to be the most likely outcome of going to war. In order to provide a backdrop for better understanding Paratroopers, there is an overview of their training, which is designed to enhance resilience encompassing group identity and cohesion.

All participants in this study have remained mentally well regardless of their traumatic encounters in combat. The final section will review research in the emerging field of Posttraumatic Growth (PTG) and will present the rationale, reflexivity and research questions for this study.

If you were to fall to your death from a very great height - it would be a shame not to enjoy the view as you fell, or to fail to appreciate the wind in your hair and the warmth of the sun on your face. To experience the raw voltage of being alive requires that we learn to lick honey from the razor's edge (Rinpoche, 1992).

Paratroopers have formed an elite regiment within the British army for over 70 years. They are trained to negotiate life-threatening situations as a matter of course in the already highly dangerous environments of war. This coupled with the particularly stressful nature of their training, successfully navigated by only the most resilient, creates/reinforces strong group identity, where the fear of letting down their comrades becomes greater than the fear of death; where the desire to win must override the will to survive. As one former Parachute Regiment officer notes "Winning the battle must supersede survival otherwise nobody would ever fight" (Anonymous 1, personal communication, November 17, 2012[1]). Thus Paras offer an intriguing opportunity to explore the successful navigation of life after being confronted with their own death.

Death

Mortality has fascinated and frightened humanity throughout history, its draw little abated by the advance of scientific knowledge. Following millennia of religious and philosophical scrutiny, the issues of mortality and the impact of near-death experiences have been widely examined from psychological and biological perspectives, but have not become any less enigmatic or unsettling. In the shadow of the first World War, Freud's notion of the death instinct re-conceptualised humans as intuitively attracted towards a peaceful state in which all conflict would be eradicated (Lemma, 2003). Self-directed aggression arises from this innate lure of death which is re-directed outwards due to conflict between the life and death drives (Lemma, 2003). According to Freud (1918/2010) our unconscious, driven to reconcile all contradictions, cannot contemplate its own death, thus behaves as if

[1] A former Parachute Regiment officer (Anonymous 1.) and serving army medical officer (Anonymous 2) contributed to this proposal both of whom requested anonymity. This is explained and discussed in the next chapter.

immortal. In his view, the notion that abstract group ideals supersede individual survival thus forms the basis for heroism, with the caveat that ultimately heroism may result from primitive man's belief that it won't happen to him (Freud, 1918/2010). These ideas underpin the seminal work of Ernest Becker discussed later.

An existential perspective

The perspective offered by existential psychologist Emmy van Deurzen suggests that in order to live life to the full, we must actually acknowledge and endure our physical/biological limitations, anticipating the inevitable pain, deficiencies, yearnings and most importantly, life's unavoidable conclusion, our death. We may believe in a 'natural balancing mechanism' where pain transforms to pleasure, yet this understanding comes with the knowledge that life ultimately elicits death (Deurzen, 2010 p.153). This suggests that a close reminder of our mortality may serve to refocus us on living. Thus she conceptualises death as "the essential reminder of life", a means of facing reality and maximizing its potential (Deurzen, 2010, p.152). Chantelle Taylor, the first British female soldier known to have killed in combat agrees with this sentiment. "There's nothing that makes you feel more alive than being quite close to death and maybe that's what most soldiers, former soldiers feel like" (Lunt, 2012).

Indeed a new awareness of death can act as an "awakening experience" or type of "existential shock therapy", providing significant motivation for life change (Yalom, 2011 p.30/1). Although physical death may destroy us, Yalom believes it is the idea of death and its interdependence with life which actually saves us. He points to Heidegger's dual modes of existence; in everyday mode, we focus on "how things are in the world"; in the ontological mode we revel in the "being" itself, where raised awareness of existence and mortality elicit anxiety. Yet it is this very anxiety which primes us for change (Yalom, 2011 p.33). Similarly, Sartre maintains that any experience that brings death to conscious awareness reminds us of what is important; authenticity (life experience) not knowledge (Sartre, 2003).

There appears to be broad agreement for the view that an underlying anxiety (whether conscious or unconscious) is fundamental to our will to live. Existential psychotherapist Ernesto Spinelli frames this anxiety within the context of meaning. He believes that our evolved systems of experientially-created meaning-making predispose us to brand our experience with purpose (Spinelli, 2005). He views meaning-making as central to the human condition, where finding acceptable or suitable explanations for events and/or behaviour helps reduce the anxiety we experience when things appear inexplicable (Spinelli, 2005). Meaninglessness is thus intolerable. He also points out that because individual meaning is socio-culturally dependent, whatever conclusions are drawn they cannot be viewed as the truth or a definitive depiction of reality.

Viktor Frankl also highlights meaning-making as our primary motivation for living. It is our will to discover meaning in any circumstance, even when faced with the "tragic triad" of human suffering, guilt and death, which drives us on through life (Frankl, 2004 p.139). These future-focused beliefs, (tested to the limit during his struggle for survival in Nazi concentration camps) emphasise personal strength alongside meaning-making, rendering individuals responsible for change. Thus while we may not always have the power to control what happens, we can still choose our response to it even under the most difficult circumstances (Frankl, 2004). This is consistent with Heidegger's (1927/2010) concept "being-toward-death". Heidegger posited that we hide the unavoidably finite nature of life from ourselves (where we cannot control the start and end of existence, from birth to death). Any disturbance to our usual mode of living (e.g. bereavement) elicits the fundamental anxiety and choice in how we react to the "ontological givens" of birth and death (Langdridge, 2007, p.31). Heidegger believes this anxiety results from not only these choices but also our renewed awareness of our being-towards-death. This intensifies with the additional realisation that life has neither grounding nor inherent meaning. Creating a meaningful life in the face of our angst-ridden knowledge (of our finite existence) remains our own responsibility.

Frankl's (2004, p.139) notion of "tragic optimism" incorporates our potential to exchange suffering for achievement, and guilt for meaningful engagement (perhaps similar to Becker's (1997) concept of heroism (discussed below) and Deurzen's (2010) "natural balancing mechanism"). Acknowledging that the inexorable qualities of being human are hard to confront, both Frankl's (2004) conceptualisation of the suffering-guilt-death trinity and Heidegger's being-towards-death (1927/2010), force us to acknowledge the inescapability of human anguish, imperfection and death. Thus, in Frankl's (2004) view, acceptance of our finiteness helps us capitalise on of whatever life we have left.

While accepting that our lives require a foundation in purpose, Sartre (2003) proclaims that our endeavour to reveal that foundation is a pointless obsession. In other words, we cannot hope to understand why we exist, we can simply select and passionately pursue a goal whilst acknowledging the meaninglessness of life and assurance of death. Thus, the pursuit of Frankl (2004) and Spinelli's (2005) need/biological drive for meaning (in Sartre's view, futile) may be the source of the anxiety, itself creating the circular paradox between a desire to discover that which does not exist, in order to eradicate anxiety which results from the pointless search.

Terror of death: Terror management theory

Like both Freud (1918/2010) and Heidegger (1927/2010), Becker (1997) addresses the issue of man's refusal to recognise his own mortality. He believes man to be a creature living in a world of symbols, whose self-worth is created symbolically and whose natural narcissism is inseparable from a core need for self-esteem. This elicits a feeling of fundamental worth (according to Becker). Everything man does in his symbolic world is an attempt to deny and overcome his monstrous destiny. Becker conceptualises society as a symbolic system of action - a conduit for heroism, the attainment of which (based on organismic narcissism and the need for self-esteem) is the core condition for human life. The various forms of cultural hero-system ultimately allow us to earn a feeling of value, usefulness and "unshakable meaning" (Becker, p.5).

Terror Management Theory (TMT) proposed by Greenberg et al. (1990) is founded on Becker's work (1962, 1973, 1975, cited in Greenberg et al. 1990). Becker proposed that most human deeds and actions are performed in the service of suppressing or avoiding the inescapability of death. The fear of total annihilation creates (in Becker's view) such an overwhelming yet subconscious anxiety, that we never cease trying to make sense of it on multiple levels.

Becker purports that our main mission in life is to become heroic and to transcend death (Becker, 1997). At the macro level, societies create hero-systems of meaning through cultural values which facilitate our ability to cope with the fear of death. Examples include laws, religions and cultural belief systems which help explain life's magnitude and significance, marking out and celebrating talents, skills and deeds which make us extraordinary and penalising those who stray from cultural expectations and norms. Becker proposed that on the micro (individual) level, enhanced self-esteem also cushions us from the anxiety of death, itself created and maintained by how well we perceive (or are perceived by others) to adhere to our cultural worldview. It imbues life with personal meaning again buffering us from the anxiety of non-existence (Becker, 1997).

In a sense, we are seeking immortality via various cultural means. This happens directly through religion (belief in an afterlife), but Becker argues such macro-level constructs as national identity and posterity also offer an indirect symbolic immortality, creating a sense of inextricable connection to something greater than oneself which will effectively continue beyond our physical death (Becker, 1997). Thus, identification with a specific cultural system/group, silently promises immortality, as it invests our lives with meaning via adherence to the beliefs, traditions and worldviews of the group. Such symbolically-derived self-esteem requires close comparison with others to ensure ongoing supremacy which expresses our fundamental drive to demonstrate our worth in the greater scheme of being. He believes we must be heroic and prove our value above all others (Becker, 1997). Once established, we must then necessarily defend against the terrifying potential loss of meaning and self-esteem that cultural membership

offers, by attacking any of the many other cultural systems contradicting our 'truth'. This, Becker (1997) believes is the real basis for intolerance, aggression and evil.

Indeed, so strong is the human drive to avoid the knowledge of our inevitable demise, paradoxically we may be willing to kill or be killed in order to protect the cultural system buffering it. Becker also highlights the more righteous aspect of human heroism; a willingness to die for one's country, family or friends, but in order to do this, one must feel that it is truly heroic and timelessly meaningful. Yalom (1991, p.149) suggests that an "irrational sense of specialness" is our greatest defence mechanism against the terror of death, creating an unfounded sense of invulnerability. Furthermore, he suggests that it is "human connectedness" (p.119) which ultimately overcomes death terror. This view, consistent with Becker (1997) may explain one mechanism which allows men to go to war and face death, in particular paratroopers, whose strong group identity as elite may facilitate this. "Nobody joins the Parachute Regiment expecting to die. Everybody expects to get away with it one way or another. Now that might be unrealistic but nonetheless everybody expects to get away with…it's almost self-deceit" (Anonymous 1, personal communication, November 17, 2012).

Hence military personnel may face considerable internal conflict; trained to kill and to be killed, while (according to Becker, 1997) unconsciously seeking to suppress and conquer this inevitable grotesqueness. TMT thus proposes that higher exposure to death (our ultimate vulnerability), elicits enhanced pro-cultural behaviours and greater suppression of thoughts about mortality (Wong & Tomer, 2011). TMT further predicts that individuals facing such existential terror will actively reinforce self-worth and validate their cultural system (Berg & Soeters, 2009). Consequently, for elite forces, TMT might predict that the strength of their immortality system allows them perhaps to out-perform other units in terms of intensity of trauma exposure and success, yet arguably maintain better mental health than other soldiers (e.g. Sundin et al., 2010).

Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon and Reus (1994) demonstrated that those denied the opportunity to defend against any assault on their worldview (i.e. death anxiety-buffering self-esteem) experienced greater accessibility to death-related thoughts. In other words, a weakened buffer opened the door to such thinking. Interestingly, mortality salience (raised awareness of death) has also been shown to increase risk-taking behaviours when they form the basis of self-esteem (Berg & Soeters, 2009). Therefore TMT might reasonably predict a noticeable impact of mortality salience on soldiers who face the existential dilemma of death's inevitability more explicitly than most others.

Berg and Soeters (2009) explored the effects of actual death threat on the self-perceptions of Dutch soldiers deployed to Iraq in 2004 using questionnaires, self-assessment/report and word-fragmentation tasks. Their claim to provide a compelling example of TMT in extremis is questionable since their participants were clearly not completing questionnaires at life-threatening moments on the battlefield. Thus, despite the improved proximity in time to the threat, reliance on memory remains an issue, as it is for much research dependent on retrospective surveys or accounts. This obviously applies to the current study which is addressed in the Discussion chapter. Regardless, as envisaged by TMT Berg and Soeters' deployed participants reported fewer death-related thoughts, arguably in denial at a level beyond consciousness.

Interestingly, the Dutch soldiers' operational readiness appeared considerably higher under threat, potentially supporting TMT's prediction that mortally-threatened individuals, will seek to reinforce self-worth (in this case, via their group/cultural identity as fighting soldiers) thus maintaining psychological balance. The authors also found that a greater acceptance of the risk of dying elicited increased acceptance of their military objectives, motivation and identification with their national army. The sense of being valued by relevant others enhanced mutual identification with those sharing a worldview (i.e. in their cultural group), which the researchers convincingly argue, suggests that higher acceptance of mission riskiness is related to their perceived value to it and to fellow soldiers, thus establishing

strong group/cultural immortality in accordance with TMT. Berg and Soeters (2009) also point out that the success of this particular mission reinforced the soldiers' self-worth but may also help explain less adaptive responses when outcomes are less favourable.

Acceptance of death

While Becker's (1997) Denial of Death elicits the fundamental unconscious anxiety, it is interesting to speculate that perhaps the absolute acceptance of death might significantly diminish or even eradicate the anxiety, because in fully realising acceptance, the search for meaning is relinquished and future possibilities extinguished (Yalom, 2011). In a BBC documentary about fear, Albert Niyonzima (Rwandan genocide survivor) described feeling so overwhelmed by the horror of witnessing the terrifying deaths of family, friends and even strangers on a daily basis, that the fear of living with such raw reminders of the unimaginable death that could happen to him at any moment, became unbearable. So, he accepted it and resigned himself to dying. It was at this point that the fear just vanished. He says it disappeared because he knew absolutely that he was going to die (Williams, 2012). Similarly, Hiroshima survivors reported altered outlooks where they accepted death as inevitable, no longer respecting its horror (Lifton, 1991).

Near-death experiences

Although qualitative studies investigating near-death experiences appear scarce, one study plus a follow-up conducted almost 40 years ago was unearthed, investigating depersonalisation in the moment of life-threatening danger. Noyes and Kletti (1976) presented a descriptive analysis of 104 participants who experienced near-death in a range of life-threatening contexts including drowning, car accidents and illness. Data were gathered from first-person accounts (mainly questionnaires plus interviews and written statements). Some participants described fear turning to intense calm at the moment death seemed inevitable. Other striking features across accounts included altered perceptions of time and space, in particular slowing of outer environmental time alongside a corresponding inner sense of time speeding up. In their follow-up, the authors note feelings of

"strangeness or unreality" were often accompanied by an "as if" quality suggesting separation from the world was incomplete (Noyes and Kletti, 1977, p.380). However descriptions of feeling like a spectator, support participants' subjective sense of disconnection. The lack of consistency in data-collection may have influenced findings and the meanings attached to participant experience were somehow elicited through 40-item yes/no questionnaires, which may account for some level of coherence in the findings. Nevertheless, the authors concluded that depersonalisation may be a universal reaction to mortal peril.

Due to an apparent of dearth of formal qualitative research exploring not only the experience of surviving death but its ongoing impact, a broader search led to accounts documented via biographies and newspaper articles including cancer survivors, hostages and civilian war-victims. The responses to facing death vary greatly between individuals. Gonzales (2012) offers a poignant example, describing a horrific bear attack in which a married couple nearly died. Their responses over subsequent weeks/months/years diverged exponentially. While the husband interpreted the experience as a fresh start, embracing his new life, his wife became constantly fearful and hyper-vigilant, eventually committing suicide 22 years later.

International cyclist Lance Armstrong describes how cancer survivorship rendered him disorientated when he tried to return to his life, asking "How do you slip back into the ordinary world?" (Armstrong, 2001, p.187). He also notes that after battling for one's existence, there is no support-system primed to deal with the emotional fall-out (Armstrong, 2001). Plane hijack survivor Mike Thexton was selected for execution, spending 12 hours waiting to die after seeing fellow-hostages shot and killed beforehand. His account reveals difficulty sleeping, disorientation and experiencing a quasi-religious ecstasy as a result of being unexpectedly alive (Thexton, 2006). Lifton (1991) conceptualised survival as a terrible rite of passage during which the self undergoes a symbolic death eliciting the birth of a new self, forever marked by death's imprint.

However, while many of the aforementioned experiences result from random, uncontrollable events or simply bad luck, there are those whose choice of activities place them directly in harm's way. Mountaineer, Joe Simpson contemplated his impending death having fallen into a deep crevasse, the only possible hope for escape being to climb the vertical ice wall with a broken leg, seemingly unimaginable:

> I felt calm. It was going to end in the crevasse. Perhaps I had always known it would end this way….I thought carefully of the end. It wasn't how I had imagined it. It seemed pretty sordid. I hadn't expected a blaze of glory when it came. Nor had I thought it would be like this slow pathetic fade into nothing (Simpson, 1997, p.114).

Combat experience

Qualitative military research

In joining the army, individuals actively expose themselves to adversity and potential death. However not only is there an apparent lack of qualitative research exploring the vivid and nuanced experiences of nearly dying in combat and subsequent impact but there is a paucity of exploration into any combat experience; two notable exceptions being Lomsky-Feder (1995) and Jensen (2012). Lomsky-Feder's phenomenological exploration revealed the experience and meaning of combat as integrated into the life-stories of 63 veterans of the 1973 Yom Kippur War. She questions the basic assumption of combat as a traumatic experience and suggests that a non-crisis perspective may be found in the socio-cultural context which imbues individual narratives with meaning. This seems consistent with findings from Nucifora, Subbaro and Hsu (2012), which highlight the importance of community resilience in reducing post-adversity occurrence of mental health issues. Lomsky-Feder further argues that the phenomenology of combat has been neglected and that most research ignores the meaning of war for the individuals fighting it. Her participants represented their combat experiences as largely non-traumatising and normalised them, pointing to her central claim; that

because at the macro-social level, war is un-shocking within Israeli society, it thus presents as less shocking on the micro level; i.e. to the individual (Lomsky-Feder, 1995). This illuminates the indivisible nature of individual and lifeworld.

Heidegger's dual modes of existence seem pertinent to the experience of battle. War can shatter the social knowledge we take for granted which may help us understand the difficulties soldiers can face coming home to everyday existence; a transition from one reality to another. Returning to what was once familiar; the everyday mode, they may find themselves in a place of what Lomsky-Feder (1995 p.466) describes as "phenomenological strangeness" in the ontological mode-of-being.

Jensen (2012) explored the experience and impact of killing in hand-to-hand combat. An interesting contrast emerged from existential phenomenological interviews with 17 male military service members, between fighting at a distance and close-quarters engagement. The analysis revealed the disturbing nature of such killing and Jensen described ways in which participants depersonalized to "temporarily suspend the opposing person's humanity" (Jensen, 2012, p.80). Furthermore, they expressed shifts in their own psychological disposition to enable the necessary taking of life. Jensen and Simpson (2014) further elucidate this, relating the accounts of two participants who reported experiencing no impact, and who used a variety of tactics (rationalising, compartmentalising, depersonalising and creating meanings) to facilitate disconnection from necessary acts of violence towards another human being.

These interviews also helped facilitate a better understanding of the stressors and coping responses of those on the battlefield. Jensen and Wrisberg (2014) identified the fear of letting down comrades and endangering the mission as significant stressors. One of the many interesting themes to emerge; 'flip the switch' encapsulates the shift in focus from perceived situational threat, to problem-focused coping strategies. This is consistent with Tedeschi (2011) who suggested that active coping facilitates post-traumatic growth, although this was not a focus of

Jensen and Wrisberg's study. The significance and impact of thorough preparation is encapsulated in the theme 'fall to your training'. Realistic and challenging drills were repeated to automaticity and perceived as literally life-saving in hand-to-hand combat where chaos, surprise and confusion rule (Jensen, 2012).

These studies highlight the rich and subtle textures of experience which may be elicited through qualitative endeavours, enhancing aspects of our understanding which quantitative approaches do not seek to capture. Although Jensen (2012) investigated combat killing rather than dying, the two are intimately linked and thus relevant to the current focus. Nevertheless, it is clear that active military personnel face far greater exposure to potential death (and therefore survival experiences) than civilians (Marshall, 1947/2000).

Becker's (1997) explanation as to why men will die willingly for their country is that they must believe their actions are heroic and exceptionally meaningful. Indeed for Paras, the meaning of winning may play a significant part:

> You must principally be fighting to win rather than survive because you will know going into a battle, you will look around all your comrades, you know that not everybody is going to survive and yet you do all still go and do it (Anonymous 1, Personal communication, November 17, 2012).

The research presented above spotlights different aspects of human awareness of and encounters with death and our various attempts to avoid this knowledge. The potential consequences and outcomes of such encounters will now be considered.

Combat trauma

The central aim of this study is to explore the experience and aftermath of combat trauma where good mental health is maintained. Nevertheless it seems appropriate first to understand aspects of psychological distress which can result from encounters in war. Benight (2012) suggests that the main contemporary research

emphases into responses to traumatic stress are dominated by the medical model, taking a disease-orientated approach. This section will explore recent findings, including differences in prevalence between individuals and various military groups.

Empirical research: PTSD

A major prospective cohort study was set up in 2003 at King's Centre for Military Health Research, London (KCMHR) to examine psychological and physical wellbeing of UK military deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan. Approximately 16000 regulars and reservists completed comprehensive surveys (KCMHR, 2010). As a result, most research in the past 15 years into the Army's physical/mental health has been conducted at KCMHR. Whilst acknowledging significant contributions from its eminent research team, methodological limitations may transfer across studies: E.g. data collection reliant on surveys (subjectivity of self-report plus motivational effects); Likert Scales (criticised as arbitrary and prone to desirability biases). Individual biases may also transfer with researchers drawn from a relatively small pool limiting breadth of perspective/internal peer review. Research conducted at KCMHR discussed below is denoted once by *.

This section focuses mainly on PTSD, reflecting its relative emphasis in the research literature. However other problems do arise post-combat, both co-morbidly and independently from PTSD such as depression, anxiety disorders, aggression and alcohol misuse (Kang & Hyams, 2005).

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders' (DSM-5) 'Criterion A' definition of traumatic incidents involves encountering or witnessing real/threatened death (violent/accidental) or serious injury. Conway (2013) emphasises that traumatisation is not confined to single, acute events, sometimes occurring over time. Indeed, the DSM-5 added a dissociative sub-type of PTSD to include de-realization (the world as unreal) and depersonalization (oneself as unreal) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). This acknowledges trauma from inescapable, overwhelming experience like combat trauma.

Conway (2013) describes the main symptoms believed to characterise PTSD including: Re-experiencing, avoidance and increased arousal plus difficulty imagining any kind of future. Cultural differences and age may also influence the way in which it manifests (Conway, 2009).

General traumatic experiences (e.g. bereavement) are distinguished from trauma as defined above. Exposure to the former is common within the general population after which the majority do not develop persistent, psychological conditions (Ehring, Ehlers & Glucksman, 2008). Clearly soldiers in combat encounter higher intensity trauma, thus speculation that they face increased risks of various mental health issues (including PTSD) is understandable (MacManus et al., 2014)*.

However, research does not appear to support the notion of mental health issues universally on the rise in UK military populations. Hotopf et al. (2006)* surveyed just over 10,000 UK army personnel to compare health outcomes of those deployed to the 2003 Iraq war with those not deployed. Surprisingly, they found no significantly worse psychological outcomes associated with deployment for regular troops, and only moderate effects on some physical symptoms. Researchers acknowledged potential selection bias where unfavorable consequences of war could be masked, since in order to be deployed, soldiers may already be healthier than the general population.

However Sundin, Forbes, Fear, Dandeker and Wessely (2011)* also found no overall rise in mental ill-health of regular UK personnel deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan (alcohol misuse being the notable exception). Perhaps more surprisingly, the percentage of regulars with probable PTSD symptoms remained remarkably low. Fear et al. (2010)* supported previous findings that the most frequently reported mental health issues for UK military personnel were depression, anxiety and alcohol misuse rather than PTSD (findings also supported by Creamer, Wade, Fletcher and Forbes (2011).

A number of factors have been identified as potentially contributing to mental health difficulties in combat. Iverson et al. (2008)* reported perceived threat to life during the event as the strongest predictor. Proximity of enemy contact and the belief that the situation was beyond control were also significant.

Hotopf et al. (2006) discovered worse outcomes for reservists than regulars. Their Iraq deployment was associated with increased levels of common psychological disorders (anxiety/depression) and fatigue. Reservist vulnerability is supported by Sundin et al. (2011); MacManus et al. (2014); and Browne et al. (2007)* whose potential explanations include weaker group cohesion, difficulties readjusting socially and domestic issues. Reservists also reported greater perceived exposure to trauma and higher perceived threat-to-life (a PTSD predictor). This difference in perception could mean lower threat levels were reported by reservists as traumatic, than their more experienced 'regular' counterparts (Browne et al., 2007).

Another relevant group difference was identified by MacManus et al. (2014) between UK and US troops' mental health, supporting previous findings (Thomas et al., 2010; Vasterling et al., 2010; Sundin et al., 2011). PTSD occurrence in US troops returning from combat was between 21% and 29% (Wells et al., 2011) whereas UK troops' mental health has remained resilient (apart from the rise in alcohol misuse); PTSD symptoms in British regulars ranged between 1.3% and 4.8% (cf 3% prevalence of PTSD in the UK general population). MacManus et al. (2014) suggest younger U.S. personnel, longer tours of duty and higher proportions of reservists as potential causes.

Two meta-analyses (Brewin, Andrews & Valentine, 2000; Ozer, Best, Lipsey & Weiss 2003) investigated PTSD risk factors and symptoms. However, their findings were largely inconclusive and accompanied by multiple caveats relating to validity and reliability due to common methodological issues such as incomplete search protocols and selection bias. Brewin et al. concluded it was too early to determine specific sets of pre-trauma predictors shared across all traumatised populations. Interestingly, Ozer, et al. found that for two predictors (family psychiatric history

and prior psychological issues), interviews produced greater than average effect sizes than self-report surveys, which highlights potential value of qualitative investigations in identifying future quantitative foci.

Nonetheless with aforementioned limitations noted, Brewin et al. (2000) found for military trauma (unlike civilian), poor education, childhood adversity, strength of trauma and lack of social support all showed weak but increased effect sizes. Strength of trauma was a notably stronger predictor among combat veterans than civilians. However the military data was drawn from just two studies and measures for trauma severity between these populations differed, undermining any universal claims.

As well as predicting risk, research has investigated mediators and protective factors. Several potential mitigating occupational factors were considered by Iverson et al. (2008) including group/unit morale, leadership and training, concluding that systematic personnel preparation could lessen the psychological consequences of deployment.

Sutker, Davis, Uddo and Ditta (1995) proposed that both vulnerability and resistance to combat-related stress are more strongly linked to personal resources than environmental factors. They identified commitment to personal hardiness and active, rather than avoidance coping as protective, possibly modifying and shielding against vulnerability to negative psychological outcomes. However, their research design prevented any conclusions as to causation and relative contributions of potential mediators. The lack of specificity of stressor types pre, during and subsequent to combat exposure and the absence of information regarding pre-existing mental health issues may have skewed results as well as self-report limitations.

Research also suggests that certain group-memberships promote resilience. Sundin et al. (2010)* reported that although commando and airborne units (Royal Marine Commandos (RMC), and Parachute Regiment (Paras) respectively) serving in Iraq

endured high levels of extreme combat exposure, they appeared less vulnerable to mental health issues than regular troops (again alcohol misuse the exception).

MacManus et al. (2014) also found that elite forces (RMC and Paras) reported fewer psychological issues after deployment to Iraq than other infantry and speculated this was connected to rigorous selection and training. They further note that elite forces have lower occurrence of childhood adversity (potentially screened out during selection) and higher group cohesion, both of which may safeguard against mental health issues, particularly PTSD (Iverson et al., 2008).

A meta-analysis investigating group cohesion supported the notion of its protective role, advantageous in military contexts (Oliver, Harman, Hoover, Hayes and Pandhi, 2000). Further, Frapell-Cooke, Gulina, Green, Hacker-Hugues, and Greenberg (2010)* validated the efficacy of the peer-support system "Trauma Risk Management" (TRiM), trialled by the RMC to promote psychological resilience through facilitating group support. This evidence opened the door for TRiM to run across all services (KCMHR, 2010). Further support for unit cohesion as potentially protective against poor mental health outcomes (including PTSD), comes from Greenberg et al. (2003); Wessely, Dandeker, Hotopf, Rona and Fear (2006)*; and Iverson et al. (2008) who highlighted the low rates of mental ill-health among paratroopers in particular.

By contrast, Sundin et al. (2010) concluded that group cohesion did not account for differences between the aforementioned special and regular forces' mental health, because they found unit cohesion to be greater in the RMC than the Paras and further that there was no difference in cohesion between Paras and regular troops. Thus the authors attributed the Special Forces' higher resilience to more rigorous selection and training.

Their finding of unit cohesion parity between Paras and regulars aroused curiosity, but the specific measures used may offer an explanation. Richards (2002) proposed that simply because something is measurable, does not necessarily mean it exists.

Sundin et al. (2010) formulated unit cohesion as a construct based on four variables, measured using Likert scales. Even disregarding the general criticisms of such scales, the specific wording and language utilised was potentially loaded and alienating, for example, 'I could have gone to most people in my unit if I had a personal problem'. It can be strongly argued that for Paras it is highly undesirable either to discuss or admit to discussing personal issues as it may threaten/undermine the very thing the researchers seek to measure. Limitations of self-disclosure (potential fear of seeming weak and losing colleagues' trust) are particularly pertinent to Paras, despite assurances of anonymity. Further, the researchers assumed that the nature of groups is universal and includes the ability to discuss personal issues.

Summary

This section has highlighted research findings supporting the idea that traumatic combat experiences do not necessarily traumatise. Individual and group differences have been investigated alongside protective and vulnerability factors to mental ill-health. Broadly speaking UK regular troops appear resilient, particularly to PTSD, despite media focus (e.g. Greene, 2005) and a parallel research emphasis on what is undeniably a debilitating condition. Although affecting considerable numbers of individuals, it remains a relatively small percentage of deployed personnel. Most importantly, it shows that the complexities of mental health issues pose considerable challenges to quantitative exploration alone and perhaps highlights the need for additional qualitative investigation (cf criticisms of Sundin et al., 2010). There remains little research into the specific experience and meaning-making of life beyond combat survival where death has been encountered.

Resilience

Background

There has been a relatively recent surge of interest in the notion of resilience, a potential factor underpinning all responses to trauma (Gonzales, 2003). Meredith at al. (2011) note a variety of existing definitions including; the ability to endure stress/adversity; adaptive coping styles; and a return to baseline functioning.

Interest in psychological resilience derives from developmental psychology's focus on protective factors eliciting healthy outcomes even for children exposed to extreme adversity. Bonnano (2004) distinguishes between recovery and resilience in the face of loss or trauma; recovery represents a pathway where varying degrees of transient psychopathology (e.g. PTSD) might dominate but will gradually return to pre-trauma functioning. By contrast, resilience in adults suggests the ability to maintain stable psychological balance despite encountering potentially challenging events such as life-threatening situations (Bonnano, 2004).

Much research has attempted to identify various factors which enhance resilience. In a review of the relevant research, Bonanno (2004) highlighted four main contributing factors: 1. Self-enhancement reflecting an overly positive self-bias. 2. Repressive coping - the avoidance of disagreeable or unwanted memories, thoughts and feelings, plus engaging with mechanisms such as emotional dissociation. Although as Bonnano (2004) suggests, the latter is often regarded as dysfunctional and potentially harmful, in contexts of extreme adversity emotional dissociation may actually promote helpful adjustment. Although this may appear to contradict the aforementioned study from Sutker et al. (1995), it should be noted that whereas Sutker's avoidance coping may be an unhelpful unconscious process limiting any sense of personal agency, Bonanno's repressive coping perhaps refers to a more conscious process akin to compartmentalising rather than avoidance. I.e. the temporary setting aside of potentially debilitating emotions in order to survive. 3. Laughter represents the effective coping mechanism of repressive copers, reducing distress by negating negative emotion and enhancing social support. Finally 4. Personal hardiness (encompassing commitment to meaningful purpose; a belief in personal agency; a belief that growth occurs from positive and negative events) also supported by Bartone (2006). Florian, Mikulincer, and Taubman (1995) demonstrated that hardy individuals (Israeli soldiers) tend to assess potential adversity as less threatening, and so reduce their distressing experience. They also exhibited more confidence, active coping and effective use of social support.

Everly, McCormack and Strouse (2012) believe the main characteristics linked to enhancing resilience can be learned. Distilling the findings from interviews, focus groups and seminal war manuals, they illuminated a number of characteristics common across highly resilient individuals including: decisive action, persistence, self-control, and an optimistic view of life. Expressing views not dissimilar to Frankl (2004) the researchers acknowledge that while life-events are largely uncontrollable, a measure of choice remains as to how we respond to adversity, either through resistance (how we withstand it) or resilience (how we bounce back).

Resilience in the military

In military environments it is argued that exposure to trauma and an awareness of mortality may be enhanced, rendering resilience key to withstanding the pressures of war. Although research, including MacManus et al. (2014) supports the notion of ongoing mental health resilience among UK troops, its origins and how it may be nurtured remains somewhat elusive. This means attempts to enhance resilience during training are subject to trial and error. Indeed, Tri-Service Professor of Military Psychiatry and first head of the extended UK Medical Assessment Programme for UK Military Veterans Ian Palmer, says although the US Army routinely offers resilience training, its efficacy is questionable. “People who do well in training don’t necessarily do well in the field….because it’s contextualised. Until you’re confronted with the stressful situation, you can’t ever know who’s going to do well” (I. Palmer, personal communication, January 9, 2013). Research supports this, suggesting individual resilience to be context-dependent (Casey, 2012).

Consequently realism has been a focus of British Army training for some years and efforts to improve this are ongoing. A medical officer with strong ties to the Paras says that officers returning from the Falklands were instinctively putting into the training, techniques to enhance realism and improve resilience (Anonymous 2, personal communication, January 13, 2013). For example, for the past few years as part of pre-deployment training for Iraq and Afghanistan, he says real amputees have been used as casualties in practice combat scenarios:

> They hear a bang, go round the corner and there are people lying there, screaming and shouting with blood spurting. You've got some guy who's a genuine amputee with a bit of make up on the end of his leg squirting fake blood from a syringe. Very, very convincing…it means when they see their first casualty they have a sense of what to expect as opposed to being shocked at the fact that there's blood everywhere and someone's got a leg missing (Anonymous 2, personal communication, January 13, 2013).

Thus, making training programmes as realistic as possible is one route to resilience taken by the British Army. Colonel P. McAllister explained that teaching soldiers to function well under high stress means that trauma sometimes occurs in training, which is unavoidable when preparing for the brutalities of war (Personal communication, November 15, 2012). Hence, Para selection is by design, particularly stressful (I. Palmer, personal communication, January 9, 2013). One such training exercise similar to boxing is milling, unique to the Paras and Special Air Service (SAS). Milling highlights the significance of both physical and mental toughness within these regiments:

> Recruits must demonstrate controlled physical aggression…except neither winning, losing, nor skill are pre-requisites of passing. Candidates are scored on determination, while blocking and dodging result in points deducted. You've got to be prepared not only to give it out but also take it, fight on and not protect yourself (Anonymous 1, personal communication, November 17, 2012).

Whilst enhancing resilience by whatever means remains highly desirable in the service of protecting our troops' physical and mental well-being, it is important to acknowledge potential ethical issues arising from this. Increased resilience enables soldiers to continue functioning at high levels which in combat has an arguably negative impact on those caught up in war and classified as the enemy.

Identity and group cohesion

I. Palmer believes that the stressful nature of Para training is designed to enhance group identity and cohesion and to promote survival and the will to live even in the most extreme situations which paratroopers are more likely to face than most other soldiers (Personal communication, January 9, 2013). Former Head of Counter Terrorism and UK Operations in the MoD and Senior British Military Advisor to US Central Command, Major-General Chip Chapman fought with 2 PARA in the Falklands. He suggests that the Paras' strong identity may facilitate individual identification with the regiment even before selection. This distinctive identity also enhances unit cohesion, such is the desirability and high motivation required to become a Para (C. Chapman, personal communication, October, 25 2013).

For paratroopers, both group identity and cohesion appear particularly prominent. "You can be in the Para Regiment and perhaps achieve more because you belong and you've done something special. You are an elite soldier" (I. Palmer, personal communication, January 9, 2013). Dominic Gray who served in 3 Para (Third Battalion, Parachute Regiment) in the Falklands, believes that knowing you're a Para transcends everything else; "Everyone is very much equal, whether you're black, white, red, yellow, you're a paratrooper and that is that" (Smith, 1990).

I. Palmer explains the significance of group identity/cohesion in battle:

> You develop intense relationships particularly if you go to war and go to conflict. So the cohesion amongst the group is enhanced by external threat. The Parachute Regiment will be more likely to go to into more hairy places and are more likely therefore to have this cohesion if everything works ok (personal communication, January 9, 2013).

Former Para and Falkland's veteran Vincent Bramley offers a personal view; "When you go to war, you don't fight for queen and country. You fight for yourself, you fight for your mates. Without your mates beside you, you're nothing" (Smith, 1990). Fighting for or against an ideology may also provide motivation for laying one's life

on the line. For example, Middlebrook (2009) highlights the German Jews serving in the 21st Independent Parachute Company at Arnhem.

Chapman believes resilience is underpinned by unit cohesion, itself elicited through training excellence, shared philosophy and understanding, extreme motivation and the will to succeed (C. Chapman, personal communication, October, 25 2013). He describes how, for highly cohesive units like the Paras, exclusion from group missions has a greater negative impact than encounters with extreme, traumatic events. For example, during his time with 2 PARA, 212 men were selected to join 1 PARA for a mission in Sierra Leone. Due to the particularly severe nature of the atrocities encountered, the men completed psychiatric assessments upon their return. A control group of non-deployed 2 PARA was also assessed and interestingly, the men left behind exhibited higher rates of depression, suggesting morale among those unable to fight alongside their comrades was significantly impacted (C. Chapman, personal communication, October, 25 2013).

Chapman strongly believes that in the military, cohesion is all and views the breaking of group bonds as analogous to tearing limbs from soldiers' bodies (Chapman, 2013). Indeed, TMT (Greenberg et al., 1990) predicts negative consequences for disruption of cohesive groups. Moreover, in combat Chapman observed that the least resilient were the most recent additions to the unit, i.e. the least bonded with others. This helps develop a picture highlighting the significant role of group identity/cohesion in creating highly effective and resilient soldiers such as the Paras.

Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel, 1982) offers a broad framework for understanding the significance of group identity and thus cohesion. SIT was developed by Henri Tajfel who conceptualised identity as having two comparatively distinct parts; personal and social identity (Phoenix, 2007). The theory aims to explain the change to human psychological processes when in group contexts. Hepburn (2007) highlights SIT's premise of a universal human cognitive desire to

positively differentiate from one another; as individuals we are unique with corresponding beliefs, attitudes and preferences. However in groups, we adopt the characteristics of the social group with which we identify and which we feel define that group.

According to SIT the significant factor is the subjective sense of belonging to a group rather than simply sharing characteristics (Turner, 1982). Some overlap appears between Becker's (1997) Denial of Death (thus TMT) and Social Identity Theory. Like Becker, Tajfel connected belonging with self-esteem which becomes entangled with group outcomes. If we view our group unfavourably, then that is how we see ourselves (Hepburn, 2007) and if a social identity is of particular significance, we self-stereotype behaving in accordance with group attitudes. By differentiating our group favourably from others, we gain self-esteem as a result of our in-group attaining high social status, usually by denigrating the out-group and maximising positive attributes of the in-group (Phoenix, 2007). Parallels may be drawn between Becker's cultural immortality systems and Tajfel's in-groups, both of which imbue an individual with meaning and self-esteem and which may be worth vigorously defending, thus explaining why humans resort to aggression and war (Becker, 1997) and for SIT, antisocial behaviour and discrimination (Hepburn, 2007).

Posttraumatic Growth

Background

While group identity and cohesion may enhance resilience and potentially protect against combat trauma, other factors may also influence how well people adapt post-trauma. Bartone's (2006) views broadly coincide with Bonanno (2004) who refers to 3-dimentional hardiness; a dedication to discovering meaningful reasons for living; the conviction that surroundings and outcome of events are largely controllable; and the understanding that both positive and negative experience elicit personal growth.

More recently, trauma research has ventured beyond the idea of survival (and a return to pre-trauma levels of functioning) into the realm of positive change. The historical tendency to focus largely on negative aspects of post-trauma experience, neglected human resilience to adversity and perhaps failed to capture the complexities of potential trauma responses (Bonnano, 2004). Tedeschi (2011) highlights the paradoxical nature of posttraumatic growth (PTG), conceptualising loss as gain and vulnerability as strength, which may explain some of the historical neglect of research into positive outcomes of trauma.

Tedeschi and McNally (2011) describe PTG as transcending the ability to withstand and resist psychological damage from high-stress events (i.e. resilience), facilitating development beyond pre-trauma adaptive states (i.e. change for the better). Butler et al. (2005) suggest adversities sufficient to disrupt psychological balance (promoting cognitive restructuring) but which do not overpower adaptive capabilities, are most favourable to PTG. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) maintain that growth occurs not from the trauma itself, but as a result of the struggle to adapt to the new (post-trauma) worldview.

Tedeschi (2011) addresses the misconception that those who experience PTG must be extremely resilient, by pointing to research which challenges this - that resilient

individuals are actually less likely to experience growth (Levine, Laufer, Stein, Hamama-Raz & Solomon, 2009). Their resilience i.e. ability to cope, may result in less of the struggle with the mental aftermath of trauma which elicits PTG (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Since the 1980s a growing body of research has highlighted the diversity of individuals experiencing PTG across a broad spectrum of traumatic events including mortality salience (Bluck, Dirk, Mackay & Hux, 2008) and combat (Wolfe, Keane, Kaloupek, Mora & Wine, 1993). There are also many domains in which survivors of traumatic events may experience PTG illuminated by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) including: altered perspectives, beliefs and values, improved interpersonal relationships, changes to self-perception and spirituality.

Empirical research

Due to the high levels of exposure to adversity in military populations, much research into PTG specifically addressed combat exposure. For example, Berg and Soeters' (2009) investigation into soldiers' self-perceptions under mortal threat highlighted a strongly reinforced sense of self-esteem particularly after successful missions; moreover they established that mortality salience can elicit positive psychological reactions.

Further supporting the potential for growth resulting from changes to self-perception, a sense of self-improvement was highlighted as influential by Fontana and Rosenheck (1998) and positively correlated with most types of combat exposure. Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) suggest that experiencing traumatic events also creates or reinforces beliefs around self-reliance and competence, eliciting an enduring self-confidence for extrapolation to future traumas.

Brewin, Garnett and Andrews' (2011) mixed method study into military trauma and identity illuminated the experience of positive identity change (alongside the negative). These included living deliberately, enhanced relationships and empathy, more positive self-perception and new appreciation of life. These potentially

facilitate more active participation in post-trauma life, identified by Linley and Joseph (2004) and other PTG studies as positive outcomes.

Several studies have found positive correlations between severity of combat exposure and PTG including Sledge, Boydstun and Rabe (1980) who found the most severe experiences of tortured American prisoners of war (POWs) in Vietnam, elicited the greatest PTG. Speculatively the greater the exposure, the greater the shattering of the individual's worldview eliciting a harder adaptive struggle, thus the greater growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Solomon and Dekel (2007) found evidence of both PTSD and PTG in Israeli soldiers (POWs and non-POWs) who fought in the 1973 Yom Kippur War. In this study POWs who experienced more severe exposure than non-POWs, were not only shown to exhibit higher levels of PTG but also of PTSD symptoms. Limitations of their self-created questionnaire however, prevented examination of relationships between PTG/PTSD and coping mechanisms which have emerged as potentially significant to trauma exposure outcomes in several studies discussed below. Also, the attrition rate of the study was 30% although the authors highlight the 12-year break between combat and assessment.

The correlation between PTSD and PTG has fuelled speculation around their close, potentially dynamic relationship. While Solomon et al. (1999) found evidence of both positive and negative change in the same participants, some investigations have suggested that psychological turmoil may not simply trigger the growth process, but lingering elements of distress may also supplement its development and preservation, indicating a level of interplay between the two (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Indeed evidence suggests common ground exists between PTSD and PTG on many levels including the possibility of shared variables and predictors. Linley and Joseph (2004) conducted a review of positive change after traumatic and adverse events, an exploration which highlighted many variables associated with PTG. Those

identified from the reviewed studies show considerable overlap with those considered risk factors for PTSD. They included context/type of event; cognitive appraisal; socio-demographic variables; coping/social support; personality; cognitive processing and affect among others (Linley & Joseph, 2004). Updegraff and Taylor (2000) found a similar phenomenon, concluding that the same factors (and events) may either inoculate or exacerbate the impact of adversity, consistent with Solomon et al. (1999).

Dekel, Mandl and Solomon (2011) discovered peritraumatic factors in their Israeli military participants (coping and loss of control during exposure) to be predictive of both PTG and PTSD suggesting a shared psychological driver that triggers them but sends them along different paths. However, they found personality and pre-trauma variables predicted only PTSD, while personal agency appeared unique to developing PTG. The researchers highlighted the significant role of the traumatic event itself in both subsequent PTSD and PTG. Further, it is not simply exposure, but the loss of control which they believe facilitates the PTG.

This view is consistent with Tedeschi and Calhoun's (2004) emphasis on the adaptive struggle with the mental aftermath of trauma. Erbes et al. (2005) also note several examples where during prolonged trauma (such as combat captivity) some sense of agency or control was identified as predictive of PTG (e.g. Eitinger, cited in Erbes et al., 2005).

Although Dekel et al.'s (2011) assertions (that both loss of control and personal agency may be linked to the development of PTG) appear somewhat conflicting, an explanation may be found in the difference between subjective and objective loss of control. The loss of control facilitates PTG, in that it may elicit Tedeschi and Calhoun's (2004) 'adaptive struggle'. However, a subjective sense of losing control still arguably leaves room for a response which might also incorporate a sense of personal agency, rather than an objective loss of control which may not. Thus, while a subjective loss of control may contribute, and indeed be necessary for Tedeschi's adaptive struggle (a key component in the development of PTG), it does not

preclude the possibility of the individual gaining a sense of personal agency from their response/reaction. Potentially, if the sense of control is not lost, there may be no opportunity for experiencing personal agency in the midst of a traumatic event.

In light of the discovery of both mutual and distinct predictive factors for PTG and PTSD Dekel et al. (2011) view the association as multifaceted. The authors suggest a helpful conceptualisation would encapsulate both idiosyncratic and shared characteristics simultaneously rather than as independent concepts (Dekel et al., 2011).

Fontana and Rosenheck's (1998) study revealed interesting interactions between the benefits and liabilities of combat exposure in 1198 participants using data from the National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study (NVVRS). They discovered that perceived benefits (particularly self-improvement) may moderate the negative effects of some liabilities such as self-impoverishment, while the ability to cope (sense of success/failure) emerged as potentially influential in the development of PTSD. The authors acknowledge the challenges of assessing retrospective self-report data such as NVVRS, where the reporting of exposure, benefits and liabilities could be affected by participants' PTSD to the extent that non-existent relationships might be created. However their findings as to the potentially significant role of coping strategies are consistent with others such as Solomon et al. (1999) who concluded that some POWs contained their distress not by avoiding, but by compartmentalising reactions thus not impeding potential for psychological growth.

Thus, while it appears that stress is an underpinning factor for PTG and PTSD since both are predicted by combat exposure, the way in which the stress is managed, may be key to determining trauma outcomes (Moran, Schmidt and Burker, 2013). In a study specifically investigating re-readjustments patterns in Vietnam veterans, Wolfe et al. (1993) discovered a heavily combat-exposed subset of participants with positive post-combat adjustments and which also experienced the largest positive gain in stress-reduction. The researchers determined that coping strategies were more predictive of current adjustment than exposure and those veterans endorsing

active coping strategies were significantly less symptomatic. The strongest predictive variable of poor veteran functioning was sets of unfavorable coping tactics (such as wishful thinking and acute avoidance). Methodological problems included the common issues of self-report; the potential for bias due to concerns around completing government-funded surveys and low survey response-rates. Further, the approximate 20-year gap between combat and survey introduced the potential confounding variable of intervening life-events which may have influenced results.

Ford and Spaulding (cited in Wolfe et al., 1993) compared American POWs in North Korea who had coped well under stress with those who had not. The former employed a range of coping strategies including rationalisation, humour, reality testing and denial. The first three are consistent with active coping strategies identified by Solomon et al. (1999) among others. It is possible that denial may provide some respite from the struggle to maintain active participation of managing their stress. Those determined as coping poorly appeared more passive-dependent and less flexible in the range of strategies employed.

Many studies of PTG such as Feder et al. (2008) have adopted cross-sectional designs which can only identify correlates of PTG rather than causes. The general challenges of self-report measures remain, but when they are the only measure used, a further limitation arises in the potential for inflated assessments of relationships identified. For example, in Sledge et al. (1980), singular reliance on the particular self-report measures used may have reduced the likelihood of detecting whether such positive evaluations were in fact a defensive response rather than a distinct growth phenomenon.

Indeed, there are those who believe that assumptions of PTG as adaptive and positive may be premature. Zoellner and Maercker (2006) argued that it is insufficiently understood and cannot yet be linked reliably to measures of adjustment, pointing to the possibility of a self-deceptive, defensive role for PTG. Further support for PTG as a defense mechanism may be drawn from the many

studies showing that it is distressed individuals who seem to experience the most growth; the higher the distress the greater the defensive need. Nevertheless, Dohrenwend et al. (2004) examined PTG appraisal data from the NVVRS specifically looking for evidence of defensive, psychological denial and found none, concluding that successful war/post-war adaptation was probably more common than not.

However whatever the 'truth', while it seems reasonable that loss of control during traumatic events might trigger a defensive response, this does not necessarily undermine the concept of PTG. Fontana and Rosenheck (1998) found some evidence of dynamic interplay between PTG and PTSD where perceived positive outcomes help mitigate negative consequences. This may provide a sense of psychological balance which speculatively facilitates PTG or at least does not deter it. So whether labelled a defence or growth mechanism may be inconsequential to the individual's overall sense of positive change.

Findings as to the permanence of PTG are inconsistent (Linley & Joseph, 2004). However, Dekel et al.'s (2011) prospective, longitudinal study found evidence of PTG when assessed 18 and 30 years after the Yom Kippur War, suggesting longevity is possible at least for some. Nonetheless, Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) believe that when PTG has been shown to endure, further long-term benefits occur.

Since PTG may represent a desirable outcome for combat veterans, research has begun to address the ways in which it may be fostered, prior to, as well as post-adversity. Tedeschi and McNally (2011) identified significant areas for enhancing PTG within the U.S. military. These include: Normalising trauma responses and creating expectations of growth as a part of the experience, developing anxiety reduction and distress tolerance techniques, beneficial self-disclosure (enhancing emotional/social support) and facilitating soldiers in telling their story via metaphor to aid expression of complex experiences and revision of shattered life-narratives using trauma as a catalyst, to include aspects of PTG providing new goals and means by which to live (Tedeschi, 2011).

Summary

Despite negative trauma outcomes historically forming the central focus of both research and public interest, the idea that PTG in a variety of domains may be equally prevalent as an outcome of trauma, is gaining ground. Furthermore it seems that negative and positive responses may interact although the exact nature of the interplay remains uncertain. Particular aspects underpinning trauma outcomes may be dynamically interchangeable as both protective and predictive of negative outcomes, whilst also promoting mental well-being. Finally, research investigating the role, mechanisms and potential for PTG has yielded sufficient understanding that is now being successfully integrated therapeutically to promote and facilitate mental well-being in US servicemen (Tedeschi, 2011).

Research rationale

Despite media depictions of a pandemic of PTSD sweeping through the British Armed Forces following deployment, research, statistics and anecdotal evidence suggest a different picture (I. Palmer, personal communication, January 9, 2013). Prevalence of PTSD among those deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan appears only slightly higher than the general population. Furthermore, aside from alcohol misuse, there seems to be no evidence that deployment significantly increases the occurrence of common mental health issues such as depression or anxiety among regular personnel which remains at similar levels to those within the general population (MacManus et al., 2014) despite soldiers' greater exposure to traumatic events.

Thus it seems that even under extreme stress, most soldiers do not generally develop severe symptoms of psychopathology. In fact, as many existential philosophers have pointed out, the presence of unavoidable and challenging events in the lives of us all suggest they form an important function in human experience. Moreover, it seems likely humans are more resilient than the risk-averse twenty-first century Western mind-set imagines. However, it appears that even the highest estimates suggest around 94% of British soldiers return home without developing

PTSD, and do not necessarily experience higher psychological disturbance than the general population. This is certainly not an attempt to minimise the significant challenges which face those who are traumatised in combat, but aims to present a broader picture of potential outcomes.

Reflexivity

When I became interested in this research focus, I wanted to understand the experience of those encountering extreme adversity - those who looked death in the face, but who remained mentally well. Whenever I spoke about my chosen topic I was struck by two contrasting reactions. Firstly, apart from a small minority, there was a palpable reluctance (from silence to direct avoidance) to discuss death, even within psychological settings; the second was the great enthusiasm with which the military embraced the topic, in particular paratroopers who were clearly irritated by the focus on post-combat mental health deficit and of their depiction as either psychopaths or mentally broken having squared up to the Grim Reaper.

My own experiences relating to this are outlined in the methods chapter under *Personal Reflexivity*. As I began searching for research relating to the experience of nearly dying in combat and its impact on subsequent living, I realised there was little encompassing the whole experience. Furthermore, given the inevitability of our demise, it seems that opening up dialogues around death might be helpful in a society so fearful of the D word, that life is prolonged at all costs, ageing is avoided by ever more extreme and desperate measures and the fear of death manifests in a variety of disguises in and out of the therapy room.

Furthermore, my experience of working therapeutically with cancer patients has underlined the importance of open and honest dialogue around death. The opportunity to talk freely about dying appeared significant, since many were unable to do so without the fear of causing distress to family and friends.

By understanding the experiences of Paras exposed to death, it is hoped this study will contribute to the small body of existing literature concerning such encounters

and their impact within military contexts. Moreover, a better understanding of the ways in which those who have successfully navigated trauma and made meaning of their ongoing lives without mental health dysfunction, may be beneficial for those who do not fare so well. Thus it is hoped that this study may in some small way, encourage psychologists to broaden the discourse around death as well as to deepen understanding of the potential range of trauma outcomes.

Research questions

Inspiration for this research initially came from an account which described the "evolution of a soldier" as the moment in battle when death is an absolute certainty, when they accept that the next step will be their last (Lynch cited in Cooksey, 2004, p.81). That moment arrived for the soldiers of 3 Para on the summit of Mount Longdon during the Falkland's conflict. Lynch (cited in Cooksey, 2004, p.84) points out that those who survived this "ultimate test" had faced the death for which they were trained yet did not die, thus posing the question; how do you live a life you've already given up on? Informed by the meaning-making existentialist ideas of Frankl (2004), Spinelli (2005) and others, this fascinating question led to the current research which aims to explore the experience of; an encounter with mortal peril and how life is lived subsequently; how paratroopers who've encountered death but do not die, make meaning of living; and do they create specific meanings which allow themselves to face almost-certain death in the first place?

Method

Chapter overview

This chapter is written in two parts in order to explain the methodological basis for the study and to allow the process to unfold chronologically.

Section 1: Methodology focuses on the methodological stance, rationale and procedure. Section 2: The Research Process explains specific research techniques used and how they were applied within this study. The second part is written in the first person to help the reader engage with the process as it happened and to allow direct expression of methodological and personal reflexivity.

Section 1: Methodology

Research aims

This is a qualitative study, conducted from a phenomenological perspective offering insight into the paratrooper's experience of nearly dying and subsequent meaning-making after encountering mortal peril. It is hoped this research will provide insight into an experience which affects many but is often neglected.

Research questions

What is it like to encounter mortal peril? How is life lived after such an encounter? How do paratroopers who've encountered death but do not die, make meaning of living? How do they make meaning of the potential for facing death?

IPA methodology and philosophical underpinnings

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is an idiographic approach employing qualitative methodology which takes an especially psychological interest in its attempts to understand lived experience, exploring how individuals make sense of their personal and social world (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). Smith and Osborne (2013) believe the principle raw materials for IPA are the meanings participants maintain about particular experiences. Since an understanding of lived

experience cannot be fully or directly achieved, it relies on the researcher's own views, necessary for making sense of that other personal world through the practice of interpretation. Smith and Osborn (2013) call this the double hermeneutic (the researcher making sense of the participant's sense-making), highlighting the importance of hermeneutics within IPA.

The epistemological position of any perspective informs methodological choices. The phenomenological paradigm sets aside focus on belief in a 'real' world and instead emphasises experience or narrative (Langdridge, 2007), requiring the collection of first-person accounts. Thus investigation moves away from the quest for universal truths about phenomena and attempts to understand and illuminate the essence of a comprehensible whole (Langdridge, 2007).

Phenomenology takes a philosophical approach to the study of experience and existence (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). Instigated by Edmond Husserl in the early 20th century, phenomenological philosophy represents the investigation of concrete lived experience. Husserl's transcendental phenomenology sought the essence of conscious experience i.e. the experiential content prior to thoughts, interpretation or meaning-making. In order to understand this essence, a reflexive diversion from our everyday assumptions about the world (or natural attitude) was required by bracketing prior knowledge (epoché), experience, culture and so forth, leaving us free to understand the universal essence of phenomena (Langdridge, 2007). Phenomenology avoids the duality of an individual in the world, via Husserl's concept of the lifeworld encapsulating the inextricable nature of the world as a setting for living and the subjective experience of it (Hollway, 2007). Thus subjective experience rather than objective reality, remains the focus of phenomenological endeavour - as Husserl proposed; we can only know that which we experience (Hollway, 2007).

However, in a move away from Husserl's original conceptualisation, transcendental knowledge is not sought in IPA. Instead it draws on his successors, in particular Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). Heidegger focused on

the meaning of being human, introducing the idea of intersubjectivity. He viewed the individual as permanently entwined with the world - a Dasein (being there) or as he termed it 'being-in-the-world' (Heidegger, 1927/2010). Human beings are in relationships with others from which there is no escape (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). Indeed this perspective, the focus of Bracken's (2002) BMJ editorial, may be increasingly permeating mainstream narratives. Heidegger also questioned the notion of knowledge without interpretation since in his view, individuals actively and continually make meaning from experience in context, comprised of body, culture, relationships and time (Hollway, 2007); in other words, subjectivity in dynamic symbiosis with the world.

Two core phenomenological concepts attempt to bridge the divide between individuals and their environment: Lifeworld (the indivisible nature of the world in which life is led and the subjective experience of that life); and being-in-the-world. The latter underlines active meaning-making, produced in the social context of experiences shared with others (Langdridge, 2007).

Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) emphasised the embodied nature of being while Sartre (another important IPA influence), attended to its developmental nature; in his view a relentless endeavour of discovery since there are no essential characteristics of consciousness (Langdridge, 2007). Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the interpreted and embodied characteristics of our worldly understanding of existence, points to phenomenological investigation as a situated endeavour, a position referred to as hermeneutic phenomenology, descriptive in tendency but procedurally interpretative (Larkin & Thompson, 2012).

As an idiographic approach, IPA focuses on the particular rather than seeking to make claims generalisable to the population in order to create universal laws of human behaviour (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2013). It instead shifts the focus towards understanding meaning within individual lives. However, Harré (cited in Eatough & Smith, 2013) proposes that attention to the idiographic represents the first step towards more universal structures.

Rationale for using IPA

This study seeks to understand and explore the experience and meaning-making of nearly dying in combat and its subsequent impact. After establishing there was a gap in the literature and that the experiential aspects particularly appeared neglected even in contexts other than combat, it seemed appropriate to select an exploratory methodology. Smith and Osborne (2013) view IPA as particularly helpful in addressing complexity, novelty or process and appropriate for investigating how individuals perceive and experience specific situations. Furthermore, the nature of the experience under investigation may be hierarchical (connecting to past events, moving forwards), thus required a methodology which could encompass that. Smith et al. (2013) differentiate between levels of experience; an awareness of something happening forms the initial stages of an experience, rather than being unselfconsciously caught up in its everyday current. This comprises basic experiential units (meaningful in themselves). IPA however engages more often with what Dilthey describes as "comprehensive units" composed of many segments of life, dispersed across time but connected via common meaning (Dilthey, cited in Smith et al., 2013 p.2). The issue of using IPA to investigate past events, thus relying on memory to explore experience is considered in the Discussion chapter under the heading 'Critique of methodology'.

The assumption at the start of this study was that each participant would have a unique personal experience of the phenomenon to share. As Willig (2008) points out, IPA aims to capture the rich textures of such uniqueness whilst acknowledging direct access to it remains elusive. Also there was a certain appeal to a methodology offering guidance within a flexible structure; an important feature, if individuality (of both participant and researcher) is to be truly embraced.

Other qualitative methodologies were considered however, including the approach which views narrative as the cornerstone of being human. Narrative analysis (NA) bears similarities to IPA. For example, its 2-stage analysis is descriptive and interpretive and the researcher is considered active in the process. Narrative,

according to Murray (2008) helps us make sense of a chaotic world. Thus NA could facilitate participants in telling their stories and sense-making revealing the impact of mortal peril as an unfolding drama. The researcher's inexperience with this methodology doubtless elicited anxiety about undertaking a methodology at this level as a complete novice.

The contrast between discourse analysis (DA) and IPA is highlighted by DA's assumption that action and thought are constructed by language rather than reflecting it (Cooper & Kaye, 2002). DA investigates the ways in which people construct reality through language, examining such things as turn-taking, creation of subject positions and use of interpretative repertoires (linguistic tool kits) (Cooper & Kaye, 2002). However, a discursive approach may marginalise the embodied nature of experience, neglecting an arguably important aspect human meaning-making, particularly when potential annihilation is central to the topic of interest. Eatough and Smith (2013) noted emerging dialogues between DA and IPA investigating how discursive constructions are entangled in individual lived experience. Ultimately however, IPA was deemed the most appropriate for investigating this topic and for eliciting the type of knowledge sought.

Epistemological standpoint

Epistemology according to Ponterotto (2005) concerns the study of knowledge, how we obtain it and the relationship between researcher and participant. Different types of knowledge will be generated by different approaches. As Smith et al. (2013) point out, the qualitative researcher's choice of approach must be consistent with the epistemological stance of the research question, i.e. its appropriateness for acquiring the particular knowledge sought. In order to clarify my own epistemological position, I considered three questions highlighted by Willig (2012): What kind of knowledge do I hope to create? What beliefs/assumptions do I hold about the world I am investigating and what is my relationship to that knowledge?

I do not believe that the Truth is out there waiting to be discovered and rather than seeking such Truth, I aim to elicit rich accounts for better understanding participant

experience and meaning-making activities, by presenting a place in which to interact with and consider a specific phenomenal experience (Willig, 2012). I am thus interested in exploring my participants' unique lifeworlds and the ways in which they make sense of their experience in creating them. However, I also adhere to the view that it is impossible to provide a purely descriptive account of experience since both the describing and the listening to, are subject to interpretation. The knowledge produced in IPA studies is thus dependent on the researcher's views, assumptions and prior experience.

My ontological assumptions (about the nature of reality and of being human), consider that each individual's experiences create unique worlds. This is consistent with a phenomenological understanding that there may be 'as many (experiential) worlds as there are individuals' (Willig, 2012, p.12). This is reflected in my clinical practice where I have actively pursued training as an integrative psychologist, since I prioritise individuality over a one-size-fits-all approach and where I aim for an egalitarian, exploratory client/therapist relationship.

I am positioned as relativist in relation to both status of data (an interest in how participants create meaning rather than seeking absolute truths) and also status of data-analysis (my interpretation of data rather than revealing truths) both of which require consideration (Willig, 2012). The researcher-participant interaction underlines the importance of researcher reflexivity in accounting for their impact on process and findings (Willig, 2008). Overall, I would describe my epistemological position as interpretative phenomenologist. This potentially presents something of an oxymoron; interpretation arguably negates revealing of experience itself - the raison d'être of phenomenology (Langdridge, 2007). However, opportunities for phenomenological research might be slim if only pure experience, unadulterated by interpretation were acceptable. Accessing human experience without language as a vehicle for understanding seems optimistic and as Gadamer (1975/2013) suggests, all understanding requires interpretation. However, this is a subject of ongoing debate which perhaps lies beyond the scope of this study.

Issues of validity

The debate around validity in qualitative research persists and as Yardley suggests is an important issue to address in terms of ensuring that its significant contribution to social psychological knowledge continues (Yardley, 2013). She proposes that the criteria for assessing quantitative research differs not only because of the type of knowledge sought, but also the central position of the researcher's subjectivity renders more traditional routes to evaluation (e.g. statistical analyses) immaterial. Yardley (2000) identified four core elements for assessing the validity of qualitative research, which guided this study (outlined below).

1. Sensitivity to context

Yardley (2013) suggests researchers might demonstrate sensitivity to relevant theory/literature, to socio-cultural contexts and to the study's protagonists, the participants. The current study emerged from a gap in the literature, established following a thorough review of the relevant research. However, due to the lack of more traditional sources of information (particularly concerning paratroopers), a range of background interviews were conducted, which it was hoped would not only facilitate understanding but create a more vibrant backdrop against which the reader (and researcher) might encounter the study. Additionally, sensitivity to context was demonstrated by seeking approval/support for the research from the Regimental Colonel; also by going through recognised channels for recruitment so participants could rely on the study's legitimacy, maintaining sensitivity to potential security issues. Participants also chose the time/location of the interviews to ensure a relaxed environment for discussing challenging experiences. Sensitivity to context is further enhanced via semi-structured interviews, whose open-ended, flexible questioning allows participants to guide proceedings. Their voices are present throughout the analysis, via verbatim quotes bringing to life their experiences and offering some access into their world. This helps the reader consider the researcher's interpretations, which are presented as speculative and specific to this sample. It also highlights the distinction between the participant's raw data and those interpretations, in line with Smith and Osborne's (2013) recommendations.

The Discussion chapter then connects these findings to the existing theory and literature.

2. Commitment and rigor

Yardley's (2000) criteria for establishing commitment and rigour include extensive engagement with the topic, meticulous data collection, immersion in data and a thorough analysis. Smith et al. (2013) suggest commitment to developing methodological competence/skills underpins these processes. This researcher formed an IPA research group, attended a 2-day IPA workshop and other lectures. Data collection required persistence in accessing the inner circles of the participants' tight knit-world, where suspicion is often the attitude adopted towards 'outsiders'. Again the flexible nature of semi-structured interviews contributed to quickly establishing good relationships. Yardley emphasises the adequacy of participant cohorts in fulfilling research questions/aims. Paratroopers face death as part of their job, yet research suggests most remain psychologically healthy despite exposure to highly traumatic events, thus ideal for this study. This facilitated in-depth interviews and analysis, part of what Smith et al. (2013) suggest contributes to a rigorous study. The use of relevant quotes to illustrate analytic themes also demonstrates rigour. Detailed accounts of the methodological and analytic process appears later in this chapter, highlighting the efforts made to conduct this study in a diligent, systematic manner consistent with Yardley's recommendations. However, it is hoped a balance was found between maintaining rigour while still utilising the methodological flexibility of IPA, since adherence to hardcore rules may reduce and limit the researcher's analysis (K. Heffron, personal communication, November 27, 2012). Smith et al. (2013) also highlight this point encouraging imagination, sensitivity and playfulness alongside methodological rigour.

3. Transparency and coherence

The third core element concerns the clarity and coherence of the research as a whole, in how it is presented and thus understood by the reader; further whether it is consistent with its underpinning theory (Yardley, 2000). Transparency requires full disclosure of all relevant aspects of the research processes. Again, a detailed

account of the method is provided shortly, which demanded distinguishing between relevant and irrelevant detail. For example knowing the participants were recorded, suggests a more accurate recall of interviews than if written from memory, yet recording may have impacted the way they described their experiences, thus seems relevant. Knowing informed consent was signed on A4 paper is less critical to understanding, thus more acceptable to omit. Reflexivity is significant in any qualitative research. IPA emphasises how experience of the world is mediated by our beliefs, intentions, actions and assumptions thus Yardley argues that researchers must reflect on how theirs may have affected the research process/outcomes. Thus reflexivity is addressed in Method and Discussion chapters. Further efforts to maintain transparency throughout included a paper/electronic trail, maintained from start to finish, preserving the details as the study developed. Much of this process (including relevant documents) was reviewed in research supervision sessions. Indeed this could be considered a type of independent review which Smith et al. (2013) argues contributes significantly to the validity of any qualitative study.

4. Impact and importance

The potential for making a difference and the utility of the research is Yardley's (2000) final core element. It is hoped this study will enhance understanding of the experience of combat, of facing death and of the potential for outcomes other than detrimental, following trauma. Currently, there is very little research illuminating battlefield experiences, perhaps particularly important in countries where significant numbers of citizens comprise both professional and volunteer forces. Furthermore it is hoped the findings may be extrapolated more widely both to broaden our understanding of trauma outcomes and in any small way facilitate a more open relationship between society and death.

Limitations of IPA

Criticisms commonly aimed at qualitative methodologies often emphasise their lack of generalisability. Rawson (2011) highlights the influence of the researcher's epistemological standpoint which potentially biases them towards certain aspects

of the data supporting their view. This may undermine the potential for replication and thus the study's validity. However, since IPA explicitly aims to provide only one of many potential interpretations, Yardley (2000) rightly questions the appropriateness of reliability as a criterion by which to measure qualitative research. Silverman (2001) highlights issues of transparency arising when research articles/reports contain only extracts of the data and where access to full transcripts is usually limited for ethical reasons.

Limitations more specific to IPA, include its reliance on language which mediates the transmission of 'experience' from participant to researcher. Willig (2008) highlights IPA's assumption that a participant's narrative is a sufficient and accurate representation of his/her experience. Firstly she argues that language may construct one of many possible versions of reality rather than simply describing the experience and that these constructions are imbued with individual meaning. Thus direct access to others' experience remains impossible.

Willig further proposes that language precedes experience (thus shaped by what we think), which in turn is limited by our linguistic expression of it (Willig, 2008). Moreover, IPA relies on a participant's ability to fully express the richness and complexities of physical and emotional experience - potentially challenging for those unused to giving voice to their ways of being in such detail (Willig, 2008).

The issue of description over explanation is also debated. Willig (2008) points to potential limitations in our understanding of phenomena if no new light is shed on their causes or origins. IPA does not attempt to explain why events may be experienced, more how they are perceived and understood by individuals in particular contexts.

Finally, Smith et al. (2013) propose that cognition forms an integral part of the natural attitude, (as memory, reflection, judgements), which they argue, supports IPA's compatibility with a social cognition framework. Indeed Eatough and Smith (2013) specify cognitions not as isolated distinct functions, but as an integral feature of being-in-the-world. However, others maintain that this stance invokes a

Cartesian view of individuals in direct opposition with the bedrock of phenomenology; intentionality - the idea that consciousness occurs between people, not internally within individuals (Langdridge, 2004). This opposes the phenomenological challenge to cognitive theory's subject/object split perhaps inviting criticisms of IPA as not so much phenomenological, than a study of cognitions (Willig, 2008).

Participant criteria

Purposive sampling is the usual foundation for data collection within IPA studies. Participants are selected on the basis of suitability for answering the research question, thus they are to some extent likely to form a homogenous group. This means although individual experience is sought, participants' shared experience renders a view across the group potentially enlightening (Willig, 2008).

Paras are specialists, trained for particularly dangerous elements of combat, which makes them highly desirable participants for this particular topic. The nature and role of being a paratrooper increases their exposure to the experience of mortal peril and their potentially robust response to it.

Inclusion criteria:

- Participants must have served as paratroopers with the British Army and experienced near-death in combat; i.e. believed they were about to die.

- Participants must be willing to share their experiences and be able talk about them in detail.

- Participants must be over 18. Other than this, there was no age restriction since the experience under investigation was not deemed to be age-dependent.

Exclusion criteria

- Volunteers with mental health issues such as PTSD were excluded through careful wording of recruitment materials and via pre-interview telephone introduction and screening questions.

- Paratroopers still serving with the British Army were not considered due to security issues and potential conflicts with their current employment.

Recruitment strategy

A research recruitment poster was created (appendix A) and emailed to the Webmaster of various Parachute Regiment websites as recommended by staff at the Regimental Headquarters in Colchester, Essex. One Webmaster offered to create a web page on his site specifically for recruiting participants for this study (appendix B) and others also displayed the poster. From here I was introduced to a military historian who had interviewed many paratroopers as part of an historical study about the Falklands War and who very generously sent my poster to all their contacts. One of these (an ex-Para) who runs a network for former members of the British Military, emailed offering help. He suggested changes to the poster (approved by my supervisor) emphasising my personal connection to the Paras making it more accessible to members of his network (appendix C).

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews allow exploration of individual experience, with the immediate focus on eliciting the meaning and significance of the participants' own 'stories' through detailed description of concrete events. This follows Van Manen (1990, in Lydall, Pretorius & Stuart, 2005) who proposed lived experience as the start and end-point of phenomenological research (investigation being guided by the nature of experience). The aim throughout the interview process would be to approach each with curiosity, attempting to set aside personal beliefs concerning

death, dying and living beyond imminently anticipated death. However this is challenging if not impossible, the dilemma of phenomenological investigation being that we already know too much (Van Manen, as cited in Finlay, 2002) Thus, IPA acknowledges the researcher's role as significant and their experience is explored reflexively as part of the investigation. Further, in doing so it aims to illuminate the habitual ways in which things are known to them (Willig, 2008). In this way, it is hoped a level of transparency about the researcher's beliefs and attitudes will allow the reader to better understand the co-constructed nature of the interpreted experience in question.

All interviews were to be recorded digitally at a time and venue of the participants' choice. The first interview was to be treated as a pilot study to manage any adjustments needed to the interview schedule, to ensure it offered sufficient opportunity for the participant to express his experiences freely and that any prompts elicited the kind of data required for the study. After an initial warm up question, broad areas of interest would be introduced via open questioning further guided by his responses, to illuminate the fundamental nature of the meaning-making involved in living a life after a significant threat to existence. If appropriate, this interview would then be incorporated into the main body of data. This is common practice in IPA research (Langdridge, 2007). All interviews would then be transcribed verbatim.

Interview schedule

A very flexible approach was adopted for the participant interviews. An initial list of questions was created with the research aims (and facilitating the participant's description of his experiences) in mind (appendix D). These were tested on a non-participant Para as suggested by Smith and Osborne (2013). Aside from one initial warm-up question, ultimately no schedule was actually followed as the researcher intended to be guided by participant responses. However, it is acknowledged that the aim of remaining broadly within the area under investigation was kept in mind.

Ethical considerations

The proposal for this research included an Ethics Release form (appendix E) and was granted approval and insured by the Department of Psychology, City University London (appendix F). Full consideration was given to the study's ethical implications in accordance with the British Psychological Society Code of Ethics and Conduct (2009) which demands that participants must be protected from possible harm (psychological or physical), their dignity and rights maintained and their confidentiality and anonymity assured.

All participants in this study are adults without mental health impairments, which was not only central to the research aims but reduced the potential for psychological distress resulting from taking part. When conducting interviews about traumatic experiences, it was necessary to be mindful of the potential for emotional upset, although it is acknowledged an assumption was made regarding the robustness of paratroopers particularly since they were all deemed mentally well in order to take part. However, measures were in place to provide appropriate assistance had that been necessary. Details of support services were provided for each participant (appendix G).

Individual, written, informed consent (appendix H) was obtained prior to participation and the nature of the research was explained in detail verbally (to give participants the opportunity to ask questions) and in writing; all participants received an information sheet before their interview detailing requirements and research aims since there was no methodological need/intent to conceal them (appendix I).

Sufficient time was provided between participants agreeing to take part and their interview, to ensure they could consider any implications of participation without feeling rushed, to ensure informed consent and to enable them to withdraw beforehand if they wished.

Participants were asked in advance if any subjects were off-limits to aid privacy - specifically emphasising their right not to reveal personal information. However, no topics were excluded. They were assured of anonymity, that all names and identifying information would be changed to preserve confidentiality and that the recordings/transcripts would be encrypted and stored securely for five years in accordance with City University's ethical requirements. These will be destroyed once all research/ethical obligations are fulfilled.

Participants were informally debriefed about the research (appendix G), included with support services information, and again given the opportunity to ask questions. They were reminded of their right to withdraw at any time both in writing and verbally before and after the interview.

The researcher's safety/welfare was considered thus participants were recruited via both personal and official networks ensuring accurate identification of genuine and known paratroopers, since cases of men posing as Paras (known as 'Walter Mittys') occasionally emerge. Personal therapy was also in place to address any unanticipated psychological distress, although this proved unnecessary.

Despite the data being anonymised, permission was sought from the then-Colonel of the Parachute Regiment as a respectful courtesy given the military focus. The research proposal and signed ethics approval form were sent to the Colonel and feedback requested. The email itself is not included in the appendices to preserve his confidential details, however the content is displayed in appendix J. This elicited cooperation/support for this research, extremely helpful feedback and suggestions for background reading. Furthermore the Regimental Adjutant was assigned as point of contact for information and assistance.

Section 2: Method - The Research Process

Choosing the participants

I received over 60 responses from ex-Paras via the sources cited above. 17 respondents, although lacking the particular experience I sought, offered help including; distributing posters, general advice, free use of central London offices for interviewing, reading materials and senior members of the military offering background interviews. These men actually provided a moving insight into the enduring bonds between paratroopers, all keen to promote research which might help others.

The 43 remaining respondents were potential participants. Initially I corresponded with all of them via email, followed up by telephone once a rapport was established and permission to call was received. During these calls I posed the mental health screening questions (appendix K), which were answered without issue, explained the research in detail and what would be involved if they were selected to take part. I explained that the number of volunteers had more than exceeded the number required and that I would contact them to let them know once I had spoken to everyone.

Three were excluded because they had received a diagnosis of PTSD and had slightly misunderstood the research focus. Nevertheless, they provided interesting insight into the experience of combat. Others were excluded on the basis of: availability (being away from the UK), available but in active service, and not quite fulfilling the study's criteria. For example, although they had experienced extreme danger they had not reached the point where they believed they were about to die. The calls also allowed me to see how comfortable they were talking about their experiences and the ease with which they were able to express themselves, which Willig (2008) highlights as an important consideration for IPA.

The eight participants

Ultimately with all other criteria fulfilled and needing to select eight, choices were based on my subjective experience of their willingness to discuss their experiences in detail (e.g. some appeared hesitant) and the richness of self-expression (i.e. vocabulary/metaphor). To summarise, I selected the final eight on the basis of actual experience of mortal peril, availability and the way in which they were able to talk about what had happened. Furthermore, all eight mentioned both challenging and constructive aspects i.e. they were not selected on the basis of presenting an exclusively positive worldview. They all spoke with ease about the topic (albeit with very different ways of expressing themselves). Even by phone, their stories came alive because of their ability to describe their experiences. At this stage I was mindful of limiting details, keeping it fresh for the interview. Further so that I would not be tempted to 'know' too much in advance.

The date, time and venue of their choice were then agreed and confirmed via email. Venues included: participants' homes (2): university lecture room (1): private members' club (1): hotel (1): military base (1): and workplace (2). When conducting interviews, I arranged calls before and after to a responsible third party, safeguarding against unexpected personal safety issues.

Biographical details reported are deliberately minimal due to the potential for identification if pieced together alongside information from the participants' own accounts. They are all male, former British paratroopers in their 40s, 50s and 60s. Four, educated to graduate or postgraduate level. Four joined the regiment straight from school. Two are married, two are single and four have been co-habiting long-term. One is now retired while the others are all employed in a variety of jobs including: business, finance, law enforcement and military consultancy. One remains in the military, though no longer the parachute regiment. There was a mix of officers, non-commissioned officers (NCOs) and privates. The commonalities across participants (regiment, training, gender, experience of mortal peril fulfilled Smith et al.'s (2013) recommendation for seeking a fairly homogenous sample.

First and subsequent interviews

I began the first interview with a warm-up question to allow the participant to respond descriptively (rather than analytically) as recommended by Smith et al. (2013) giving him time to acclimatise to the interview process. This also avoided the potential pitfall of discussing more sensitive subjects before a rapport was established between us. I emphasised my interest in his experiences (that there were no right/wrong answers) and that I would like to hear as much detail as possible, even if he thought it might not be of interest. The first question (also asked in all subsequent interviews) was: can you tell me why you decided to become a Para? I felt this was something they were likely to feel comfortable describing and indeed all participants spoke at length about this. This first interview yielded rich and relevant data and so was included in the main analysis. It was transcribed before the other interviews took place and was discussed in supervision. Although no adjustment was made to the schedule (other than the flexibility required in IPA to accommodate individuality), I noted with interest that direct questions concerning death (such as: could you describe an experience in combat where you felt you were about to die) yielded rather indirect responses. Whereas indirect prompting (e.g. that sounds dangerous) elicited very direct and detailed descriptions. Thus, in subsequent interviews, although the schedule remained the same, I approached some questions less directly than before. All other interviews followed a similar process to the first.

Transcriptions

Each interview was initially transcribed verbatim in its entirety (including the researcher's questions) by a close personal contact whose work requires knowledge of encryption and data protection issues. I was reluctant to use an established transcription service due to others' experiences (including being slow, inaccurate, incomplete, inappropriate formatting and on one occasion sent to an incorrect email address). Unlike an unknown service, I was completely confident in the transcriber's discretion and reliability in behaving in accordance with required ethical guidelines. The recordings were encrypted during transfer and instructions were to encrypt and store both recordings and transcripts offline, not to discuss the

content with anyone else and to destroy all documents and audio files once transcriptions were delivered.

After the initial transcription, I double-checked it for accuracy against its recording and anonymised it. I changed all identifying details and names mentioned and assigned each participant one of eight pseudonyms: A-H: Alex, Ben, Carl, Damian, Ewan, Felix, Giles and Harry. Where nicknames were used in the original, nickname substitutes were inserted. None of the substitutes coincided with any of the originals. Further, any personal information or other facts which may have led to the identification of the participants were changed or removed.

Important questions are raised when considering the level of transcription needed for phenomenological investigation. Langdridge (2007) asks to what extent should the spoken words be cleaned up, either for clarity or to correct grammatical or verbal errors? Should every um and er be erased or included? Smith and Osborne (2013) argue that for IPA, transcriptions should be at the semantic level and recommend including significant pauses, false starts, laughter and other idiosyncrasies which may be indicative of particular meanings.

An example which springs to mind in this study involved one participant who exhaled in the middle of various sentences throughout the interview (shown in the analysis) and which underlined different meanings, significance or intensity of the events he described. To omit this would detract from any understanding of its meaning for him. I thus decided that all verbal and grammatical errors, laughter, notable pauses and colloquialisms pertinent to meaning and understanding would remain, as recommended by Smith et al. (2013). They also note that transcription itself is an interpretative process. Similarly for Langdridge (2007) transcribing the interview is already a step away from the propinquity of the interaction, so making a narrative grammatically correct would serve no purpose and may actually reduce meaning.

Regardless of accent, educational level, rank or age, all participants expressed themselves very clearly. When I was unsure of their meaning during the interview, I asked for clarification. However, to aid the reader's flow I removed some *ums* and *errs* from the quotes when they were presented in the final analysis if they appeared superfluous to the meaning. Each edit was denoted with empty square brackets [] and was checked back against the raw data to ensure the meaning was not lost or changed. Despite the best intentions of any researcher, while the record may be rich and full, it will inevitably remain incomplete as an objective representation, since among other things key visual behaviours (non-verbal) are mostly excluded (Langdridge, 2007). However in this instance I attempted to capture some with brief note-taking during and more extensive notes immediately after each interview. Although Smith and Osborne (2013) remind us that IPA does not require the prosodic detail of conversation analysis, on occasions I did note significant verbal emphases in transcripts where I felt it enhanced participants' meaning. The transcripts were formatted with large margins on either side and each line numbered to facilitate practical aspects of the analytic process.

Analytic strategy and procedure

The data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). As a relative novice to the approach, I broadly followed the 6-stage outline for analysis as proposed by Smith et al. (2013). However as these authors emphasise, their guidelines are not meant to create a prescribed method but to encourage a "healthy flexibility" in the analytic process (Smith et al., 2013, p.79). In line with the idiographic stance of IPA I considered the interviews individually until the later stage of analysis looking across participants, as suggested by Smith et al. (2013).

Stage 1: Here, I attempted to reconnect with each participant and our interaction, and to gain an overall feel for the shape of the interview. For immersion in the data, I returned to each of the audio recordings several times, before reading and re-reading the transcripts, and before any exploratory comments were made. At this point broad observations (e.g. shifts between detailed descriptions and general recollections) were preserved alongside the post-interview notes. This assisted me

in remaining focused on the participant, thus slowing the process and resisting the urge to charge in. Smith et al. (2013) suggest this helps to limit our habitual tendency to quickly reduce and summarise information, potentially losing the participant's voice in that rush.

Stage 2: Initial notes (exploratory comments) were made in the left hand margin. I highlighted anything of interest using the participant's own words where possible. Appendix L shows an excerpt from Felix's original transcript. Although there is no prescribed way to do this, I broadly followed Smith et al.'s (2013) suggestion to focus on three areas: Descriptive; linguistic and conceptual. These were noted in black, blue and red respectively.

Descriptive comments reflected things of great importance to the participant such as events, experiences and key features of their lifeworld, which Smith et al. (2013) suggest may be highlighted via descriptions, emotional responses, assumptions and linguistic idiosyncrasies which at this stage are accepted at face value.

Linguistic comments attempted to capture the relationship between the content and specific language use, including metaphor which as Smith et al. (2013) explain, provides a link between descriptive and conceptual notes. Other functional aspects of language were explored such as laughter, pauses and fluency vs. hesitancy.

Conceptual notes moved away from direct representation of the text towards a more interpretative or questioning tone, attempting to understand the participant's broader understanding of their experiences. As a result, at this stage interpretations are inevitably derived partly from my experiences - an interaction between my own pre-understandings and new understandings of the participant's lifeworld arising from my interaction with the data (Smith et al., 2013).

I conducted each line of enquiry separately i.e. focusing solely on one of the three areas at a time (my preferred way of working), rather than trying to explore all three consecutively. Alongside these three areas, I also noted any links between

different parts of the account and any paradoxes or apparent contradictions. I revisited the transcript again after allowing some time to elapse which I found helpful in standing back from my exploratory comments to ensure I had remained appropriately close to the participants' narratives.

Stage 3: The third stage developed the emergent themes, recorded in the right-hand margin. Smith et al. (2013) remind us that this stage is influenced by what was learned and understood from the transcript as a whole during the initial stages. The aim was to capture discrete chunks of meaningful text and create individual theme labels, some of which paraphrase or summarise and others which may offer initial interpretations (Smith & Osborne, 2013). This required a reduction of detail (transcript and preliminary comments) without losing the intricacies such as patterns and connections noted between exploratory comments. Where similar themes emerged (mainly expressed as phrases) I used the same theme label as suggested by Smith and Osborne (2013). So I tried to reflect the meanings of these discrete chunks as summaries of the exploratory comments whilst attempting to preserve their sense and position within the context of the transcript as a whole. An excerpt from Felix's interview demonstrates this (appendix L).

Before embarking on Stage 4, I recreated the transcript and its hand-written content in an excel spread sheet, with a tab per participant. Thus, the far left-hand column contained line numbers and the next column exploratory comments, which I developed a little at this point. The middle column contained the corresponding original raw data/transcript and the right-hand column, the emergent themes, ordered chronologically (as presented on the transcript). I did this to create a back up of all data (particularly my hand-written notes) and to aid organisation. However, although the process was extremely time-consuming, there was an additional benefit, in that my immersion in the data deepened significantly. This was later repeated for all participants. An excerpt from Carl's Excel tab may be seen in appendix M. The spreadsheet contained no identifying details, was encrypted and securely stored.

Stage 4: Next, I began the search for connections across emergent themes to cluster them into a smaller set (Major Themes) with overarching labels. To do this, I wrote each theme onto a separate sheet, enabling me to create groups according to the relationships I perceived between them. Smith et al. (2013) suggest a variety of ways to aid this process, including; abstraction, polarisation, subsumption and contextualisation: Abstraction requires similar themes to be grouped and given a new label; polarisation allows opposing themes to be clustered; subsumption involves one theme assuming higher status and becoming the new theme label to join others together; and contextualisation provides an interesting way of forming connections through identification of cultural, temporal and narrative features. I found this particularly helpful for drawing together aspects of identity not only here at the major theme level of analysis, but more broadly across participants at the super-ordinate theme level. Some of the emergent themes were reduced or discarded when they overlapped with others and when the meaning would not be impacted by doing so. Each decision was recorded and the original list of emergent themes was preserved in the Excel document. For the pilot/first participant, I identified 12 theme clusters (Major Themes) and gave each one a meaningful label. In excel, I opened and labelled a new tab adjacent to the first, in which I created columns for each of his Major Themes with its reduced emergent themes listed below (See appendix N for Giles's Major Themes table). I then drew a mind-map to represent graphically, the participant's Major and corresponding emergent themes (See appendix O). This completed the process for the first participant.

Stage 5: I followed the same procedure for the other seven participants' data individually. The number of Major Themes that eventually emerged per participant ranged between 10 and 16. Maintaining IPA's idiographic stance requires exploration of each transcript separately. I was very aware of the impossible challenge of setting aside what I already knew about the first, so I was careful to follow each step systematically for the remaining participants and attempted to allow each of the narratives to speak for themselves. All data was added to the excel spreadsheet in the same way as the first.

Stage 6: The final stage involved looking for patterns across all eight participants. To do this, I colour coded each of their Major Themes in excel and printed them out individually, with their emergent themes listed below to ensure any clusters were meaningful to all. Since the number of major themes per participant ranged between 10 and 16, I had around 100 colour-coded major themes spread out on the floor to organise into super-ordinate clusters. The colour codes allowed me to track which and how many of the participants were linked to each one. I initially identified ten super-ordinate themes but reduced these to five using the processes of abstraction and subsumption described above. Each of the five super-ordinates contained three to four sub-ordinate themes themselves derived from the major themes comprising them.

The sub-ordinates reflect distinct, significant aspects of their overarching labels and which I believed to be pertinent to the individual's experience. For example, seven of the eight participants' narratives reflected a sense of transition, a change to the self that invoked the concept of a Rite of Passage which became a sub-ordinate label within the super-ordinate theme of Identity. To illustrate this figures 1+2 show one each of Alex (blue) and Ben's (yellow) major themes (respectively) with corresponding emergent themes. Both their major themes were then incorporated into the super-ordinate theme of Identity and under its sub-theme banner Rite of Passage.

Washing the Spears
Transforming self
Pushing limits
Living up to personal ideals
Dying for a cause
Something to live up to
Heroism
Death vs. failure
Test of masculinity
Invincibility

Figure 1.

Putting demons to bed
Heroism
War as a romantic notion
Self as warrior
Recognition of extreme courage
Endorsement from group
Self as hero
Seeking experience
Closure
Loss of naivety
Changed self

Figure 2.

Table 3 (appendix P) shows all super-ordinate themes, sub-themes and quote locations linked to the participants. Finally, word documents were created containing all quotes for each super and sub-ordinate theme, identifying the corresponding participant and line numbers. This enabled me to remain aware of all relevant quotes for each theme during the selection process for writing up my findings. Indeed, the last part of the analytic process was to present the key themes via a written account of the participants' narratives.

Methodological reflexivity

Langdridge (2007) defines reflexivity as the process through which researchers remain critically aware of how their beliefs, questions and methods have helped shape the research. Although I genuinely believe IPA to be the most appropriate methodology for researching this topic, given both my epistemological stance and the type of knowledge I am seeking, I am also aware that I was drawn to it because I had previously conducted a very small-scale (2-participant) IPA study at undergraduate level which I had found extremely interesting. This by no means made me an expert, however I felt more comfortable having explored the underpinning philosophies and process beforehand. Moreover, previous experience of a small-scale DA study also informed my rejection of it. Although interesting and informative on many levels, for me the lack of attention to the participants' lived experience left me with the sense of absence, reflecting my personal view of

humans as embodied emotional beings within and inseparable from cultural/historical contexts.

Another concern also highlighted my own preconceptions about my participant group. I was wary of a methodology which focused so heavily on language, having been warned by many people that Paras might not say much, nor be willing to express openly, feelings about nearly dying. Although these were unfounded concerns (and not forgetting IPA also requires rich linguistic data), I had allowed others' views some influence over my methodological choice.

In preparation for this study, I conducted several background interviews to enhance understanding of the Paras and of their training in relation to the research focus. Two of the interviewees requested anonymity; one, a former Parachute Regiment officer experienced in both active duty and training of recruits; the other an army medic with considerable knowledge of the Paras. Both remain serving officers in the British Army and expressed a strong preference for anonymity due to the sensitive nature of their current roles. While I felt it would be more powerful to explain their exact links to and involvement with the Regiment, it was imperative to respect their wishes and right to privacy. Use of the footnote in the introduction and explanation here, hopefully allows the report to flow uninterrupted by such administrative issues yet provides sufficient information for the reader to understand the context en route.

During the recruitment process, my interaction with the many respondents provided me with invaluable insight into training, comradeship, identity and background knowledge of the Paras. The lengths to which these individuals went in order to be of assistance was remarkable and provided further insight into the strength of the bonds that exist between them. While this may have potentially directed my attention towards group bonding when I was analysing the data, I do not think this focus was unjustified or unsubstantiated. On meeting not only my participants but other Paras during the course of the study, the sense of identity, belonging and bonding between them was very apparent. Several participants had

gone on to join other elite units, yet they always returned to their Para identity as fundamental to setting them above the rest. For example, Giles explained how his selection process for the SAS had been much easier for him than other recruits having already trained as a Para - something he explained other non-Para recruits envied.

My previous long-term work as a broadcaster provided both benefits and challenges to the data-collection process. Similarities between my personal broadcast style and semi-structured interviewing were striking. For radio interviews I would write only one initial question and then follow the interviewees, rejecting formalised question-lists but keeping areas of interest in mind. I found prescribed lists restrictive and produced less fruitful interviews, so this process felt quite natural in many ways. At the same time, this experience brought challenges. Broadcast interviews aim to inform and 'entertain' usually requiring direction, challenge, humour and interruption. Whilst I believe I managed to contain these, on occasions I found my questions were perhaps too directive, revealing my relative inexperience with qualitative research.

While this previous experience allowed me to feel relaxed in the interviewer role, it also contrasted with an awareness of what I should not be doing (i.e. the differences between research and broadcasting), which on occasions led my focus away from the narrative and onto the process. So, what was once an almost unconscious process had been brought to conscious awareness. However, both during the interviews and after scrutinising the transcripts, it seemed whenever I led participants towards something irrelevant, they said so and went their own way - a distinct advantage with this cohort.

One aspect of the process elicited some personal discomfort. Offering information about therapy services in the event of distress, whilst ethically sound, seemed potentially patronising given the participant group, their experiences and study criteria. While I did not expect them to remain emotionless, I believed them capable of managing any distress which arose. Indeed several participants were quite

emotional, particularly describing deaths, injuries and injustices suffered by others. However, without exception, all participants laughed when offered the support services information but graciously accepted my explanation. My discomfort had exposed my own presumption that they would be fine.

Personal reflexivity

Willig (2008) underlines the importance of personal reflexivity in qualitative research which requires seeking to understand how our worldview; (beliefs, culture, values, experiences and political views) influences and shapes research.

I am presenting it at this point so that my experiences, assumptions and potential influences are clear and available to the reader immediately before my analysis unfolds. IPA is acknowledged as a co-construction between researcher and participant, yet inevitably due to the intractable nature of epoché, there may have been moments where I overstepped the fine line between co-construction and imposition. I have tried to remain mindful of this throughout the entire process, via supervision, reflective diary-keeping (appendix Q) and weekly personal therapy, always aware that to make any interpretation of my participants' accounts, I necessarily bring my own experiences to the table.

My personal interest and experience relating to this particular research topic is two-fold. Firstly military; initially I was drawn to it through reading military accounts as described in the introduction. I have strong emotional ties to the British Army via close personal connections, plus an understanding and appreciation of what it offers society (distinct from political agendas). Secondly I have experienced near-death myself; as a seven year-old and again in my thirties so I have a personal understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

My earlier experience was quite extreme and shocking, involving a complete physical transformation and intensely long recovery process. I was cut off from everything familiar; friends, activities, home and school for a long period of time. I became an object of medical interest and curiosity which appears to continue to

this day, despite (or perhaps because of) my full recovery. My eventual return to 'normality' invoked the sense of Lomsky-Feder's (1995 p.466) "phenomenological strangeness" mentioned earlier, as I had to re-learn how to do everything I already knew. The impact of this experience on my life was both immediate and unfolding. It felt like a huge, insurmountable and never-ending challenge. However I also felt quite transformed from a previously rather fearful child into a lone fighter (friends report that I 'disappeared' for several years) eventually emerging with a significant, lasting zest for life. Interestingly, my later experience (being informed I might 'drop dead at any moment') by contrast was not bothersome, experienced as un-shocking and felt like old news.

When I chose this topic, initially I failed to connect my experiences to my curiosity about it and felt quite surprised when it surfaced. I attributed this to the dramatically different circumstances; a sick 7 year-old vs. adult soldiers; a random health crisis vs. conscious career choice; plus a historical refusal on my part to discuss it with anyone (until in my 30s), never looking back, always moving forwards. Thus throughout the research process I have endeavoured to remain reflexively aware.

Whilst attempting to be explicit about my assumptions regarding the experience and impact of nearly dying, personal therapy drew attention to aspects of my behaviour of which I had been unaware, but which revealed interesting parallels to those of my participants; in particular the ways of coping and the impact of raised awareness of mortality. For example, I had not noted my own tendency to minimise rather challenging events. I was surprised by the emerging parallels because initially I had (perhaps naively) assumed that the participants' experiences would be entirely different to mine. This kept me returning to the data to ensure I was not imposing my own experience, nor unnecessarily prioritising aspects of theirs in order to fit my own worldview. I also hope that by aiming for transparency throughout (via a detailed and illustrated description of the process) that I was able to find a reasonable and apparent distinction between participant responses and my own.

Analysis

Chapter overview

A detailed analysis of all transcripts individually then across participants, allowed themes to emerge offering a rich and nuanced description of the experience of nearly dying in combat and its impact on the subsequent lives of these Paratroopers. Due to the volume of data, it is impossible to incorporate every aspect of each participant's story. Therefore this chapter aims to create a journey through the areas best illuminating the research questions. Attention will be drawn to some notable connections with research and theory to enrich the account, although this is mainly reserved for the discussion chapter.

I have written the analysis in the present tense, the linguistic ploy of writer/journalist Damon Runyon who offered his readers an almost tangible sense of his characters' lived experience. My aim in doing so is to help bring to life the transcribed words and experiences of my participants.[2]

This analysis offers a co-construction of meaning and sense-making between the researcher and participant data (Smith et al., 2013). As such, another researcher may have prioritised different extracts and themes. However, every effort was made always to remain grounded in the data, returning constantly to the original transcripts. Whilst the super-ordinate themes aim to capture a seemingly distinct aspect of the experience, it is worth noting considerable areas of cross-over exist between and within them, highlighted wherever possible during the analysis. The positioning of sub-themes within particular super-ordinate themes reflects a subjective choice as to where best they fit in the service of eliciting the experience in question. It does not imply exclusivity. Further, from a phenomenological

[2] **Key to quote presentation**
Empty square brackets [] signify data removed from quotations. Non-italicised wording within square brackets provides clarification, and ellipsis points … indicate short pauses in the participants' narratives.
Use of the word 'trauma' in this chapter does not imply traumatised. It aims to reflect participants' experiences of encounters with mortality and adversity, not the outcome. Quotes are followed by participant initial, page number and line number in square brackets. E.g. [E44:254] represents Ewan, p.44, line 254 of the transcript.

perspective, such divisions may render the experience meaningless if taken literally. Thus the current research creates boundaries with the caveat of acknowledging the indivisible, interrelated nature of human existence.

Despite the volume of relevant data, the coherence across their experience is conspicuous. Many similar themes emerged albeit with different emphases, represented by different major theme labels for each participant. For example, Alex's major theme; The Lives of Others reflects his emphasis on duty of care towards his men and their families, whist Ben's major theme No Man is an Island prioritises his commitment to group identity. Both however are underpinned by their relationships with others (one of ten initial super-ordinate themes), eventually subsumed into the super-ordinate theme Identity.

The experience of nearly dying and its impact on the subsequent lives of Paratroopers was eventually organised into five super-ordinate themes (see figures 3+4 overleaf) in order to illuminate the most meaningful experience emerging from the analytic process. These in turn contain several sub-ordinate themes highlighting different dimensions of each main theme.

Identity permeates the entire analysis, but is presented as the first super-ordinate theme in order to set the scene for understanding Paras in their cultural context. The remaining super-ordinate themes attempt to capture an essence of the experience of nearly dying, the ways in which participants cope, the impact on the self and making sense of the experiences via connection.

Super-ordinate themes

	Identity	**Tempering the Sword**	**Riding the Emotional Storm**	**The Tempered Self**	**Survivor's Search for Connection**
Sub-ordinate themes	**1.** Everyone Else is a Hat **2.** Rite of Passage **3.** Two Worlds Colliding	**1.** 'Oh Shit' Moment **2.** Body of Evidence **3.** Fourth Dimension	**1.** Taking Action **2.** Humour **3.** Making Molehills out of Mountains **4.** Denial	**1.** Raised Awareness of the Fragility of Life **2.** The Doors of Janus: Closed and Open **3.** The Texture of Time	**1.** Making Sense of Self in Historical Context **2.** Myth-Making **3.** Creating Purpose

Figure 3: Table of themes

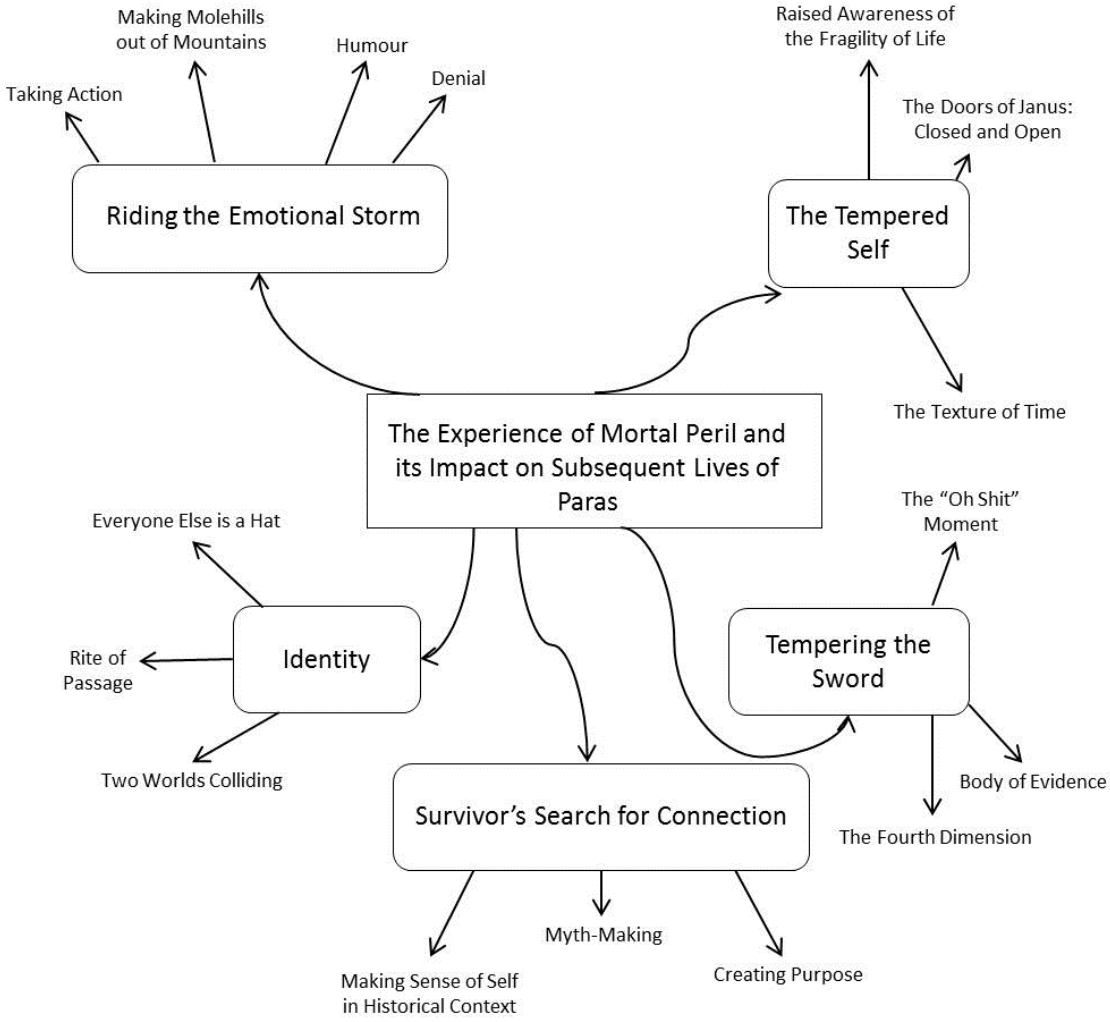

Figure 4: Diagram of super-ordinate themes and sub-ordinate-themes

Super-ordinate Theme One: Identity

The first theme explores participants' multi-faceted identity as Paras, highlighting its crucial role (specifically through the group) in battle and mediating experience both during and after nearly dying. Training strongly reinforces group identity, yet paratroopers must also take individual initiative, albeit in the service of the group/mission. An ingroup-outgroup dichotomy characterises their identity and relationships with others, helping them overcome extraordinary odds and ultimately creating a shift in their sense of self. This theme also explores unhelpful dichotomies eliciting broader conflict between individuals and family, the army/regiment and society. Thus, three sub-ordinate themes emerged: Everyone Else is a Hat, Rite of Passage and Two Worlds Colliding.

Sub-ordinate Theme One: Everyone Else is a Hat

Everyone else is a hat, is a craphat. We laugh and joke about it but it's true.
[G4:134]

The role of group identity, central to the success and survival (physical and psychological) of paratroopers in combat cannot be over-emphasised. Craphat or hat is derogatory slang for non-Paras (i.e. all other military). Civilians are not even considered hats. The use of such slang to positively distinguish themselves from all other military units is reminiscent of Tajfel's (1982) in-group/out-group divide. This may also form an important underpinning belief structure for building the confidence needed in an elite combat unit. The Regiment's legendary status appears to inspire a passion and connection which may facilitate identification with the group prior to joining:

> *The guy that goes in the Parachute Regiment has a burning desire. With me it was a lifetime ambition, it was a burning desire to get in there. [C4:145]*

The intensity of Carl's desire to become a Para is reflected metaphorically as if burning into his very being, a fire that cannot be extinguished.

It is also Damian's life-long dream:

> *Basically* [exhales audibly] *ever since I was a little boy I wanted to be a paratrooper, since I was about seven years old. [D3:103]*

Despite years of service and achievement with the regiment, Damian's palpable, almost incredulous excitement about what this means, cannot be physically contained as he exhales. Most participants express some kind of pre-understanding of what it means to be a Para reflected in both these quotes, an understanding perhaps fuelled symbolically via elite reputation and striking regimental imagery.

While the label Everyone Else is a Hat emphasises the Paras' difference to others, it is important first to consider the group as significant in itself.

> *When you go out as a gang, you're going out as one, literally. All for one, it's the old adage, Band of Brothers, Henry V and all that. It unifies you. You're like one body of men. [C12:434]*

Individuality seems compartmentalised or even overwhelmed in favour of the powerful protective group identity (consistent with Becker, 1997). Carl's use of metaphor strongly reinforces the complete sense of being one (rather than parts comprising a whole).

Group cohesion/bonding is facilitated by their training. Tough and extreme by design, training creates and reinforces the Para mind-set and group identity from the start. Although it augments initiative and thinking on their feet as individuals, the group is also strengthened through shared hardship including the significant dangers of military parachuting:

> *One of the things that keeps you together very strongly is the fact that you have to face death before you actually become a qualified soldier. [F4:137]*

It was sort of a shared adversity I think brings people together. [H3:106]

Such training creates and reinforces trust within the group, whose mutual attitudes, abilities and commitment can be relied upon. It also highlights the divide between Paras and society's conflicting notions of what it means to be good:

> *Paras bond together because they've been through this brutalised training. You know when you smash in that door and go left, that your oppo's going right. People are going to get shot, but you'll know he's not going to suddenly go 'I'm having a bad day, that's so nasty'. You know he's going to be nasty which is what you need. [G10:330]*

Societal norms (generally against killing) contrast with the demands of war, where notions of good and bad/nasty must be reversed as Giles illuminates. An interesting paradox also emerges; group cohesion and bonding not only aid survival but facilitate a willingness to put their lives on the line, overriding fundamental survival instincts as Felix explains:

> *When I became a paratrooper that individuality, they attempted to remove it completely in order to achieve their objectives which are to win battles and for you to do incredibly dangerous and ridiculous things that most sane people wouldn't do. [F4:123]*

The tension between individual and group identity is apparent. Use of '*attempted*' suggests '*they*' were not entirely successful, that he retains some individuality alongside his sense of belonging. However he alludes to a psychological shift towards a necessary but controlled insanity, to the division between Paras and Hats or '*sane people*'. He views their contrasting endeavours as both perilous and ludicrous in nature. The insanity perhaps engenders the greater superiority since it facilitates feats of war of which Hats are incapable.

Giles believes the '*brutalised*' training is justified and of central importance in building an identity sufficient for enduring and overcoming extreme hardship, since it is not enough simply to acquire battle skills. Becoming a paratrooper requires much more than just peak physical fitness:

> *It's 70% mind, 30% physical. [] It* [training] *imbues a mind-set in you of <u>always</u> keep going, push the limit of endurance and hardness. [G3:73]*

Although describing them as separate entities, Giles seems aware of his mind/body in dynamic interaction, where the mind dominates. The experiential emphasis perhaps shifts between them as necessary. The unyielding belief (central to their identity) that Paras never give up, emerges consistently from all participant narratives.

Their ability to endure hardship fuelled by such beliefs may also create a sense of indomitability, enhancing self-esteem. Furthermore, this may be underpinned by the Paras' highly distinctive uniform which serves as a symbol of aspiration, adding to the appeal and status of the Regiment. The symbolic significance of this emerged from several participant accounts.

> *The moment you get your beret presented that's like a <u>massive</u> feeling of pride and belonging. [] It does give you a really great feeling of achievement…and self confidence really is a big one. [D4:141]*

This appears consistent with Becker's (1997) notion of cultural hero-systems. Enhancing anxiety-buffering self-esteem, the symbolic power of the beret serves as a constant reminder, driving the preservation of group identity whatever the individual cost:

> *Even if you think it's going to lead to your death, because you place so much emphasis on that cap badge, what it means and how it creates your*

character, it's worth dying for, not to be seen as a coward, not to let your group down. [F9:326]

Here, Felix sums up the power of group identity; shaped in training, reinforced via adversity, consolidated in battle, embodied in the red beret. The loss or weakening of the group (through cowardice or failure) is a far greater threat than the loss of his own life, thus he goes to any lengths to preserve it, preferring death over cowardice. Death for Felix in this context may be conceptualised as heroic, ultimately offering what Becker (1997 p.5) terms 'unshakeable meaning' or perhaps immortality. Dying for a cause may imply physical death, but living as a 'coward' renders life devoid of meaning.

A distinctive and highly significant aspect of a Paratrooper's identity is the sense of elitism and superiority to everyone else. Cultivated physically, psychologically and symbolically from the start, it augments group commitment and esteem, consistent with Tajfel (1982):

All the way through your training, it's drummed into you that if you pass, you become one of the elite…[]…your own self-worth magnifies. [E2:65]

Harry demonstrates how in-group identity extends even to strangers whose red beret ownership offers automatic entry into the exclusive club:

People supported each other even if they didn't know who they were. As long as they were the right grouping there was support so it probably created quite a bit of resilience. [H2:43]

Here he alludes to the psychological boost that membership of the *'right'* group affords - the wrong group being everyone else. Maintaining the group's elite status would thus seem crucial to such resilience.

This assumes particular significance on the Falklands battlefield. As Carl explains, thoughts about dying are easily overridden by the need to maintain and demonstrate superiority, even (or perhaps particularly) when outnumbered with the odds stacked against them:

> *Sergeant major was like 'Tell you what, we'll put our berets on and show these bastards who we were'. You didn't care what happened to you [] you were with your mates [] it wasn't a thought about dying...[]…it was 'let's take these bastards on'. [C28:1024]*

This again illustrates the significance of the red beret as a symbol of who/what they are. The donning of berets symbolises the very identity of the superior, elite group of fighters who will never give up, despite the possibility of individual sacrifice, inspiring them to defend it to the death.

Harry feels augmented by group-membership whilst pointing to the inferior bonding (and arguably loyalty) of the civilian out-group, which shies away from challenge (unlike his in-group):

> *You're really quite confident in your ability. Metaphorically you stand a bit taller. I see cohesion created as well, comparing it to civilian friends. When there's a bit of a fracas outside a pub, they shirk away and there's no cohesion. [H1:37]*

His metaphor illustrates perfectly the in-group's perceived psychological and physical dominance over the out-group. He sees others as weaker for their lack of cohesion, again reinforcing group superiority.

Summary

Everyone Else is a Hat encapsulates the crucial significance of psychological group boundaries created in the service of developing and maintaining group-esteem, building resilience and in facilitating self-sacrifice where necessary for overall group

survival. The difficulties resulting from the ingroup-outgroup dichotomy emphasise the Hat/non-Hat boundary, which itself may create a virtuous circle further reinforcing the group-bonding and identity of paratroopers as distinct from others.

Sub-ordinate Theme Two: Rite of Passage

It's a rite of passage for a soldier. It's taking up the warrior's spear, and being able to answer the question that has always nagged you. [A17:612]

Rite of Passage explores personal transitions following exposure to combat, described in various ways by seven of the eight participants. This potentially enhances connections within the group:

> *By taking that step and facing death and choosing to go forwards over the boundary line, it makes you, it sets you into a totally different category to people that haven't done it. I've never seen a paratrooper freeze the first time he comes under fire. [F4:144]*

Testing themselves to the limit seems to motivate these participants:

> *It's a very deeply personal thing 'will I be able to do it when it happens?' and for me, I'd always wanted to go in <u>search</u> of that experience. [B18:646]*

Answering that question appears to have a significant impact on identity:

> *There is a difference in a soldier, certainly there was in <u>me</u>, from having taken up a warrior spear to the man that was there before. [A17:607]*

Alex experiences himself as changed in a relatively short space of time; his use of *'the man'* distances him from who he was, as if another person, consistent with Lifton's (1991) notion of the birth of a new self. Returning from the Falklands, Alex

senses a change in everyone who was there, emphasising its significance by way of a quasi-oxymoron:

> *There was a corporate instant maturity by the experience. [A24:879]*

Whatever the temporal experience however, a significant before-and-after change is noted. Harry suggests that such exposure perhaps eradicates naivety, offering a new perspective on the world:

> *Before you've had your first experience of being shot at, you might have a bit more of a 'Boy's Own Adventure' type view of it. <u>After</u> that I think the view is slightly different. [H11:402]*

'The view' is perhaps 'life', which can never be the same. Although speculative, this manifests as a significant 'reality' check - perhaps a challenge to a fundamental human denial of death. It is as if the scales have fallen from his eyes and he now sees the world as it is (i.e. without the protection of denial). He is irrevocably changed.

Summary

Rite of Passage brings a significant shift in the individual's sense of self. Having passed the ultimate test facing death, they have grown and changed, now occupying a space from where the view is different. Although experienced as individually transforming, the Rite of Passage may further strengthen the group as a whole.

Sub-ordinate Theme Three: Two Worlds Colliding

> *There's a conflict of the two worlds. [C37:1338]*

All participants experience personal and professional conflict. The identity of paratroopers may triumph on the battlefield, but often clashes with family and societal expectations. This highlights the need for flexible boundaries between

group and individual and the demands on them to navigate between their many different, conflicting roles. Training facilitates investment in an identity so strong, Felix is primed and ready to give up his life, despite significant events at home:

> *When I went to the Falklands, we were going into Argentina to take out the jets. [] But in order to take out the Argentinian Air Force they were prepared to sacrifice a squadron of Special Air Service soldiers. My wife was eight months' pregnant. [F10:335]*

Furthermore, he is aware of a conflict of emotional interests once home:

> *My family life [] that kind of cold viciousness actually made me a better soldier so the two don't fit very well together. [F15:544]*

He senses emotional changes in himself presenting a conflict not only between work and home but perhaps internally between the loss of who he once was, and the blurred lines between the soldier and man he has become.

For Carl, once home, adapting to a civilian work mentality is challenging and creates tension with new colleagues as he attempts to fit into a familiar but now disconnected world, at odds with his post army/combat lifeworld. He experiences an internal struggle with external demands:

> *Our black humour is not looked on favourably within this job. They call it canteen culture where we have a laugh and a joke, they don't like it in this job and that's where there's a conflict of the two worlds. [C37:1335]*

Group boundaries are maintained *('our' black humour)*. Similarly, on a macro level, desirable attributes encouraged in training to create elite soldiers, generate social tension:

You can't expect soldiers to be Lord Fauntleroys and suddenly turn into a psychopath, which you need to be on the battlefield and then change back again. Individuals [] are dismayed when the behaviour cultivated in them is what they're being castigated for. [A3:86]

Alex empathises with the Paras' dilemma, trained to suppress emotion, to kill without hesitation and to forget the usual rules imposed by society which then expects instant identity transformation when required. What suits society in one context, horrifies it in another.

Summary

Where difference is cultivated and embraced between Paras and everyone else, it may be conceptualised as largely beneficial. However this sub-theme reveals a sense of separation and conflict for participants whose experiences perhaps disconnect the threads engendering a sense of lifeworld continuity (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2012). It also highlights potential inner conflict resulting from society's demands that Paras create and compartmentalise different aspects of identity, only acceptable in certain contexts and even then subject to society's ever-changing attitudes. The theme of identity offers some understanding of what it is like to be a Para and provides context for the following themes which move into the heart of the current study.

Super-ordinate Theme Two: Tempering the Sword

The fact that you are getting through all of that and that you're suffering together constantly welds you like two bits of metal. [G9:314]

The start of this journey explores the actual experience of confronting death. It includes the notion of such adversity contributing to participants' resilience and a permanent shift in sense of self. Building on the use of metallic metaphors (e.g. welding, bonding), this can be conceived of as the tempering of a sword, begun in training, tested in battle. Tempering is an ancient process which originates from the

master sword smiths of Toledo whose steel gains its distinctive strength and flexibility after being heated to a specific temperature, then plunged into water to reduce excess brittleness. The "Secret of Temper" was only revealed to family through songs and prayers containing the closely-guarded recipes, whose words, tempo and meter indicated precisely how the sword should be immersed (Lop, 2014). The Paratroopers' tempering process yields strength and flexibility, borne out in their response to extreme threat.

The experience of nearly dying is encapsulated within three sub-ordinate themes: The 'Oh Shit' Moment, Body of Evidence, and The Fourth Dimension.

Sub-ordinate Theme One: The 'Oh Shit' Moment

I remember quite clearly thinking 'oh f....(sic) *that's a bomb'. [F13:464]*

The 'Oh Shit' Moment [H7: 250] addresses the anticipation of death, the participants' realisation they are about to die (experienced by all), manifesting in diverse ways. Ben describes the instant he and his men came under mortar fire, well within its lethal radius:

> *The first round landed and I just remember screaming. It hit the Signaller, it severed an artery in his arm. My Second in Command, got shrapnel in his leg and all four of us were blown over. I just remember at the time screaming 'check fire, check fire' because having been a mortar officer I knew there was 14 more rounds in the air'. [B5:163]*

Aware of the continued threat he screams orders *('check fire*') perhaps on autopilot, simultaneously unable to contemplate anything beyond his own death, his mind focusing only on the end of life:

> *I just remember lying there just thinking 'I'm going to die, I'm going to die' and I can't remember any more than that. [B6:203]*

The participants' responses to the threat to life vary considerably. When Felix finds himself lying on a bomb on some waste ground in Northern Ireland, he describes quite a practical response:

> *I was quite cool in the sense I didn't panic and I remember quite clearly thinking 'oh f....that's a bomb'* [laughs] *you know [] 'oh shit that's a Claymore Mine'. That was exactly…. 'oh shit that's a Claymore Mine' and just simply getting away from it as quickly as I possibly could. [F13:462]*

He acknowledges the threat ('*f….that's a bomb'*), expressing the severity of the situation via strong language and three repetitions, but during which he reportedly felt no panic (nor was he aware of other physical or emotional responses when asked). Further, he appears to avoid thoughts about mortality. Instead he makes light of it (laughing) and describes his highly functional reaction. This may indicate parallel processes of emotional control during the experience, then reflected in his retelling of it.

Unlike Felix, under imminent threat in the North Atlantic Giles allows himself to imagine the worst:

> *You're trying you're trying to get up a cabling ladder up the back end of a ship. My first feeling was 'if you can't hang on and climb up, you get washed off'…the waves are pretty powerful, you genuinely think 'I could end up in the propellers here and chopped' or best case, 'I end up in the sea and drown'. [G13:446]*

Repetition (*you're trying)* reflects the effort involved. He imagines and confronts thoughts of impending death '*I'm not a strong swimmer*' [G13:442], which may magnify the irrepressible emotion '*You constantly feel fear*' [G14:476] but manages the task regardless, mission success overriding personal safety (and potentially survival). Switching between 'my/you/I' perhaps

represents the ambiguity in confronting his closeness to death. He appears to settle on what feels like a hypothetical acknowledgement.

The 'Oh Shit' Moment is not always experienced as totally negative however. Damian's encounter with mortal peril appears highly dramatic:

> *The noise of that bomb coming in was pretty <u>scary</u> and I thought 'shit, this is it'. I'd seen this amazing explosion right in front of me…[]…so close it was unbelievable and the <u>noise</u> of it going off was massive and [] a plume of smoke and basically bits of metal and rubble flying up into the air. [D13:453]*

The infectious energy of Damian's descriptions vividly brings to life an exhilarating experience, potentially enhanced by his proximity to death invoking Yalom's (2011, p.31) notion of 'existential shock therapy', where a brush with mortality perhaps jolts him into the ontological mode of living (evidenced elsewhere in this chapter).

Summary

Sub-ordinate theme one reflects the varied ways in which participants anticipate and experience the moment of imminent death: Action vs. high emotion, confronting vs. denying death, exhilaration vs. suppression. The theme overlaps with the two subsequent sub-themes, which reveal embodied, temporal aspects characterising the experience of nearly dying in combat.

Sub-ordinate Theme Two: Body of Evidence

It felt like there was a physical weight on your back stopping you from getting up. [D11:397]

During the 'Oh Shit' Moment, all participants appear to encounter a changed awareness of the body. Ben describes the moment of experiencing mortal peril as a tense, physical manifestation of vice-like emotion:

> *Just absolute fear gripping my body.* [B6:205]

Carl also experiences extreme bodily tension, which perhaps provides a buffer against disabling fear, a potentially life-threatening emotion in combat:

> *There's an expression we use 'me arse was cracking nuts', you know, fifteen quid's worth of Calvin's, £14.99 disappeared up me arse [] the initial bombardment was like boom boom boom but [] I couldn't really describe fear. It probably was, obviously scared then trying to get under cover. [C18:664]*

He cannot access the fear or sufficient words to describe it directly, but uses creative metaphor to express its physical manifestation. He acknowledges its presence, but focuses on his immediate survival needs.

Several participants describe altered sensations of movement – (also connected to temporal experience). Felix describes a chaotic world slowing down:

> *I remembered getting rockets coming in on us in Mozambique and everybody's just eyes were just wide and screaming and I just seemed to be alone in this noise and this ringing because your ears, it makes you deaf and in these shockwaves going around you [] everything seemed kind of cocooned in slow-motion. [F11:404]*

He feels cut off from his world, enveloped in slowness and shock waves. He cannot hear but conversely experiences ringing. He is alone watching others with eyes *'wide and screaming'* – perhaps visually experiencing the sound of fear which he cannot currently access.

Damian's experience of heaviness is temporarily protecting him from exposure to harm:

> *It felt like someone was pushing down on me because I had to return fire [] it felt like a physical weight on your back stopping you from getting up, like your body rebelling against what your mind was telling it to do but your mind, if your training is good, is going to overcome that. [D11:395]*

Damian is disconnected from his everyday mode of being as he encounters a Cartesian-like split. His body tries to protect him from his (trained) mind, currently overriding natural survival instincts, so that he can do his job which exposes him to dying – against which his body is fighting.

Giles senses a similar split, but seems to dissociate from his body, his mind taking control.

> *I could smell roast pork and I knew I was on fire. I couldn't feel it and my mind was saying 'that's you, that smell is your flesh, that's your skin, that's your hair, that's you on fire'. [G17:593]*

This may represent a transformation from body-subject (body-as-it-is-lived) to body-object, i.e. the body objectified by the Other (Finlay, 2006) except here he is becoming the Other. Giles experiences this shift in perspective which may also allow psychological disconnection from the horror of 'reality' enabling him to take protective measures. Verbal emphasis on 'you/your' supports this 'objective' view. He needs convincing that the unimaginable is actually happening to him, to enable action.

Ben attempts to shrink under threat:

> *I just remember trying to dig into the ground with my eyelids…[]…you were trying to make yourself as small as you possibly can. I remember*

at the time being tense because you're preparing for the impact, waiting for something to rip into you. [B6:209]

He anticipates the destruction of his body; death is looming. He is still trying to do something, his face in the dirt, reinforcing his physical connection with the earth which he does not want to relinquish and perhaps reflecting the paradox of attempting to escape the inescapable as an embodied being.

As previously noted, the immediate psychological experience of nearly dying is not always negative. Similarly, the embodied experience is not always one of damage or depletion. It appears potentially energising, perhaps the physical foundation of Damian and others' dramatic moments:

You do get a bit of a sense of euphoria when you're on those situations like a real adrenaline rush. [D11:404]

Whenever you had a contact, the first sense was adrenaline and excitement. [B10:334]

It fires you up, it's like a rat in a corner I suppose, you come out fighting hard. [C28:1034]

Fight or flight - euphoric, excited and fired up embodiment in the face of death, these extracts indicate a vibrant, potentially life-enhancing bodily response to the 'Oh Shit' Moment perhaps consistent with Deurzen's (2010) notion of encountering death as a wake-up call to life.

Summary

This theme illustrates the embodied nature of experiencing mortal threat, which brings renewed focus to its central role in living and dying. Previously unconscious, embodied awareness is enhanced into consciousness under attack, revealing strangeness in the familiar. Altered sensations of sight, sound and movement

contribute to (and on occasion promote) the notion of a potentially protective mind/body split perhaps offering a perceived objectivity towards unimaginable and inescapable embodied horrors.

Sub-ordinate Theme Three: The Fourth Dimension

Kind of cocooned in slow motion. [F11:404]

Einstein's theories of relativity posit that the concepts of space and time are intrinsically connected (Schrödinger, 1997). Tempering the sword continues, drawing our attention to participants' experiences in the Fourth Dimension, which reflects the elasticity of time-perception and its interplay with space when facing mortal peril. There is a noticeable overlap with the previous theme's focus on the body.

A shift in the experience of time is felt by all participants. For Ben, time seems to stop or elongate:

> *It would be a cliché to say time froze. I just remember lying there for a long time. I can only say 40 seconds because that's roughly how long it would take for the guys to fire their rounds. There was nothingness really, my world became very insular [] because for those 40 seconds I didn't think about anything other than 'I'm going to die'. [B7:225]*

For Ben, time stops while under threat, contemplating his demise. During a never-ending 40 seconds, his lifeworld shrinks to an insular 'nothingness' – a world connected to no one and no-thing, perhaps the very definition of non-existence.

Damian's world decelerates when under direct fire in Afghanistan, sitting in an open vehicle:

It just slowed down. When you see an RPG fired in films they look as though you can track the rocket firing through the air in slow-motion and it's not like that. They come at you really fast, but when he fired it I could see it coming at us. [] It felt like ten minutes even though it was probably half a second [] it did feel like it had taken for<u>ever</u> to get that weapon trained and pull the trigger. Everything felt like it was in slow-motion. [D30:1073]

This highlights a sensory paradox; the need for fast reactions, trapped inside a world slowing down. Yet the contrasting perception of psychological space in time may be critical to survival when under threat. Giles experiences a juxtaposition of mind/body/world. His mind speeds up while everything around him goes into slow-motion:

I've been on fire and didn't feel it. Ultimately I could hear, because in that situation, your mind goes into itself and runs 20,000 miles an hour faster than your normal speed. So everyone around me was in slow-motion, literally like a film. [G17:584]

This illustrates the embodied, subjective nature of temporal experience as there is no time to waste, his lifeworld imbued with mortal threat. Like Damian, his film analogy reinforces how unreal this feels (similar to Noyes and Kletti's (1977 p.380) 'as if' quality). There is a sense of him outside looking in, watching the body-object. He seems disorientated, disconnected from the lifeworld from which he is inseparable. The experience of the mind moving faster than the world around it may create the perception of time and space for survival:

I'm on fire, I smell and I'm screaming [laughs]. *What do I need to do? And you're very conscious of like 'shit, I need to grab somebody to help me'. [G17:598]*

Damian goes into autopilot after his parachute and reserve fail, becoming acutely aware of the dangers of time-wasting as he plummets to the ground, both time and space running out:

> *You go through it repeatedly, repetitive, repetitive, training to full muscle memory so that when something does go wrong it's an automatic action. [] It's not rounds coming at you it's the ground so you need to deal with that really quickly otherwise you're going to run out of time and height. [D25:904]*

Linguistic repetition parallels training to automaticity so when something goes wrong, no time or space in which to survive is wasted. Interestingly, participants' overarching intolerance of time-wasting surfaces in super-ordinate theme four The Tempered Self.

Time when experienced as indefinite is particularly disturbing for Alex:

> *One of the things that prevents you from sleeping soundly in The Falklands is that you don't know how long this is going to last* [drags out words]*. How long am I going to have to keep going for? [A13:471]*

His verbal expression reflects the intensity of experience of time which cannot be contained. He slows and emphasises each word, demonstrating a way in which language may reflect as well as potentially construct human experience.

The Fourth Dimension adds a further perspective to the experience of anticipating imminent death and its surrounding moments. It highlights the interplay between time and the embodied experience of nearly dying, demonstrating the subjective elasticity of time/space perception.

Summary

Tempering the Sword reveals the intensity of encounters with mortality, spotlighting aspects characterising the overall experience. At the boundary between

life and death, participants describe pure focusing of the mind (often at high speed), emotional reactions manifesting physically, altered sensations of movement in the body, a mind/body split or dissociation, a reduction of sensory input and altered perception of time. It seems plausible that physical and psychological resources may be channelled only to functions crucial to survival in that context. Ultimately, they appear temporarily disconnected from the everyday experience of existence.

Super-ordinate Theme Three: Riding the Emotional Storm

The fact he's dead, you could literally park it there and say 'yeah, Roger, got it' and we just continued to fight. [B7:254]

Both during and after their exposure to nearly dying, participants engaged with various ways of coping which appeared not only to aid survival in the moment, but potentially assisted maintenance of psychological well-being thereafter. Riding the Emotional Storm reveals from within, four sub-ordinate themes: Taking Action, Humour, Making Molehills out of Mountains and Denial. As an officer Alex understands the far-reaching consequences of not coping:

You've got to hold it together because if <u>you</u> lose it, they'll <u>all</u> lose it. [A5:180]

'Losing it' may be linked to imagining the worst and thus it is possible maintaining focus prevents this. Controlling feelings may be enhanced by socially-created beliefs and expectations around male identity - in particular paratroopers, whose identity is synonymous with mental and physical toughness/strength. Thus signs of vulnerability must be avoided:

There's probably an unspoken rule amongst us that you don't want to admit any fragility or appear weak. [B21:772]

Maintaining the masculine ideals which underpin the Para group identity may be crucial to survival in this context, consistent with the work of Becker (1997) and

TMT (Greenberg et al., 1990) in that it may shore up cultural belief systems, keeping the knowledge of their monstrous destiny at bay.

Sub-ordinate Theme One: Taking Action

If I survive, it will probably be because of what I do next. [E14:499]

The Parachute Regiment motto: Utrinque Paratus means ready for anything and this theme reflects the extent to which this motto is embraced by the group. Taking Action and/or having something to do appears to enhance the chance of survival and strengthen identity. Conversely, having nothing to do seems challenging as Felix describes:

> *Fear, there's fear when you have to sit and wait for something to happen [] for example when artillery's coming in and you're just sitting there waiting. [F7:256]*

This highlights the connection between taking action and managing emotions, which may create a virtuous circle; doing something distracts, potentially facilitating the ability to stay calm enough under extreme threat in order to do the necessary something to survive. Carl and Harry sum this up:

> *The fear sort of takes a back burner because you just kick into these drills. [C21:749]*

Carl's metaphor '*back burner*' suggests awareness of intense feelings, managed and held at a safe distance by engaging auto-pilot, the result of exhaustive training.

Outnumbered and surrounded on patrol in Afghanistan, Harry discards emotion. Time has run out for feeling. Doing is now the only option:

> *I know I've got to do <u>this</u> to get out of <u>here</u> and this is what we're going to do. At that point, there was no fear there wasn't time to have fear. [H8:283]*

All participants describe doing something, anything under threat of death to aid survival, even when it might initially seem to increase the likelihood of dying. Damian is under attack in an open top vehicle in the midst of a fire fight:

> *I basically stood on my seat and fired a 40 Mil grenade. I think I got him* [laughing] *I put a grenade right into the area where he'd shot at us from and I was pretty chuffed with that. [D31:1108]*

Although risky, he makes himself a bigger target in order to get the job done. His identity as an elite soldier drives his desire to be the best, to live up to the in-group ideal. Natural survival instincts to take cover are completely overridden as he actively risks his life to enhance group identity, consistent with TMT (Wong & Tomer, 2011). Even now, decades on his tangible excitement yields the sense of a man living the dream.

Ewan embodies the Para mantra of never giving up even when it seems futile. He is plummeting to the ground after parachute malfunction:

> *I was scared and panicking but I thought 'I've got a plan and I'm going to do that'. [E11:385]*

Ewan feels the fear but does it anyway. Taking Action offers a psychological sense of control and distance from potentially debilitating fear which is rendered impotent leaving him to function effectively.

Damian experiences similar benefits of taking action in mid-air:

I reached over my shoulder and pulled the bridle to the reserve off my back and physically yanked the reserve parachute out. At that point, I thought 'I might die here' but it worked in the end, well it didn't work, I forced it to work. [D23:840]

He gains a sense of agency in making it work, reinforcing confidence in his ability to survive anything, consistent with findings that active coping during traumatic events may elicit better outcomes - in some cases psychological growth (Tedeschi, 2011; Florian et al., 1995).

Summary

There appears to be a dynamic interplay between emotional control and taking action when faced with mortal peril. The strong sense of identity again wends its way throughout and is actively reinforced; paratroopers do not give up; do not show emotions (although appear content to describe feeling them); they are ready for anything and as a group will not be beaten. Taking Action enables all of these facets of their identity (via distraction, suppression, and highly effective split-second problem-solving). It also helps to preserve life, facilitating safe passage through extreme events. Although on occasions preservation of group identity may generate greater risk-taking, such pro-cultural behaviours may actively serve to reinforce Becker's (1997) cultural hero-system. Whatever else, it seems the Paras live and die by their motto: Utrinque Paratus.

Sub-ordinate Theme Two: Humour

Boof! It's like you've just wiped the slate clean. [G27:911]

We continue Riding the Emotional Storm by exploring these Paras' use of humour to cope with the extreme adversity they endure. Shared, macabre wit, unique to their sodality is largely unacceptable to outsiders which may bind the group ever-tighter. Freud (1918/2010) describes the purpose of mocking death in jest as giving expression to a 'truth' (interpreted here as 'experience') which we cannot face:

> *There's always been that sick, morbid sense of humour among soldiers - this very dark, black humour [] but that's just a coping mechanism, it's what gets you through. We're not a very caring bunch* [Laughs]. *[B21:774]*

Humour is perhaps a way of safely processing potentially incapacitating experience. Ben's final sentence encapsulates their unwillingness to express emotional 'weakness' yet there is evidence supporting the idea that they do care very much, highlighting the subjective nature of what it means to care (e.g. through their commitment to the group). Humour perhaps offers them an acceptable expression of caring, more consistent with their strong, traditionally masculine identity.

Felix illustrates the function of humour in dealing with human atrocities and like others, is proud of their ability to turn absolutely anything into something to laugh about:

> *They've got a rather macabre sense of humour, so they can take the most disgusting and revolting set of circumstances and turn them into humour. There's a classic story from The Falklands War where a guy is lying, a mortar has come and taken his leg off and he's screaming that he's lost his leg and a voice from a trench says 'don't worry I've found it'. [F7:234]*

Ben finds humour an effective way of managing the enormity of his own near-death encounter during an aerial assault in which others were both seriously injured and killed:

> *Afterwards we laughed about it because that's what soldiers do. If you can't trivialise it and compartmentalise it, you'd struggle to do your job again. [B7:242]*

Humour helps him reduce the magnitude of traumatic encounters. Here, there is an overlap with sub-ordinate theme three Making Molehills, but the strength and

recurrence of humour as a way of coping, warranted a distinct theme. Damian describes events following parachute failure which nearly kills him:

> *The funny thing was, the guy that packed that reserve parachute [] (laughing) gave me a good slagging [] Instead of saying 'oh sorry mate, that was a dodgy pack job' he went 'oh you wanker you dropped your handles* [laughing loudly] *stop flapping'. [D23:844]*

Humour also reflects and enhances group bonding, reinforced by outsiders' disapproval and failure to comprehend their particularly dark wit:

> *There's no thin skins in the military and that's great for levelling people out and bonding which you can't do in a PC* [politically correct] *office. If you've got to pussy-foot around people you don't get that bonding [] and again the humour is one of the big crutches that overcomes it all when people have died. [G22:765]*

Giles' '*thin skins*' metaphor suggests humour forms a kind of armour – a layer of protection whilst offering support. Felix agrees:

> *Another classic; 'all those people who have got mothers take one step forwards, Jones stand still'. There was a Sergeant Major who actually did that 'stand still Jones, your mother died yesterday morning.' They almost thrive in that vicious, unkind environment and by using that macabre humour, it stops people being vulnerable. [F7:243]*

Giles sums up the transformative effect of humour, when psychologically at rock bottom:

> *You're emotionally shattered and just one little thing will set you all off. You'll roll around crying with laughter and that's it, you'll get up and <u>boof</u>, it's like you've just wiped the slate clean; 'I can't even believe I was upset a*

minute ago'. It's like another day. Just been reborn, almost. Literally. [G26:901]

It is as if humour facilitates a psychological re-boot. Metaphorical rebirth obliterates experience and creates space for emotional re-grouping. He expresses this three different ways highlighting its significance.

Summary

Overall, this theme underlines the need for a safe, actively-engaged means by which participants can process and express adverse experiences within the group. Whilst strengthening group bonding, humour provides a critical emotional outlet which helps trivialise challenging thoughts and feelings, expression of which might otherwise undermine their (traditionally masculine) identity. Furthermore, laughing in the face of death reinforces invincibility and facilitates minimising which is explored in the next theme.

Sub-ordinate Theme Three: Making Molehills out of Mountains

There's a dead body and there's a hat. Same. [F9:316]

In Riding the Emotional Storm through extreme adversity, the participants are drawing on various coping mechanisms both immediately and in the longer term. Making Molehills out of Mountains explores the ways in which Paras disconnect from the enormity of their experience which starts in training.

Felix appreciates how adversity and challenge even during P Company (selection) helps psychologically minimise and normalise the horrors of battle:

There's an old saying of 'train hard, fight easy' and that's what we did. So when you got into a frightening situation it was fairly everyday kind of thing. Somebody shot at you. 'OK'. [F14:486]

His extensive military experiences globally have also shaped his somewhat non-Westernised worldview which further normalises death and dying:

> *It's a very ordinary experience and when I was in Africa somebody dying was no different from having sex and sex was no different from having a shit. [] People from those cultures must look at us and think 'what's such a big deal?' [F26:933]*

This extract highlights how Felix's experience distances him from his own (Western) culture, presenting death as one of the givens of human existence. Other cultures may ask '*what's such a big deal?'* but perhaps he wants the answer himself. This highlights the conflict (apparent in all participants' narratives), between their raised existential awareness and their attempts to reinforce the anxiety buffer against that which they now know.

Harry's response to nearly dying illustrates how he minimises near-death events linguistically:

> *I think I probably walked away and thought 'that was a bit close'. [H36:1307]*

Similarly, Damian's reaction to his parachute and reserve failing:

> *….that was a bit of a scary situation. [D25:898]*

Damian is also quick to dismiss surviving a massive bomb landing well within the kill zone:

> *At the time you don't think about it, you just, like 'flipping heck, that was lucky'. [D13:469]*

Conversely, when a bomb explodes, Alex frames the apparent death of someone right next to him as unlucky:

> *When I looked around I couldn't find this other guy and [] I just thought he'd evaporated and I remember thinking 'blimey that was hard luck'. [A10:365]*

Harry uses 'blah' several times in his account to dismiss an accident as insignificant:

> *We were in a Land Rover [] we went from the outside lane, across three lanes and back across into the central reservations. There was all these cars piled and twisted and blah, blah, blah. [H15:549]*

After exposure to extreme adversity, everything else perhaps pales into insignificance. Acknowledging the closeness to death may undermine Becker's (1997) anxiety buffer, where conscious knowledge of man's ultimate fate is denied.

Many participants appear to be masters of understatement. Carl describes coming home from the Falklands, generally considered to be the most bitter conventional fighting since WWII:

> *We flew back to Brize Norton* [UK RAF Airfield] *so we were home from what was a bit a kick off to people [] going to the pub. [C30:1091]*

Whilst highlighting the contrast between war vs. going to the pub, he minimises his horrific experiences (*'bit of a kick*-off') as if a small fracas in said pub. Such extreme encounters may engender changed priorities. Like Harry and others, Giles now finds many issues '*minor and irritating' [G19:636]*, maintaining a somewhat polarised view of life and death, which he extrapolates to broader contexts, his own and others:

> *People start saying 'oh my bank's failed' [] and you're just like 'Seriously'? You're worried about that? Why? Nobody's trying to kill you. [G19:648]*

Unless they are dying, it is unimportant. A fundamental shift of perspective seems to have occurred in all participants. Alex's changed worldview elicits a robust stance towards new challenges. The adversity of simply training as a paratrooper was enough to put advanced cancer into perspective:

> *I was [] close to death with cancer, the professor who was treating me said 'how do you feel?' I said 'I don't feel great but it's still only week one of P Company'. [A4:138]*

Summary

Overall, it is argued that Making Molehills out of Mountains indicates changed perspectives and reassessed priorities, potentially underpinning shifts in their sense of self. The loss of life's absolutes (Stolorow, 2007) strips away the illusion of certainty to expose fundamental aspects of existence (including the inevitability of death) the enormity of which is managed through disconnection. Para identity may be reinforced by their ability to minimise such adversity, both mediating and perpetuating experience; ready for anything, never giving up, it my also facilitate moving forwards rather than dwelling in the past.

Sub-ordinate Theme Four: Denial

It won't happen to me. [H10:335]

Riding the Emotional Storm concludes with the participants' implicit and explicit attempts to sidestep knowledge of their own mortality and potential death. It has been hypothesised (Becker, 1997; Freud, 2010) that denial is a necessary component of functional human existence and perhaps nowhere is that truer than on the battlefield:

> *If you <u>worry</u> about dying all the time then you can't function so you need people that go 'yeah, OK, somebody's going to die today, I hope it's not me but let's just get on with the job'.* [F17:625]

All participants except Ewan express the belief, 'it won't be me':

> *You believe you'll never die, you'll always believe the kit will work, that nothing will fail [] It is mental defence, it's a way of hedging it off. [G20:697]*

Giles sounds almost superstitious reflecting unwillingness to engage with 'what if'. This manifestation of denial suggests a desire to protect himself from the psychological threat of death. This does not propose a 'head-in-the-sand' approach, more an optimal way of doing his job and surviving. It highlights the paradox of talking about denial; raising it to conscious awareness by its very nature, may render it impotent leaving individuals vulnerable (without denial) and in Becker's (1997) view, dysfunctionally anxious.

However, throughout participants' narratives, many illustrations of denial's shifting boundaries emerge. For example, a very close encounter with death may elicit a change in awareness, such that participants are forced to confront their own mortality exemplified by the 'Oh Shit' Moment. However, this loss of denial may be temporary. Following a mortar attack in Afghanistan during which several soldiers are injured or killed, Ben is temporarily unable to maintain denial of life's fragility subsequently taking protective measures:

> *The next two, possibly three patrols where we called in mortars, being a little bit more aware of, 'what happens if it doesn't go in the correct grid?' and thinking, 'I'll always be in a good position of cover before we call them in'. But within a week you've <u>totally</u> forgotten about it. [B8:258]*

A short passage of time allows the regrouping of denial. The defences return, demonstrating the reciprocal relationship between denial and conscious awareness of death. Nonetheless, the length of exposure to mortal threat may impact denial more significantly:

> *The longer you're there [] and suffer in a sense over a tour, you get that numbed mind. It's like being out in the rain for four hours. People get the thousand yard stare. Your mind switches off and it's almost like you don't give a fuck whether you live or die. [G8:280]*

This suggests the strength of denial may wane if exposure to death is unrelenting. Such exposure is psychologically so exhausting it simply cannot be sustained, which he alludes to in his rain simile – he is psychologically drenched in death salience and has switched off, now disconnected from the flow of time severing connection to any future. In the absence of denial his mind numbs (a post-traumatic stress symptom). Thus the absence of anxiety implicit in his final sentence seems consistent with the notion that the fear of death may be eradicated by total acceptance (Williams, 2012; Lifton, 1991).

Alex believes death can never be fully acknowledged until it actually happens, until the possibility of survival completely vanishes:

> *People who are [] catastrophically wounded will say things like 'I'm going down' or 'I'm a goner' and there must be a point where there is an acceptance of the other side, but I think until you get to that point you don't recognise it. [A9:301]*

This may reflect the paradoxical, fundamental nature of denial where rendering mortality truly, permanently conscious (i.e. denial is lost) requires death itself, at which point consciousness ceases to be. In other words, it continues to protect until the very end (death). However, experience perhaps tips the scales towards a more permanent raised awareness of existential issues that impacts participants' subsequent lives and which is explored next.

Summary

Riding the Emotional Storm represents the ways in which participants cope with the enormity of confronting their own mortality during the battle for victory, survival

and beyond. A series of disconnections and re-connections characterising the sub-themes, appear to reflect the ways in which emotions are managed, avoided or minimised. This facilitates composure at critical moments, potentially making the difference between life and death.

Super-ordinate Theme Four: The Tempered Self

I think adversity creates character. [F19:690]

This theme represents participants' altered sense of being-in-the-world following the tempering experience of mortal peril. Existential issues come to the fore, as participants' newly raised awareness of life's random nature makes its presence felt in the short and long-term aftermath. A new temporal perspective mediates their experience of post-combat living, both as a reflection on changes to the self across time and their sense of time as now finite. The Tempered Self yields three sub-ordinate themes: Raised Awareness of the Fragility of Life, the Doors of Janus: Closed and Open and the Texture of Time.

Sub-ordinate Theme One: Raised Awareness of the Fragility of Life

I've seen a few of my friends dead, it could be me next so there's perhaps a raising of your general awareness. [E5:162]

As discussed, a dynamic connection seems to exist between the loss of denial and the raised awareness of existential issues. It has been argued that diminishing denial creates room for enhanced existential awareness which emerged from all participants' narratives in abundance, eliciting the fundamental realisation that life/death is random:

> *They weren't shooting at me as an individual, they were shooting at a spot on the map [] every fifteen minutes. Eventually that gets to you because you think 'I'm doing to die out of bad <u>luck</u> here'. [A8:281]*

Reduced to a dot on a page, Alex's understanding of the arbitrary nature of existence (highlighted through verbal emphasis) elicits anticipatory stress.

Carl's awareness of the precarious line between living and dying has stayed with him in the longer term:

> *Life and death is part of your life, you know, people disappear all the time. People make song and dances…I've lost a lot of friends [] I can look in the mirror 'am I next?' [C40:1444]*

He is now aware of life's fragility. He normalises it, begins to minimise others' attitudes as over-the-top but stops himself, asking '*am I next*?' Perhaps now he knows too much to return to a blissful place of denial occupied by those who sing and dance. The words; *'people disappear'* reflect his understanding of the suddenness of death. There seems little room for denial.

Felix describes exposure to the kind of extreme experience that may raise awareness to the point where denial is futile:

> *The way they cleared minefields was to advance until somebody hit a mine, and advance again until somebody else hit a mine [] that kind of reality is a huge shock. [F17:607]*

He faces unadulterated 'reality' which disconnects him from the illusion of certainty which denial offers.

Following a near-fatal ambush in Iraq, Harry discovers this for himself:

> *I can remember thinking 'it's my birthday today' and I remember thinking 'I wonder if I'll see in my next birthday'. [H9:310]*

His newly-raised awareness impacts his perception of time as he questions the now-finite view ahead. Death may pre-empt his birthday, evoking the sense of living from moment to moment, emphasising that time is limited. Ewan also acknowledges a shift in awareness:

> *Coming back from The Falklands, you have that recognition. [] You go down to the cemetery and you see your friends' graves. [] You're more aware than you were before. You're not playing on exercise now, this is real. [E5:157]*

'Recognition' suggests something he already knew but had not accessed. He is now awake to a new 'reality'. With hindsight he perhaps views previous participation in life as a rehearsal or game and the interplay between denial and awareness mediated by experience is apparent. Now his friends are dead he sees it for what it is, no longer able to deny it because '*this is real*'. What he now knows can never be un-known.

Summary

Overall, Raised Awareness of the Fragility of Life suggests shifts towards the sense of self as impermanent; a disconnection from certainty, engendering an understanding that life is uncontrollable and uncertain vs. death as random and certain. This kind of realisation might be potentially undermining however, paradoxically it seems Para identity as invincible, does not preclude the possibility of individual death. Indeed it may partly arise from and be reinforced by their new understanding and acceptance of their mortality. We see this in action in the next theme exploring their experience moving forwards.

Sub-ordinate Theme Two: Doors of Janus: Closed and Open

The Tempered Self now throws the spotlight onto the aftermath in which we discover a Janus-like dichotomy. Janus was the Roman god of new beginnings associated with transitions/doorways. He is usually represented by two faces; looking forwards and backwards to both the past and future. In wartime, his temple doors were open, and signified peace when closed (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2014). The two faces of this sub-theme do not suggest a lifeworld division but aim to

illuminate the ambiguities of post-battlefield experience. The slightly counter-intuitive linking of Doors open/negative, Doors closed/positive, aims to reflect the blurred lines between contrasting battlefield experiences for example between personal loss and gain.

Closed Doors

I've been through some <u>really, really</u> horrendous hard things here…I reckon I can just about do anything at this point. That's how you feel and it kind of carries on for the rest of your life. [D4:147]

One of the most striking findings emerging from all participants' narratives is their optimistic take on extreme experiences whilst acknowledging negative outcomes and simultaneously holding both positions as valid. A very real sense of 'Carpe Diem' leaps off the pages of transcript, even more so in person as they proactively seek out lives of opportunity:

Man only has a short time to live so make the most of it. [C33:1194]

I've always made an effort to try and you know, if there's an opportunity to do something new then I've done it. [E16:570]

The sense of self-awareness in that you're only here <u>once</u>, it's not a dress rehearsal. [B14:512]

For Giles now, even the most basic life functions are no longer simply utilitarian but must be savoured, highlighted here through verbal emphasis and metaphor:

I see <u>everything</u> as another day breathing. It's an opportunity, everything is gravy. It's gravy, honestly, it really is. [G27:942]

Themes overlap as it seems behind Closed Doors, Giles' sense of urgency emanates from his raised awareness. There is a desire to convince (‘*honestly’*) perhaps so that now time is finite, none will be lost or wasted. Participants’ dislike of time-wasting is explored further below.

The sense of Carpe Diem is evident in all participants. Although Paras are by definition highly motivated individuals, there is a definite shift towards a more conscious engagement with life moving forwards. Felix treasures the present whilst looking forward to the future under advisement:

> *I have moments where I’m really, really happy and you know that tomorrow it could all change* [clicks fingers] *in a car accident. Rather than say ‘It might all be over tomorrow’ say ‘Isn’t today great?’ I hope I’ve got another 30 years and have as many new joyful experiences as I have so far and not worry about the bad ones. [F26:948]*

He emphasises his new understanding *(‘you know’)* driving him forwards. He acknowledges the potential for suffering, invoking Frankl’s (2004 p.139) ‘tragic triad’, but believes people who focus on the negative, are missing out:

> *While they’re doing that, they’re not filling their boots and having fun. Come on, you know, you might be dead tomorrow. [F26:945]*

His narrative suggests impatience (*‘come on’)* towards those who waste time, rather than enjoying life, which might cease at any moment. He seems intent on making sure his metaphorical boots are full of life. Carl is almost inspired by injury:

> *I got that…*[pulls up trouser leg]…*there’s a hole in me leg there from a blast bomb which again it could have gone in my head. So you make the most of that. [C33:1206]*

He takes nothing for granted – the hole in his leg, for him an embodied reminder to be thankful for his life, even 30 years on. The lasting impact of these experiences is evident. Ewan draws on these at challenging moments:

> *It gives you a context other people don't have. When you've got your nose pressed up against things, it's worth stepping back, looking at the big picture and saying 'at least I'm not plummeting towards the ground at 120 mph' or 'at least I'm not on fire'. I mean it's nice to have that context. [E15:546]*

He gains an advantageous perspective from his experiences - something which others do not have. He is minimising here which perhaps creates space for the broader view. Nothing he faces in life now can ever be as challenging as that which he has already conquered (i.e. death). As Yalom (2006) suggests, although death brings physical destruction, the idea of it actually saves us.

Damian views adversity as character-forming, without which he would be like everyone else:

> *I'd probably be a boring bugger like most people are* [Laughs] *[]maybe it moulds the sort of person you are, especially harsh things and things that are going to test you mentally and physically [] if I hadn't been through that then I wouldn't be the person I am now for definite. [D16:577]*

Damian's identity as different to others is reinforced by his encounters with death and adversity. There is a sense of positive growth from his adverse experiences, which have helped shape the person he has become into something superior, beyond even his Para identity. For Alex, adversity adds a necessary ingredient, even seeking it off the battlefield:

> *I'd have felt that something had been missing out of my life if I hadn't had that ultimate test. I used to feel that I needed a fright every so often just to <u>remind</u> me what life was about. [A25:890]*

He identifies the *'*fright' of adversity as life-affirming. The negative becomes positive where a regular shock to his system perhaps connects him to the lifeworld 'Grid' consistent with both Yalom (2011) and Deurzen (2010). Ben sees opportunities for personal growth:

> *You get a greater sense of your own self-awareness and you want to be a better person. [] I'm trying to be a better citizen. [B13:463]*

Personal reflection and developing sense of self creates desire for further change. As a *'citizen'* he highlights the intersubjective nature of being, and now actively seeks to enhance his sense of interconnectedness to others by being *'better*'. He perhaps seeks reparation for the past or for those he lost or, aware that time is always running out, he wants to capitalise on living well. Several participants commented on their enhanced compassion for others:

> *People who have been put under pressure tend to discover the truth about themselves, so it creates some sort of wisdom. Then you're not so judgemental [] you can be more forgiving for other people. [F23:819]*

> *I think emotionally I'm more tender [] more patient with people who are ill. [A23:839]*

Janus: Doors Closed highlights the almost-tangible lens of Carpe Diem through which participants now see their lives. There is a new appreciation for living, new-found compassion for others and a sense of personal enhancement, growth and advantage as a direct result of their traumatic experiences. While it is possible that aspects of their identity may drive them to present a positive view of their world, the following section demonstrates their ability to manage a range of seemingly conflicting consequences in their lives.

Open Doors

The downside is you've had bad experiences, you've lost a lot of friends and your emotions change. [C41:1492]

In times of war, the doors to Janus' temple were open, here a metaphor for ongoing personal battles resulting from participants' experiences. This face of Janus looks to the more negative experience in the aftermath of extreme adversity, emerging in all participant accounts. Ben and Harry sense the emotional impact:

> *I think as a result of the things I've seen and done, I'm perhaps a little bit more serious about life… perhaps slightly more highly strung, possibly. [B14:493]*

> *I can see the doom and gloom because I do think of the bad end of the stick and then try and put something in place to mitigate that. [H24:833]*

Harry seems aware of a more pessimistic outlook, but takes action to minimise the negative impact of his experiences which he cannot eradicate.

Giles' emotional experience following severe adversity is conflicting. The bottom line for soldiers is 'kill or be killed'. Thus to survive, he metaphorically dons the beret but must bury the human in both himself and the other:

> *You feel strong and powerful because you've just taken somebody else's life with your hands and then at the same time you feel this acute guilt because the other half of your mind is saying 'Yeah, he's a son, he's a father, he has a mother at home'. [G18:612]*

He becomes tearful as he contemplates events now not as a soldier but as a human being in relation to his victim and those who will be impacted by his actions. It is as if he suddenly senses the interpersonal reverberations of his victim's death. There is a significant emotional impact as a by-product of doing

his job well, which highlights one of many internal/external conflicts participants face.

The notion of conflict was previously explored in super-ordinate theme Identity, highlighting personal/professional struggles. Here, conflicts arise as a direct result of their combat experiences. The juxtaposition of Doors Open and Closed, between combat and peacetime remains challenging. Giles notices a disconnection from friends:

> *I realised when recounting some of my experiences to friends outside [] I could feel irrational anger because they don't understand. [G26:882]*

He changes to the present tense, suggesting that this distance from others remains. They are separated by incomprehension. Carl also finds his post-adversity understanding of the world now at odds with those around him:

> *A girl in work said 'You live in a bubble in the Army'. 'What bubble's that? When I see kids sat on stakes, women with their hands chopped off, that's my real world, what's yours [] inside the M25, what is it?' [C34:1233]*

He sees her worldview as unimaginably narrow, ring-fenced inside a middle-class Western bubble. He is disdainful of her lack of comprehension which exacerbates the divide, reminiscent of Stolorow's (2007) understanding of trauma as alienating. Carl's *'real world'* can never exclude the human atrocities he has witnessed, yet he manages this alongside the gains arising from adversity without the need to deny one or other.

Alex feels the impact of having to fight an enemy who looks just like him:

> *Northern Ireland has had a longer term effect for a lot of us because we were being spat upon and abused and shot at by people who spoke our language and were flying our flag. [A11:391]*

Dehumanising (enabling aggression and lethal action) is perhaps harder to achieve with a familiar enemy and feels counter-intuitive. It is an inner conflict which he must overcome in combat, but which remains with him over time, potentially a conflict never truly resolved.

Harry highlights the challenge of adjusting between war and peace:

> *Nowadays a guy sees an atrocity or partakes in one. Four hours later he's at Brize Norton*. *Another two hours later he's in Tescos* [Supermarket] *doing the shopping…[]…he's gone from the surreal to the ridiculous hasn't he? You know, sort of from battlefield to Tescos. [H21:758]*

He distorts a well-known idiom (sublime to the ridiculous) to emphasise the contrasting contexts. He also uses the third person perhaps to step back from the *'surreal'* (thus possibly incomprehensible) experience of atrocity alongside shopping - a disparity which cannot possibly be processed.

Summary

The Doors of Janus reflect contrasting aspects of the aftermath of nearly dying. However, a negative sense of disconnect on multiple levels of being (emotional, geographical, physiological, social) belies the overwhelming sense of Carpe Diem, self-awareness, investment in proactive living and self-improvement. Their ability to understand and engage with both open and closed doors may be significant in understanding their overall sense of well-being. This is consistent with the existential notion of living life to the full in the knowledge of the inevitable challenge and adversity that this involves (Deurzen, 2010). It may also offer a glimpse into a space of potential growth lying between trauma and non-trauma.

Sub-ordinate Theme Three: The Texture of Time

We just sat on the wall and drank beer and then looked forward till tomorrow. It was history. [F12: 414]

Exploration of the Tempered Self now shifts the focus onto the participants' longer-term perspectives, as they reflect on their lives differently across time. The theme borrows its title from Vladimir Nabokov's (1969/2000) novel 'Ada' whose protagonist 'Van' creates a philosophical treatise; the Texture of Time. Concerned with the subjective nature of temporal perception, Nabokov rejects the notion of uni-directional temporal flow (Boyd, 2001). This would seem consistent with the participants' experience in the long-term aftermath as they encounter past and present as a juxtaposition of self and others alongside varying velocity within the lifeworld.

Looking back, Ewan sees changes to his sense of self, attributed to severe adversity:

> *The 15 year old me before I joined the Army, I was a completely different person to the person that I was say five years later. You can't go through extreme experiences without it changing you. Whether it's negative or positive change is kind of how you mentally put the spin on it. [E17:620]*

Past experience travels with him imbued in the self. He creates a narrative around his transformation, maintaining a sense of psychological agency in the world. He chooses the view of changes that occur, but acknowledges how experience and time elicit his total transformation ('*completely different').*

Giles finds life's tempo has changed:

You do become faster paced [] I feel old at 44 if that makes sense because I think you have to grow up very fast, take responsibility from an early age and then obviously all those experiences. [G22:756]

There is a strong sense of losing time. He hints at perhaps speeding through a now-lost youth and is moving faster through life than others. He feels '*old at 44',* perhaps wiser for '*all those experiences*'. Ben is also stripped of the illusion of his time as infinite:

It's wanting to use the time you've got. [B15:518]

Like Giles, Ewan experiences an awareness that his time is moving along faster than everyone around him. He has unwittingly overtaken and left them behind.

I found a massive disconnect with my friends from school [] I felt much older than them…that I didn't have anything in common with them anymore. [] It gave you a feeling of maturity even when I would speak to people who were, you know, 10 years older than me. [E17:606]

Whilst his experiences offer him a subsequent understanding of the world far greater than even those with a decade's more living under their belts, it perhaps emphasises the potentially insurmountable gap or disconnect between them.

Giles does not want to waste a moment:

I live life as, not as fast as I can, it's not about speed, necessarily but you become less tolerant of time-wasting or achieving nothing. Every second counts. [G22:740]

Again, he offers a glimpse of the urgency that now characterises his being, the fear of wasting even a moment. Damian feels equally strongly about others' time-wasting:

> *People sit around watching telly, monging it and being a couch potato. Why not do something that's worth doing because it could <u>end</u>…at any moment. <u>Really</u>. But you never know your luck, you never know your luck and you might as well <u>live</u> your life. [D15:542]*

Stressing *'<u>end</u>'*, pausing for effect, then further emphasis on *'<u>Really</u>'* indicates his desire to impress upon me perhaps and the world, that life/death is random, re-emphasised in his repeated reference to luck. Time can simply stop, thus the urgency to *'<u>live</u>'*. It is as if he has discovered that the means (the journey) not the end (an outcome) is the key, as he now knows the outcome of living is dying.

Summary

The participants' Texture of Time appears changed, their altered perception bringing to attention a disconnection from others and a shifting sense of self looking back over their lives. Furthermore, changes of pace in the lifeworld create an interpersonal juxtaposition of the old and new self. There is an urgency and desire to do more in whatever time they may have, overtaking and leaving others behind. Most importantly, now time is no longer infinite, the potential for significant/permanent loss is under the spotlight; time-wasting is thus intolerable.

Overall, the Tempered Self encapsulates changes to self-in-the-world following encounters with mortal peril. Raised Awareness as described above may be the very thing that stimulates Carpe Diem (in line with existential philosophy) and a significant shift of tempo. It appears to reflect a vigour sharpened by the ever-present knowledge of the extreme dark side, which itself opens the door to a richness and connection which may transcend life as it once was. This potentially enhances participants' appreciation of life's potential for splendour, facilitating growth, engagement and commitment to living.

Super-ordinate Theme Five: Survivor's Search for Connection

We have seen how lived experience of extreme adversity is encountered and managed in various ways. The aftermath yields new experiential qualities that both broaden and reduce the participant lifeworld and also elicit changes to the sense of self, against a back-drop of enduring Para identity. The ways in which meaning is created by the participants as they navigate this emerges in The Survivor's Search for Connection via three sub-ordinate themes: Making Sense of the Self in Historical Context, Myth-Making and Creating Purpose.

Thus, this theme consolidates the participants' experience as they begin to forge connections with others. For example drawing on military history creates links to the past and helps make sense of their more recent encounters with adversity, generating a meaningful narrative consistent with their present lives. Their desire for purpose drives and motivates them in the present moment whilst an urge to pass something on to create a legacy, perhaps reveals the paradox of their seeking immortality i.e. a never-ending future, whilst fully aware of the finite nature of life. They appear to be reconnecting the flow of time, between past/present/future disrupted by their confrontation with death. They draw on cultural myths to make sense of adversity and perhaps to manage their closeness to and raised awareness of mortality.

Sub-ordinate Theme One: Making Sense of the Self in Historical Context

I'd never talked to my Dad about the Second World War because he never wanted to until I came back from The Falklands and we had shared experiences. [A17:622]

While the desire to make sense of oneself, events and experience is certainly not confined to those who have faced death or adversity (indeed Spinelli (2005) argues convincingly that it underpins the human condition), the participants' accounts reveal the ways in which they understand their experience, connecting with historical events and previous generations' lived experience of 'trauma':

> *I began to understand in a small way (because theirs was much more severe), the experience my grandfather's generation had in WWI and the effects of heavy shell fire. [A8:277]*

Combat experience also yields new emotional connections with the past. They are making sense of their forefathers' (and thus their own) experience in a now-shared context:

> *In 1982 we'd not long come back from the Falklands. These guys who* [usually] *create mayhem, the lumps in their throats were too large to sing hymns in the cemetery. There were a lot of tears because finally we could appreciate what those old guys* [at Arnhem] *had gone through. [A18:627]*

Strong, painful emotions arising from this new connection, metaphorically and physically *('lumps'*) impede verbal expression. Empathy is instead expressed via the body (*a lot of tears)*.

Carl can finally relate to his family history in a way which was unavailable prior to his own experience, offering him a way of bringing fiction to life:

> *It's like me Dad telling me, and me Granddad telling me. It was a story. But having experienced it, it's the smell, a dead man. It's just the smell [] when he's dying. If he's spilt out… there's guts, the smell of the insides, all ingrained. So what was a story before is now part of my life. I can relate to that. [C31:1123]*

He emphasises how family history is a multi-dimensional, raw sensory experience of which he is now a part. These are no longer just stories. This is his history, its impact carried with him in the present and into the future.

Ben creates a place for himself in history (the future past) and projecting forwards since this offers him longevity, beyond death:

I've been around at a time where definable events were happening. 'Where were you when Iraq was invaded?' 'Well, I was in a helicopter crossing the border'….[] I like the sense that I can look back and tie myself to historical events. [B22:790]

Here he makes sense of his being, connecting past and future, preserved for posterity, as history offers immortality.

Summary

Overall, their experience, now set against an historical backdrop breathes life and understanding into the (often horrific) stories of preceding generations (family/history). Making sense within the context of shared experience seems to deepen connections. Their enhanced and now mutual understanding facilitates the forging of new, previously unavailable emotional connections to others rendering their own experience more meaningful in the context of a larger, more vivid whole.

Sub-ordinate Theme Two: Myth-Making

It was a bit like Horatio at the bridge, fighting people off so that the four of us could get up these stairs. [A12:444]

This theme explores the powerful role of myth and meaning in the participants' lives. An overlap with super-ordinate theme one Identity is acknowledged however. While Para selection significantly impacts identity, becoming a part of the Parachute Regimental myth may require experience in active combat. Myths are timeless tales which have reflected and shaped human life, possibly dating as far back as Neanderthal man. Myths represent our attempts to explain and explore the realm of our desires, fears and longing, to provide narratives about the meaning of being human (Armstrong, 2006). Throughout history, the Arts (music, literature, poetry, art) have been steeped in myth and today's route to mythological expression also

includes television and film. References to popular culture and classic literature litter participant accounts:

As Carl waits for the landing-craft ramp to go down on the beaches of the Falklands (leaving them completely exposed) he recalls a scene from a film:

> *We'd had the unfortunate advantage or disadvantage of seeing 'The Longest Day'. As soon as that ramp goes down, what happens? A machine gun opens up. So our expectations* [were] *of a machine-gun opening up. [C16:572]*

This creates an unbroken line of heroism connecting Carl back to his predecessors on D Day. This is also reflected in British military traditions such as the Battle of Waterloo Commemorative Dinner and more specifically for Paras, Arnhem Sunday and Rhine Crossing (church parades) (British Army, 2015). This overlaps with the previous theme since myth provides connections to the meaning of the past as well as making sense of the present. The concept of heroism underpinned by myth plays an important role, especially initially for getting men into battle:

> *A lot of young boys (because it comes with the sex), have a heroic ideal of a Rupert Brooke approach to dying for one's country. [A5:149]*

Once engaged in warfare, creation and maintenance of myths and of heroes becomes an active pursuit rather than simply an ideal and serves to align both incentives and needs of individuals with the greater cause/machine for which they risk life and limb and with society. Fighting for a common cause perhaps invests death and suffering with meaning and purpose, whether it be the Fatherland, La Belle France or the Empire:

> *I never thought that we wouldn't win. I was sorry that they were dead, but [] they fell in a justifiable and worthwhile cause. [E5:180]*

Ewan copes with the death of colleagues in the Falklands, safe in the knowledge that their early demise is meaningful and that they are now a part of the myth. The potential for creating a myth or hero is highly motivating. Ben's military action in Iraq not only engenders a huge sense of achievement, but the public ceremony surrounding it facilitates cultural reinforcement of the Parachute Regiment myth:

> *I'd put that demon to bed and I was decorated for it so there was a sense of recognition which for me was quite important. [B18:656]*

He is now firmly part of that myth, highlighting the distinction between his identity formed in part by becoming a Para, and fighting in combat with the Regiment after which he is integral to the myth. This essentially offers a form of immortality consistent with Becker (1997) providing meaning beyond individual extinction and perhaps broadening our understanding of why people lay down their lives for others.

Unlike legends, myths may reflect concrete events (Campbell, 1949/2008). Indeed as Carl discovers, sometimes art (or film) imitates life:

> *Private Ryan says, 'Ten seconds, God be with you'. Ours got something like 'Thirty seconds, good luck', almost the words from the film or the film took the words from our landing-craft. [C16:580]*

Myth helps us transcend the temporal world of suffering and death by giving voice to things that existed previously and which are beyond words but understood through the metaphors contained within the myths (Campbell, 1949/2008):

> *Did you ever see the film The Deer Hunter? When he arrives back from Vietnam and all his friends are going 'fucking A, come and see us' you know, and then he's just cold with them. That was me. [F14:505]*

Here, Felix perhaps alludes to the unspeakable disconnection from others arising from his encounters with mortal peril.

Interestingly, it seems combat experience can lead to a more nuanced reaction towards myth:

> *As one of the famous First World War poets put it, dying for your country actually isn't that sweet, and that came out of experience. [A5:151]*

Alex's comment perhaps demonstrates how myth might not always survive the collision with experience.

Summary

Myth may serve to get men into battle potentially drawing on its power to quell the innate human fear of death. The distinction between the role of myth in identity-formation and the merging of myth and man post-combat is drawn. The notion of heroism during battle will keep men fighting, however once death or extreme adversity has been encountered, it seems there may be a power shift from myth to individual. Myth-making offers a bridge between generations and a greater understanding of predecessors' experiences, which in turn serves to reinforce the Regimental myth. Relationships with others (both past, present and indeed into the future as the myth lives on) are strengthened, underlining the complexities of intersubjectivity through time/space and context.

Sub-ordinate Theme Three: Creating Purpose

Personally, I'm just making sure my life's flipping worthwhile. [D16:599]

The desire to make sense of experience appears to coincide with the drive to find or create purpose in the post-combat lives of all participants. This in turn appears enhanced by their raised awareness, demonstrating the dynamic interplay of themes/sub-themes. Participants' accounts reveal their differing efforts to create purpose which emerged in several forms: Passing

something on, remembering, finding a new specific focus, and generalised efforts to live more purposefully.

Felix turns adversity to advantage expressing the wish to pass something on:

> *Those bad experiences, I can actually use those and remember them to be a better person, father, grandfather, teacher. [F23:850]*

He transforms adversity to advantage, something useful '*teacher*' (perhaps a way to transform himself) starting in the present with himself as '*better*'. It offers a potential legacy, the effects of which can flow forwards in time through generations.

It is not just the passing of wisdom that creates the sense of purpose however. Remembering is an important aspect of most participants' lives. Writing in the immediate aftermath of WWI, Freud contends that remembering the dead serves to breathe life into other forms of post-death existence (Freud, 1918/2010). Passing on memories, ensuring those who lost their lives are not forgotten permeates most accounts:

> *There's quite a few of us meet up. Remembrance Day and the First Anniversary, we keep in touch on the internet. [C37:1345]*

For Alex, making sure those who die are known is crucially important. More than thirty years after the Falklands, it is as if time has stood still as he describes with tears in his eyes, naming a misidentified soldier who is nearly buried without tags:

> *I said 'I want to put these* [tags] *on the body because if he's ever dug up, I do not want him to be unknown. I know him, we know him and he's always going to have a headstone'. [A22:778]*

Verbal emphases stress the importance of the soldier being known, underlining indelible connections between him and others in the past, present and into the future. He has suffered physical death but his place in the world of others is ensured going forwards by (‘*always’*) having a headstone. Alex’s tears reflect the deep connection and lasting sense of responsibility he feels towards his soldier more than three decades after his death.

Creating memories may offer not only longevity but somehow infuse death with meaning. After one of his young soldiers dies in Iraq, Ben offers to meet the family, to explain what happened:

> *Leaving out the gory detail I told them how well I’d known their son, what we all thought of him, how professional he was, all of which was true, I was very honest. Then I explained the circumstances that led up to their son’s death. [B12:412]*

It is important to Ben that the soldier is remembered as he lived and died. He passes on memories for the family to preserve and treasure. Walking away afterwards, he describes a sense of existential isolation:

> *That was a lonely time, just a time of reflection and where for the first time I truly understood the impact that somebody’s death had. [B12:435]*

Carl remembers lost colleagues in his own way:

> *I go back to the cemetery and sit there, sad as it may sound, take a can of beer, pour it on his grave and have a can with him. If he popped out I don’t know what I’d do, probably shit myself* [laughs] *[] Yeah, you miss them. [C32:1154]*

He remembers the dead maintaining connections through their shared past in the present. Whilst clearly understanding his colleague has gone, his comment on him popping out, perhaps keeps him actively alive in memory.

Ben creates a specific purpose:

> *I help mentoring a homeless ex-Para. [] I suppose for me that's just trying to put something back, it's trying to help people who are vulnerable. [B13:456]*

Having taken something good from his experiences, he can now help ('*put something back')*. He is reaching out and reconnecting in a meaningful way. He is changed as a result of his experiences:

> *The only lasting thing for me now, is that degree of altruism that I never had previously whereas I'd now like to give some of my time to try and help others, which I'm passionate about. [B21:742]*

Passion brings drive and motivation to his new endeavours and he senses a shift in his relationships with others and perhaps himself.

Damian seems driven not to fall back into the everyday mode of existence described by Heidegger (as cited in Yalom, 2011):

> *I'm just making sure my life's flipping worthwhile rather than monging it and watching East Enders every flipping couple of times a week…[]…giving purpose to your life and doing something good with it. [D16:559]*

He sees others unknowingly wasting their lives while he appears acutely aware in the ontological mode, celebrating the 'being' itself.

Overall, the participants seem motivated to create purpose-filled, meaningful lives. More broadly, it is possible this helps forge new links to others and to the world,

where connections in combat were perhaps lost. For some, it involves seeking a never-ending variety of experiences, (actively engaging with life) others prefer a more specific focus (helping people) but all participants expressed the need to pursue purposeful, connective engagement of some kind. This desire drives and motivates them to pass something on reflecting hopes of a never-ending future, paradoxically in the knowledge of the finite nature of life.

Summary

The Survivor's Search for Connection consolidates participants' experience as they find ways to make sense of the self drawing on past, present and future. The theme is characterised by a sense of seeking and/or gaining interpersonal connection which perhaps provides some balance to the disconnection of the 'Oh Shit' Moment and Two Worlds Colliding as if coming full circle. Military history connects past and present, offering a meaningful narrative, consistent with their post-combat lifeworlds. This in turn invokes cultural myths to make sense of adversity and perhaps to manage the knowledge of human closeness to death through immortality. Their desire for purpose drives and motivates them to pass something on, perhaps reflecting hopes of a never-ending future, paradoxically in the knowledge of the finite nature of life. The theme arguably represents the participants' desire to infuse mortality with a sense of connection to life, potentially transcending physical destruction.

Analytic summary

This analysis sought to explore the experience of eight Paratroopers who have faced mortal peril yet have remained psychologically well, brought to life in their own words. Five super-ordinate themes emerging from their narratives provide an over-arching impression of what it is like to face death in combat, how this is managed and understood and the contrasting subsequent experiences/impact, all mediated by what it means to be a Para. The sub-ordinate themes nestling within the five main themes spotlight aspects of the whole, hopefully creating a rich and textured picture of their lived experience. In summary, death is encountered as an embodied

phenomenon, often experienced in temporal strangeness. The participants' unassailable group identity created and reinforced both in training and further on the battlefield, mediates the direct experience and the ways in which this is managed in the short and long-term aftermath. Changes to the self as a result of experience are reflected on through time and through a new lens of existence. Furthermore, these changes can transcend pre-'trauma' engagement with living, despite or perhaps because of their understanding of the darker side to life. Meaning-making reinforced via myth and purpose strengthens interpersonal connections perhaps seeking immortality in the hope of conquering rather than avoiding Man's greatest fear.

Discussion

Chapter overview

The issues of mortality are rarely more consistently or explicitly apparent to healthy individuals than on the battlefield. Despite the ever-changing nature of war, the threat of death is inescapable in active service. This may be particularly pertinent for Paras whose missions tend to expose them to a greater risk of dying. Further, it is argued that the experience of believing one is about to die is potent and distinct from the general threat of death in combat and thus warrants explicit investigation. Despite an extensive search, no research has been found specifically examining this. Thus, the current study aimed to explore the lived experience of nearly dying in combat and its impact on life thereafter. Five super-ordinate themes characterising the experience emerged: Identity, Tempering the Sword, Riding the Emotional Storm, The Tempered Self and The Survivor's Search for Connection.

The analysis was continually checked against the raw data, with some interpretations made throughout but intentionally remaining broadly within the Participants' experiences and meanings as evidenced by the data. Although IPA offers a co-construction between researcher and participants, the analytic journey perhaps reflects a participant emphasis. The discussion will now shift its focus towards the researcher's interpretations going beyond the data, illuminating and exploring an aftertaste of connection and disconnection arising from this analysis.

Although reflected throughout, this does not represent a new theme, more the flavour transcending the entire analytical journey. It is thus argued that for these Participants the findings may be interpreted as a series of attenuated and severed connections, re-connections and newly-created connections. They are sensed at both micro and macro levels of experience which it will be argued colour/characterise all themes and sub-themes. Thus, the current study's major findings are discussed alongside links to theory and previous research within this connection framework (summarised below).

While for clarity, it is presented here as a series of somewhat distinct processes, combat experience is messy, unpredictable and different for each individual. Nevertheless, for these Participants there appears to be a broad connection-disconnection portmanteau under which their experience can be viewed. In an attempt to reflect the fluid boundaries of this holistic messiness, the framework is considered an almost circular experience where themes cannot be said to start or finish in a particular place. A methodological critique is then presented alongside suggestions for future research. Implications for Counselling Psychology are also examined and a final reflexive summary precedes the study's conclusion. This discussion offers neither a theory, nor generalisable explanation. It is the researcher's subjective interpretation of these Participants' experiences gleaned from the analysis of their narratives.

Summary of the connection-disconnection journey

Pre-battle, (and even prior to joining the Paras) identity formation may be seen as a series of strengthening (and weakening) of intersubjective connections. In battle their narratives reflect attenuated and severed mental and physical connections at the moment of imminent death. In both the short and long-term aftermath they seem to encounter a process of reconnection through the themes which leads them back to a sense of an intrinsically interconnected lifeworld. However, potentially irreversible changes/disconnections also seem to be felt following their extreme experiences. While some severed connections may never be fully re-established (e.g. their temporal experience in relation to others), they appear to find new psychological connections to living which may compensate. Thus they are back in the world but are changed. Their experience and connections are now viewed and valued differently and hold new meanings (particularly reflected in themes 4 and 5; The Tempered Self and Survivor's Search for Connection). Thus they appear not simply to re-establish old connections, but to create new versions of them. This framework potentially offers a richer contextual understanding of PTG and thus indirectly its nemesis PTSD in relation to these Paras.

The next section will explore the Participants' connection-disconnection in more depth linking it to theory and research. Whilst touching briefly on most themes, it will prioritise those which either build on previous findings or offer new insight into the field of investigation.

Philosophy of trauma and disconnection

The work of Robert D. Stolorow (2007) has provided a philosophical and theoretical home for the connection-disconnection framework, which when interpreted through the eyes of the mentally well Participants (rather than Stolorow's traumatised individuals), remains valid and informative.

Stolorow (2007), influenced by Heidegger and Gadamer, believes that the core of emotional trauma lies in the cataclysmic loss of absolutes (or erroneous certainties) which allow us to maintain the illusion of a predictable, consistent world without which humans may struggle to function.

He proposes that the shattering of these absolutes which non-traumatised others take for granted (e.g. the assumption they will wake up in the morning) renders an individual exposed to the random, uncontrollable nature of an existence no longer guaranteed. Such a loss alongside significant temporal disruption renders their sense of being-in-the-world permanently changed. Unfettered access to aspects of being that fall way beyond the perspectives of others (whose absolutes remain intact) yields a feeling of isolation and disconnection (Stolorow, 2007).

Developmental trauma is understood as unbearable emotional affect within a relational process characterised by care-giver malattunement to such psychological pain (Stolorow, 1999). He extrapolates this idea to develop and understand this sense of alienation or disconnection surrounding emotionally traumatised adults, whose newfound view of existence-without-absolutes, lies so far outside the realm of others' understanding it is completely insulated from discussion.

He draws on the philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer as a framework for better understanding this concept. Manifest for Gadamer (1975/2013) is that all understanding is gleaned through the lens of interpretation - itself a product of the interpreter's historical context. The knowledge that the limits of others' experience can now never encompass their own, separates and excludes the traumatised from being understood. If a relational view of emotional trauma seats others' lack of understanding at its core, then this can only exacerbate the unbridgeable gulf between the traumatised and non-traumatised (Stolorow, 1999). The loss of life's absolutes creates a sense of two separate worlds in which the traumatised and non-traumatised reside. Thus, traumatic experience which is neither understood nor contained by another cannot be invalidated or confronted, leaving the individual in a permanently disconnected world of unbearable affect (Stolorow, 2007). The findings of the current study would seem to be consistent with Stolorow's propositions, despite exploring the experience of Paras who have encountered traumatic events but remained mentally well. This will now be discussed in more depth within the connection-disconnection framework.

The journey through theory and research

On the battlefield

This section explores the connections lost and potentially regained during the Participants' experiences on the battlefield in the context of previous research and theory.

It is argued both intra and intersubjective disengagement from the lifeworld is reflected in Tempering the Sword. In the 'Oh Shit' Moment there may be a psychological and even physical attenuation from everything previously experienced as fundamental to existence. This was revealed largely through their embodied experience cocooned within a distorted temporal perception. This is consistent with Noyes and Kletti's (1976) participants who reported an altered flow of time and a sense of being on autopilot, also mentioned by all eight Paras. Intra-

subjective disconnections manifested as a disruption to the everyday sense of mind/body unity characterised by an unfamiliar Cartesian duality. Temporal changes simultaneously shifted towards a disconnection from the intersubjective self, engendering a sense of being out of sync with everyone/everything around them. This is also reflected in their longer-term inter-subjective experience in The Tempered Self.

These findings may be considered within the context of phenomenological theorising of embodiment. In any phenomenological understanding of human experience, access to the world is granted only via the body, yet as Finlay (2006) highlights, it is noticeably absent from much phenomenological research. Notable exceptions identified the body as crucial to the development of PTG following critical illness (Hefferon, Grealy & Mutrie, 2010; McDonough, Sabiston & Ullrich-French, 2011). Its non-appearance in the literature review of this study highlights an initial lack of attention to the Participants as embodied beings, but its significant presence in their narratives commanded attention.

Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) proposed an ambiguity of bodily experience in the lifeworld (challenging the notion of dichotomy) between the sense of the body as intimately ours and the body as an object for others. The former (body-subject) is usually taken for granted, yielding an experience of being merged and inseparable from the world. The latter (body-object) is observed and objectified by others.

Finlay (2006) suggests individual awareness of body-object engenders a new sense of it as biological, contained matter. Toombs (1990) who explored the meaning of illness, noted the impact of ill-health on the body as an intense feeling of bodily alienation. This new 'objective' perspective draws attention to something previously beyond awareness, much like a stone in one's shoe bringing a previously ignored foot into focus. This seems consistent with this study's findings in the sub-theme Body of Evidence.

At the moment of perceived death, all Participants indicated a changed awareness from body-subject to body-object; the body controlled (weight pushing down); dissociation from body ('objective' awareness of burning flesh); mind/body split (mind talking about body; *"that's <u>you</u> on fire" [G17:595]*); and attempts to escape/reduce the body (digging into the earth/merging physically with others; "*I was digging my head up Bingo's arse" [C27:975]*).

It is further speculated that Toombs' bodily alienation may compound the sense of intersubjective alienation described by Stolorow (2007). This disconnection from the everyday mode-of-being emerged from six Participants' narratives when describing the experience of mortal peril. This is consistent with Noyes and Kletti's (1977) civilian participants' experience of facing death. Two Paras did not explicitly refer to this, but both described reverting to autopilot in the chaos and confusion of the moment, conceptualised by Noyes and Kletti (1976) as a disconnection from the world. However like Jensen's (2012) military participants, all eight Paras viewed their immediate shift to automaticity when under threat as crucial and life-saving and attributed it to their extreme training which they believed demonstrated their superiority. This would seem to reinforce in extremis, their Para identity as elite. Thus, Noyes and Kletti's (1976) assertion that depersonalisation represents a universal response to near-death is not entirely consistent with the Participants' descriptions.

The shift from body-subject to body-object was often juxtaposed with Participants' experience of time, manifesting as freezing, speeding up, stretching out, running out or disappearing. For Heidegger, temporality is fundamental to the meaning of existence, conceptualised as an indivisible harmony of past/present/future (Langdridge, 2007). Stolorow (2007) highlights the loss of temporal unity in trauma, often termed dissociation (or in the current study, disconnection) from the everyday flow between past and future. Thus it is conceivable that for these Paras, when multiple dimensions of existence (time, space, body) are all disrupted

(apparent in the 'Oh Shit' Moment), potentially traumatic disconnection manifests as significant embodied, temporal disruptions to the lifeworld. The body, the 'vehicle of being-in-the-world' is now perceived as an object which is facing destruction and perhaps represents the aforementioned ambiguity of embodied existence (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012 p.84).

Such perceived threat to self is widely regarded as a significant risk factor for PTSD (Iverson et al., 2008). Whilst making no generalised claim to challenge this it is inconsistent with the experience of these Participants. They faced the ultimate threat, believed they were about to die and yet emerged mentally well.

Alongside the immediate disconnections experienced in battle, there was a potential, longer-term re-connection to the experience of living. Here on the battlefield it seems that the Participants simultaneously encountered Deurzen's (2010 p.152) "essential reminder of life" or Yalom's (2011, p.31) "existential shock therapy" which is conceptualised as a significant part of the tempering process. This overlaps into the Tempered Self where Participants' Awareness highlighted the extensive potential for life, reflected in the Doors of Janus (both Open and Closed), connecting them more strongly to it.

Heavily influenced by Stolorow's (1999) philosophy, Carr (2013) described his clinical work with two Iraq war veterans, whose renewed awareness of being-towards-death and its accompanying anxiety seemed inescapable and whose temporal disruption and shattering of absolutes had rendered them severely traumatised. Without the means to reconnect in some meaningful way they had remained trapped and alienated. Carr provided a "relational home" (p.109) for the unbearable affect they bore by offering ways to reconnect via deeply felt intersubjective understanding.

The Participants' accounts indicated embodied temporal disconnection and shattering of absolutes (evident in Janus - Doors Open). However, it is possible that

their subsequent experiences facilitated the creation of contexts in which they not only made sense of themselves, but felt understood by and connected to others (which Carr's veterans ultimately experienced in therapy). In Stolorow's terms this might invalidate (or at least mediate) traumatic experience and consequences. I.e. the disconnections experienced on the battlefield and subsequently, seem to be accompanied by counterbalancing connections emerging after the battle and explored later.

Staying on the battlefield, the Participants' need to do their job whilst in harm's way led to a physical and psychological fight for survival. Moran et al. (2013) demonstrated that the way in which stress is managed may be key to traumatic outcomes. Super-ordinate theme 3 Riding the Emotional Storm illuminated aspects of the Participants' coping in battle (and beyond) arguably reflecting various ways in which they disconnected for survival, then began gradually reconnecting to themselves and others.

As indicated in previous research (Florian et al., 1995; Sundin et al., 2011; Hotopf et al., 2006) by assessing encounters as less threatening, the Participants may have reduced the levels of stress experienced during combat. Making Molehills out of Mountains represents the minimising and normalising of adverse events. The DSM-V includes a dissociative sub-type of PTSD resulting from overpowering experience from which one cannot escape, such as combat trauma (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Making Molehills arguably provided such an escape or disconnection from the enormity of their experiences which might otherwise have overwhelmed.

Interestingly, MacManus et al. (2014) found that less experienced reservists (more likely to interpret situations as threatening) suffered higher levels of mental health issues than regular troops. Routine exposure to significant adversity (in combat and throughout training) means these Paras were perhaps more able than reservists to normalise/minimise mortal peril to psychologically-manageable levels: "*You're worried about that? Why? Nobody's trying to kill you" [G19:652]*. Conceivably with

death as the baseline, everything else pales to insignificance. Making molehills might thus be regarded as a natural consequence of this baseline.

Although this study investigated encounters with highly traumatic events, adversity may be considered an unavoidable part of human existence. Findings from the 'Harvard Study of Adult Development' (Harvard/Grant Study) an on-going (75-year) longitudinal exploration into mental well-being and successful living[3] show that happiness does not result from avoiding trauma (Vaillant, 1995). The study identified four defence mechanisms characterising their most successful participants, who navigated life's inevitable challenges without significant psychological impairment. These mechanisms (broadly consistent with Bonanno's (2004) review of resilience-focused research) included: altruism, anticipation, suppression and humour.

The Paras' narratives reflected all four of these mechanisms: *Altruism* may be seen in their strong commitment to the group and willingness to die for their comrades: *"…if you do put yourself in life-threatening situations, it's to help your friends, not to leave your friends exposed or wounded*" [E6:202]. *Anticipation,* (conceptualised as emotional foresight into future/potential internal anxiety and the ability to prepare for that) emerged in the theme of Identity as Participants articulated the future potential for loss, injury and death (both their own and comrades') in terms of what it means to be a Para. Indeed the regimental motto 'Utrinque Paratus' perhaps dictates this.

Humour (specifically linked to managing adversity in the Harvard/Grant Study) is evident throughout the Paras' accounts emerging as a sub-theme of Riding the Emotional Storm via explicit descriptions and more implicitly via humorous narratives. These findings support Ford and Spalding (cited in Wolfe et al., 1993) who identified combat humour as a successful coping strategy and more generally,

[3] The Harvard/Grant study's notion of success is determined by a wide variety of subjective and more objective criteria, but ultimately described as their ability to adapt to life's unavoidable challenges (Vaillant, 1995).

Bonanno's (2004) review found laughter to be a factor contributing to resilience. The Para's distinctive dark wit appeared to offer connection at different levels. Where pre-battle it facilitates group bonding, reinforcing their identity as different/superior to others, on the battlefield it may re-strengthen connections to the group attenuated at critical moments of mortal threat as well as minimising the horror of annihilation. Consistent with Freud (1918/2010), laughing in the face of death allows the unspeakable to be processed in a manageable way.

Finally, the mechanism most strongly linked to successful adaptation in the Harvard/Grant Study was *Suppression*. Similar to Bonanno's (2004) repressive coping, suppression was expressed as stoicism where the most successful participants accepted the hand life dealt whilst ignoring the worst (Vaillant, 1995). Suppression is viewed as consistent with the current Participants' denial which is conceptualised as a functional (largely temporary) disconnection from a potentially unbearable 'reality'. Interestingly, Vaillant reports higher rates of mental health issues among those who did not employ suppression. The eight Paras' varying levels of denial in combat scenarios seemed to contribute to flexible (often unconscious), psychological management of exposure to horrendous events. In other words, appropriate psychological disconnection as required to cope, but which facilitated continued functioning. 'It won't happen to me' was expressed by most Participants, potentially supporting Freud's (1918/2010) theory that the unconscious acts as if immortal, unable to envisage its own death thus forming the basis for heroism where group ideals supersede individual survival.

This also supports Ford and Spaulding (cited in Wolfe et al., 1993) who identified denial as an effective coping mechanism in combat. For these Paras, denial appeared to facilitate the job of putting themselves in harm's way. "*If you do not believe that you will survive the day [] then you wouldn't have the guts to walk out of camp" [G9:301]*. Further, it enabled them to endure almost unimaginable levels of exposure to annihilation. Yet this is not an unexpected finding. Many commentaries on life, death or mortal threat encompass the concept of denial (Freud, 1918/2010; Becker, 1997;

Heidegger, 1927/2010) suggesting it occupies a fundamental space in human existence.

However, it is argued that far greater levels of denial may be required to function in combat where the raison d'être is kill or be killed (whilst still assuming one will live to see another day), than in the context of going shopping. Heidegger captures the essence of ambiguity in human acknowledgement of death, between knowing and not knowing; "…with the idle talk of the 'they': One also dies sometime, but for the time being, not yet" (Heidegger, 1927/2010 p.256). This ambiguity emerges in the Participants' accounts of their own tussle: "*You don't actually accept it. In a way you do" [G8:279].*

This study revealed not only the role of denial but something of the contextual nature of its moveable boundaries and variable strength. This may be understood as a metaphorical tug-of-war, a strengthening/weakening of their connection to 'reality'. TMT (Greenberg et al., 1990) offers an interesting perspective within the connection-disconnection framework for understanding the Participants' battlefield experience and perhaps encapsulates denial's shifting boundaries in action.

Wong and Tomer (2011) proposed that the greater the exposure to death, the greater the suppression/denial (consistent with TMT). This may have been experienced to some extent by the Participants. However it appears that at the perceived moment of death, individual Participants disconnected from all denial, simultaneously connecting to a horrific 'reality' leaving them exposed to Becker's (1997) notion of their monstrous destiny. Although speculative, at that moment they were perhaps overwhelmed by a sense of existential isolation - the knowledge that each occupies a world uniquely known to them (Yalom, 2011). While this seems to contradict TMT theory, when the threat was experienced as a group, denial strengthened: "*it wasn't a thought about <u>dying</u>…[]…it was let's take these bastards on"[C28:1029].*

While their personal resources may have been diminished through aforementioned disconnections in combat, for these Paras it is argued that the prior strengthening of connections (via group bonding and training) offered psychological protection and further, facilitated subsequent strengthening/re-connection to the group.

For some Participants, denial's disconnection from 'reality' seemed to wax and wane so that for a period of time after experiencing mortal peril, those low on denial in combat were often on high alert (raised awareness) to the possibility of death at any moment and described taking steps to minimise risk. In a short space of time denial regrouped as Participants reported a gradual return to the everyday sense of control/predictability, sidelining knowledge of their ultimate vulnerability. This appeared critical for physical and psychological functioning in a messy military world, enduring its constant threat. However although denial partially regrouped, it appears that for these Paras a complete return to ignorant bliss has been unattainable. This is reflected in The Tempered Self's sub-theme Raised Awareness, itself exposing Participants to further connection and disconnection post-combat.

Facing death on the battlefield may be considered a part of the Paras' job. Yalom (1991) like Becker (1997) frames a willingness to die for one's country in the context of meaning, where acts of heroism are themselves timelessly meaningful and immortal, ultimately reinforcing connections to something greater than the individual via Para identity and group membership. Their ineluctable sense of superiority to others also supports Yalom's (1991, p.149) "irrational sense of specialness" protecting against death terror and offering a greater understanding of these Paras' ability to do "*incredibly dangerous and ridiculous things"* [F4:126].

This idea is consistent with TMT where maintaining self-esteem/stable cultural worldview, achieved through membership of the Paras then reinforced in combat, is

conceived of as buffering against death anxiety (Greenberg et al., 1990). Similarly, Yalom (2011 p.117) understands death anxiety as afflicting those whose culture has failed to protect them against "the icy chill of mortality". Moreover in the face of raised awareness (mortality-salience), pro-cultural behaviours for Paras (e.g. never giving up, willingness to face death, coping under extreme duress) were all maintained if not enhanced, not only in battle but in the longer-term aftermath of daily life. This supports Berg and Soeters (2009) and Wong and Tomer (2011) who found increased pro-cultural behaviours in the face of greater mortality salience. Such salience potentially facilitated the Participants' new, heightened connections to a sharper 'reality' emerging on the battlefield, but with implications for life thereafter. Indeed Alex described the "*monkey on your back*" [A7:226] reflecting the unrelenting drive to live up to the Regiment's core values decades after leaving.

According to TMT, long-term maintenance of such behaviours, increased at times of significant duress (notable during Alex's later fight with cancer) potentially facilitates stronger connection/reconnection to their cultural worldview. This might render it and them more stable as a result, perhaps offering a better understanding of these Paras' ongoing psychological well-being. The long-term strengthening of their worldview is also further reflected in The Survivor's Search for Connection via historical context, purposefulness and drawing on myth discussed below in Connecting the Circle.

To summarise, most Participants described a shift in defences from Freud's (1918/2010) complete denial of mortality through to Sartre's (2003) reminder of life and Yalom's (2011, p.31) 'existential shock therapy', a place where the knowledge of death is confronted and inescapable, educed by brutal experience which can no longer support total denial. The disruption of their experience has perhaps shifted the balance from Heidegger's everyday-mode-of-being towards the ontological.

Riding the Emotional Storm yielded one further way in which Participants coped on the battlefield. Previous research has attempted to identify factors protective against mental health issues in combat. Active coping emerged as one such

mechanism from several studies (Florian et al., 1995; Everly et al., 2012; Wolfe et al., 1993; Sutker et al., 1995) and also beyond the battlefield facilitating PTG in cancer survivors (McDonough, Sabiston & Ullrich-French, 2011).

Jensen and Wrisberg's (2014) qualitative investigation into close-quarters killing in combat yielded the themes 'fall to your training' and 'the training takes over'. This seems supported by the current study's sub-theme Taking Action, where the Paras (trained never to give up) always do something under any circumstance. Furthermore, Jensen and Wrisberg's theme 'flip the switch' suggests that a shift to problem-focused coping strategies may distract from the perceived situational threat, a beneficial consequence of Taking Action described by Participants in the current study. Under threat in combat, their embodied firing up into action seems accompanied by a psychological quietening. Their resources were perhaps diverted appropriately for survival; physically they needed enhancement via adrenaline and energy, balanced psychologically by managing, reducing or disconnecting from overwhelming feelings and thoughts. Further one may speculate that taking action following a near-death encounter may begin to facilitate the psychological sense of 'reconnection' of mind/body, experienced dualistically by most Participants at the moment of perceived death.

After the battle

Yalom (2011) proposed that those who do not manage to grasp life in the knowledge of death usually cope via denial, avoidance or detachment. After the battle the Participants do not appear to have extrapolated denial of death inappropriately into aspects of ongoing life. Further, their notable acknowledgement of life's random fragility suggests previous denial levels were never fully re-established. Their narratives reveal an acceptance of the finite nature of being and the impact this knowledge has had on their lives. This seems consistent with Vaillant's (1995) findings relating to suppression. Like the successful participants of the Harvard/Grant study, all eight Paras managed challenging events without recourse to inappropriate disconnection from daily life through the denial of death. Although their narratives reveal that some sense of difference and

perhaps alienation in the lifeworld remains, seven Participants talked explicitly about close relationships and all appeared to have preserved their relational capacity for being human:

> *She's my conscience, she's the person with the integrity and the balance and I'm the person that goes out and makes things happen…there's a lovely kind of symbiosis. [F25:903]*

Although Participants seemed to disconnect sufficiently to survive severe adversity (psychologically), their ability to reconnect in various ways perhaps allowed them to move forwards to create successful lives, rather than feeling trapped in a traumatic past.

Apart from Denial, the ways in which Participants coped through the emotional storm of combat do seem to have been maintained beyond the battlefield through the connective processes of Humour and Taking Action and the disconnection of Making Molehills out of Mountains.

Maintenance of Molehills in life post-battle is most noticeable. As discussed above, the benefits in combat are apparent. However, the Participants' tendency to normalise such adverse events and further, incorporate the strategy more broadly into their ongoing lives seems consistent with Lomsky-Feder's (1995) hypothesis that Yom Kippur war veterans viewed their combat experiences from a non-crisis perspective due to the macro/social context in which war was defined for them. The powerful cultural context of Paras can perhaps be seen as creating a similarly non-crisis view of traumatic events in war, then extrapolated to the everyday.

The Paras' cultural context (or hero-system in Becker's (1997) view), created during training and perpetuated through Regimental myth, views extreme adversity, hardship and threat to life as not only inevitable, but as something through which they can prove themselves, transcending everyday human responses to adversity. On the battlefield, Ewan describes (almost nonchalantly) having to walk unaided to

obtain medical help, burned and bleeding heavily with shrapnel from a Falklands bomb blast in his legs and back; *"…they had to sort of take the shrapnel out and cut up, without any anaesthetic which was painful but I mean they got* [it] *out"* [E14:482]. After the battle, as the analysis showed, all Participants view this non-crisis perspective (nurtured culturally, then consolidated through their encounters with mortal peril) as a huge advantage in life. Without the meaning invested in dying from their cultural perspective, death would be futile and thus potentially unbearable.

Bonnano's (2004) review of research investigating factors augmenting resilience highlighted a belief in personal agency as a contributing factor, a strong sense of which was apparent in all Participants' accounts; *"I can just about do anything at this point" [D4:147]*. Their enhanced ability to manage everyday adversity after wrestling with death in combat may facilitate such agency and greater proactive connection to a life where there seems less to fear, itself continuing to feed the sense of personal agency. This also potentially reinforces ongoing connection to and maintenance of group ideals. After the extremes of the battlefield, further brushes with mortality are taken in their stride (for example in Alex's approach to beating cancer).

While the Participants' coping strategies may mediate the impact of adversity, they do not eradicate it. Their narratives reveal both gains and losses (through the Doors of Janus) often resulting from their experiences and their responses to them.

A central finding in this study emerged as a sub-theme of super-ordinate theme The Tempered Self. All Participants' Raised Awareness arose from exposure to mortal threat, possibly as a consequence of the loss of denial. This theme yielded a parallel experience of connection and disconnection in all Participants, apparent in the longer-term aftermath of nearly dying. Their newly raised awareness exposed them to disconnections from the everyday mode of living, by disrupting the sense of indelible connection to the lifeworld as proposed by Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012),

their spatial presence within it and their temporal understanding of it. Their entire experience of existence had shifted in some way.

Previous research has highlighted the importance of reconnecting/reintegrating with the social world (Florian et al., 1995; Brewin et al., 2000). Browne et al.'s (2007) findings indicate difficulties in doing so are potentially predictive of PTSD and other psychological challenges, although Linley and Joseph (2004) suggest perceptions of social support may be linked to both PTSD and PTG. The sub-theme Doors of Janus - Open has reflected the more negative aspects of the longer-term aftermath. For example, the aforementioned strengthening of these Paras' cultural worldview may have contributed to their post-combat sense of detachment.

Their narratives support this ongoing disconnection from the lifeworld they previously inhabited and to some extent the people within it who cannot know what they now know. This invokes Stolorow's (2007) proposition of the loss of life's absolutes, sense of alienation from others; "*they see themselves living to 105" [G23:791]* and temporal disruption; "*you're moving at 100 miles an hour" [G23:788].* Once the Participants returned home, they described an enhanced sense of difference to others, already positively emphasised in Identity, but here echoes of Two Worlds Colliding were experienced individually and sustained over time. References to life's unpredictability and certainty of death arose throughout all accounts; *"…it could <u>end</u>……at any moment. <u>Really</u>" [D15:548].*

The difficulties of managing others' absolute certainty, plus the temporal misalignments with individuals with whom they were formerly in tempo, contributed to an ongoing sense of intersubjective estrangement from the once-familiar world. This supports Lomsky-Feder's (1995) second major finding which exposed challenging phenomenological shifts in Israeli veterans' post-combat experience. Upon returning to society, life was imbued with a sense of strangeness within the familiar. This emphasised the Paras' reintegration challenges and perhaps further illuminated their ongoing commitment to other Paras. Indeed TMT (Greenberg et al., 1990) predicts negative outcomes for cohesive group disruption

(such as homecoming) and in combat supported anecdotally by Major General Chip Chapman (C. Chapman, personal communication, October, 25 2013).

This sense of disconnection from the social has also been examined in Schuetz's article 'The Homecomer' in which he explored the notion of separation and its disruption to the flow of relationships within time and space. With particular reference to war veterans, Schuetz identifies the returning soldier's shift between two realities of war and home where "each homecomer has tasted the magic fruit of strangeness" (Schuetz, 1944 p.375).

The current Participants revealed a sense of this in the sub-theme Doors of Janus – Open; *"…from sort of battlefield to Tescos" [H21:763].* Schuetz also describes the potential for war to destroy social knowledge (akin to Stolorow's (2007) absolutes) which is taken for granted and from which like these Participants, they are now excluded/disconnected. This is potentially reinforced by their new understanding of existential isolation, perhaps gained at the moment of perceived death, which may never be erased; "*…my <u>world</u> became very insular" [B7:229].* Thus they now live with the raw knowledge of life's fragility and perhaps some awareness of such isolation within the world of others.

The challenge of reintegration did not apply within the in-group (Paras). Indeed the desire and ability only to talk to their own emerged from most Participants' accounts; "*they got it out of their system to empathic listeners because they were there" [H21:756]* - empathy of the in-group offering the much-needed understanding in a shared rather than alien reality.

This could be interpreted as creating a paradoxical cycle, whereby connections to the in-group, strengthened through training, then in combat due to enhanced pro-cultural behaviours (and thus anxiety-buffering self-esteem), perhaps fed the sense of disconnection and alienation from their former lifeworld into which they then had to reintegrate. In so-doing, they remained somewhat phenomenologically estranged, thus leaning back towards the familiar for protection, understanding and

a meaningful existence. This may highlight a circular tussle for the Participants in homecoming, rather than a permanent sense of being. Despite the lasting taste of Schuetz's 'strange fruit', in returning to the social world, all Participants found ways to reintegrate, create meaningful lives and remain mentally well.

Despite the disconnections resulting from Participants' knowledge of life's fragility, their narratives yielded an overarching flavour of confidence and opportunity rather than doom, consistent with Frankl's (2004 p.139) notion of "tragic optimism". They have turned suffering into achievement and challenging emotional experiences into meaningful connections, not least into an enhanced zest for living.

Indeed, Deurzen (2010 p.153) ascribes to "life's natural balancing mechanism" and nowhere is this potentially more relevant than in the Participants' newly-raised awareness. While suffering disconnections, they simultaneously describe a new connection to life, itself the result of the explicit knowledge that life yields death, as Deurzen proposed. Becker's (1997) cultural hero-systems offer an understanding of the way in which these Participants have managed to tread the line between a new striving for life in the face of significantly enhanced death salience – a potentially paralysing position which they appear to have transcended.

They live with the paradox of strongly reinforcing connections to the life that will ultimately kill them. This drive can be seen quite explicitly in seven Participants' accounts in sub-theme Doors of Janus - Closed manifesting as a sense of Carpe Diem. As Yalom (2011) proposed, new understanding of the inevitable destruction wrought by death appears to have invested their will to live (whatever time they may have) with renewed vigour and urgency. *"I see <u>everything</u> as a positive opportunity" [G27:936].* This sense of making the most of life may feed into the experiences reflected in the sub-theme Creating Purpose, enlarged upon below.

While this study did not specifically set out to investigate PTG (and Participants did not complete Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1996) Posttraumatic Growth Inventory), themes emerging from the Participants' accounts indicate a subjective feeling of

growth beyond the pre-battle sense of self. Whilst this could be viewed simply as optimism; taking a positive view to shelter from the negative, this sense of growth has been maintained over many years (between 8 and 30) and appears integrated into the fabric of their being. Further, they describe enhancement in all but one of Tedeschi and Calhoun's domains of growth (spiritual development being the exception).

Research suggests that both PTSD and PTG may share variables and predictors (Linley & Joseph, 2004; Updegraff & Taylor, 2000) and further that the two may co-exist within the same individual (Solomon et al., 1999). Indeed most Participants described experiencing at least three of the main symptoms of PTSD at some point; disconnection, hyper-arousal and difficulties expressing loving feelings as described by Conway (2013). However they also indicate in a variety of explicit and implicit ways that experiencing extreme adversity has shaped the men they have become: *"If I hadn't been through that then I wouldn't be the person I am now…" [D16:585].*

Doors of Janus - Open revealed some of the psychological challenges the Participants faced in the aftermath of combat. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) believe that it is perhaps the distress itself which stimulates PTG. Indeed similar to paratrooper training (which stretches the boundaries of human potential but does not break them), Butler et al. (2005) proposed that some disruption to psychological balance (but which does not overwhelm) may promote PTG. It is argued that these Paras' accounts revealed significant disruption to their sense of self-in-the-world, but given their longer-term mental well-being, it seems they were not overwhelmed.

Tedeschi and Calhoun's (2004) observation that growth occurs not from trauma itself, but from the struggle to adapt to their new worldview, may also broaden our understanding of why PTG may develop over time (Dekel et al., 2011) as individuals process experiences at their own pace. The current Participants appear to encounter a new post-combat perspective alongside some very real challenges adapting to it. Thus despite Levine et al.'s (2009) findings that resilient individuals

may experience less growth, it seems plausible that the adaptive struggle in their strange new world was sufficient to elicit a strong sense of growth in these Paras, sustained over time.

Interestingly, normalising trauma responses is one area identified by Tedeschi and McNally (2011) for enhancing PTG in U.S. troops. As demonstrated in Making Molehills, this study's Paras normalise (and minimise) almost as a matter of course. It is thus conceivable that viewing their traumatic encounters as falling within the spectrum of 'normal' has facilitated their experience of PTG.

Seven Participants described explicit changes to self-perception emerging in the sub-theme Rite of Passage and all eight through The Texture of Time following their encounters with mortal peril; enhanced confidence, agency and self-control all surfaced following extreme adversity. Fontana and Rosenheck (1998) linked such changes (particularly those eliciting a sense of self-improvement) to PTG. Although arguably an intrinsic aspect of Para identity (developed and reinforced in training), self-improvement seems consolidated via experience. They have transcended the growth achieved by becoming a paratrooper - considerable in itself. Most Participants had questioned whether they could square up to death; "*it wasn't until I got to Iraq where I faced some…[]…close-on <u>combat</u> that I thought I'd answered that question" [B18:652]*. Furthermore, their self-belief, burgeoning with experience appears to have been carried over into dealing with subsequent challenges - consistent with Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996); confidence breeds confidence.

Connecting the Circle

"History and mythology are replete with people's attempts to mitigate the isolation of dying" (Yalom, 2011 p.122).

The Tempered Self has highlighted a reconnection to life, explored further in the theme Survivor's Search for Connection and whose sub-themes are intricately interconnected. They offer a richer understanding of the ways in which this reconnection is made. Myth and history create a meaningful bridge between the

disconnected past, present and future. This may help Participants to confront and make sense of their lives moving forwards, forging fresh links to others, facilitated through a newfound compassion, drive for purpose and understanding in the wake of their encounters with mortality. It is speculated that the threads of myth silently infiltrate their entire experience providing connections that complete the circle, potentially one of the components making the difference between traumatic alienation and belonging.

The emergence of myth as a theme was unexpected hence its omission from the literature review. Despite an extensive search, there appear to be no previous studies exploring myth and mortal peril in combat, although the military is clearly steeped in ritual, myth and legend. Thus myth in the current study is largely set in the context of relevant sociological literature.

Evidence suggests that for millennia, humans have been myth-making, imagining worlds beyond their own and have sought to make meaning by creating contexts greater than life as they know it (Armstrong, 2006). Myths thus present a broader setting for reflecting upon the unthinkable (mortality), containing the chaos of 'reality', offering sense and order, values and meaning.

The work of mythologist Joseph Campbell, offers an interesting backdrop to the Participants' experiences. Campbell argued that mythology connects humankind to the experience of existence and tells them what it means (Young, 2004). It gives expression to psychological life, serving sociological and psychological purpose. The former endorses a society's moral order, connecting individuals to society's ends and where heroes, Campbell (1949/2008) suggests, are crucial for embodying the values of a world-order, providing the impetus for ongoing existence.

Campbell argued that myths potentially expand our horizons (Young 2004) and proposed three forms of access to contexts beyond the individual; the myth itself, the personal experience of the story and finally through myth's image and symbolism. Whilst Campbell was criticised for his interpretations of myths as

reflecting inward, psychological journeys (Jacobs, 2004), from a phenomenological perspective they might be conceptualised as psychological processes within the intersubjective world. Campbell (1949/2008) believed all myths across time and traditions to be underpinned by a monomyth, with one basic structure (departure, transformation, return). As such, the monomyth as a guide to inner life out-in-the-world seems plausible - a universal structure which leaves room for individual experience and interpretation within a lifeworld inexorably connected to others.

The findings of this study seem consistent with Campbell's three points of access. 1. The pre-existing Regimental myth contributes to the Participants' determination to become Paras, defines who they want to be, who they become and strengthens commitment to the group. 2. The story then achieves tangible form - a fusing of myth and man through active service, ritual and ceremony; essentially an embodiment of the greater context, transcending expectations: "*It wasn't that long ago I was a brick layer. I was firing at this Argie plane thinking 'if only my mum and dad could see me now" [C16:558].* They are now part of the myth; "…*what was a story <u>before</u> is now a part of my <u>life</u>" [C31:1127].* When in battle and faced with mortality, it may also offer psychological containment against the terror of death, such that high-level functioning may continue. 3. Campbell's final step beyond the individual is achieved through the image and symbolism of the distinctive, hard-won uniform, through medals and traditions unique to the Regiment.

In the post-battle managing of traumatic encounters, the role of myth remains significant. Myth may re-draw connections lost; "*I can look back and tie myself to historical events" [B22:797]* and reinforce Participants' renewed connection to life. The importance of ceremonies, memorials and remembering emerged throughout their accounts. When Alex describes the unusually emotional response from his men, unable to sing in the cemetery, it is as if they are as one with their forefathers. They are now merged with the Regimental myth via shared experience, thus feel the suffering and loss as their own.

For the current Participants, the sociological function may be fulfilled through the Army-level myth to which its soldiers become connected and which is underpinned/reinforced by the regimental system. This huge hierarchy transports them through space and time, linking them to the story of battles won and lost, deeds of heroism and occasionally cowardice; retreats from disaster, charges to victory; flags and traditions, the nation defended; battles of the Empire, the squares of Waterloo; and the Thin Red Line. This connects them to the tradition of British soldiers, outnumbered but refusing to give way to the advancing enemy. They embody the values and moral order of the Army and have the potential for joining the pantheon of heroes.

The psychological function of myth serves to guide the living of human life under any circumstance, propelling us through important life-stages of change and crises (Campbell, 1964). The current Participants are steeped in Regimental myth reflected in the theme Identity, plus multiple references to popular culture and to historical military events and people to which/whom they now feel connected. Nowhere is the need for managing life in any circumstance more apparent than in combat. Campbell (1964) argues myths carry us beyond experience into the unknown. For Paras, myth's psychological function may thus be crucial, for whom leaping into the dark unknown, into enemy territory is just the start. The Para myth celebrates battling against hopeless odds, taking on superior enemy forces with surprise, determination and elan and holding on till the bitter end where others retreat.

The controversial French novelist Houellebecq highlights the void left by the 18th Century Western shift away from mythical traditions towards science, citing a recent resurgence of religion as filling the existential emptiness of Enlightenment man (Schofield, 2014). Carl's connection with Regimental myth exemplified through multiple references to popular culture and British/paratrooper military history may have been particularly pertinent as the raw realities of war had severed connections to his faith; "*When I went to the Falklands I gave up my religion" [C1:35].* Without religion, myth perhaps helps Carl fill the existential emptiness by connecting to

others in order to make sense of and contain his horrendous experiences as part of something greater than himself. The role of Myth in quietening the noise of death-salience is reinforced via strengthened connections to his forefathers reflected in Making Sense of Self in Historical Context.

Pushing the boundaries of existence, myth lights the way ahead towards more meaningful living, perhaps engendering the Participants' new sense of purpose. This is consistent with their group identity and ideals which themselves connect back to the Regimental myth. There are interesting parallels between myth and Becker's (1997) concept of the cultural hero-system. Both offer a greater context in which to make sense of themselves and their experience, thus helping to contain a fundamental anxiety and maintain good mental health. At times of crises such as mortal peril, they may engage more keenly with myth, also consistent with TMT (Wong & Tomer, 2011).

Previous research has highlighted the protective nature of purposeful activity and Sutker et al. (1995) suggested that highly committed individuals embody a sense of purposefulness that helps them find meaning in life and protects against battle stress. After traumatic encounters, it seems the overlapping of myth, history and group identity may powerfully reinforce the Participants' commitment and connection to life, to death and often to the cause, engendering a desire for purpose and meaning. Yalom (2011) points to the strong links between death terror and the feeling of not having lived life to the full. We have already seen the impact of the Participants' Raised Awareness in Janus Doors Closed where an enhanced connection to living engenders a dislike of time-wasting and a desire to make the most of life. Their desire for purpose may be seen as an extension of this.

It is the theme of Identity however, which completes the circle of these Paras' entire experience, through which they ultimately reconnect ties broken in trauma. It is the lens through which they view the world, a lens which offers strength and protection in life but which also renders them explicitly vulnerable to physical death. It is consistent with both Tajfel's (1987) in-group identity and Becker's

cultural hero-systems where reinforcing the in-group through psychological and physical means, serves to enhance self-esteem and protect against the fundamental human terror of death.

> *We did absolutely and wholeheartedly believe that we were immortal, we were the best and nobody in the world could touch us…that's what you need with stormtroopers. [F3:110]*

This identity predates individual existence and lives on beyond individual demise as the dead join the ranks of the Group Immortal. It offers a meaningful context which creates understanding and maintains a sense of order in a world of chaos experienced after exposure to mortal peril. History, myth and purpose form a virtuous circle with identity, continually reinforcing the notion of connection to others and as Felix highlighted, to immortality, potentially mitigating disconnections of traumatic experience. Identity pre and post-dates physical existence - no start and no end, invoking the image of the Ancient Egyptian 'Ouroboros' depicted as a snake continually devouring its own tail. The Ouroboros symbolises the cyclical nature of the universe; from destruction comes creation, life from death. It maintains unity in everything, creating an everlasting cycle of destruction, recreation and immortality (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2014). For these Paras, this offers a connection to others in any circumstance, even in the shadow of the Grim Reaper.

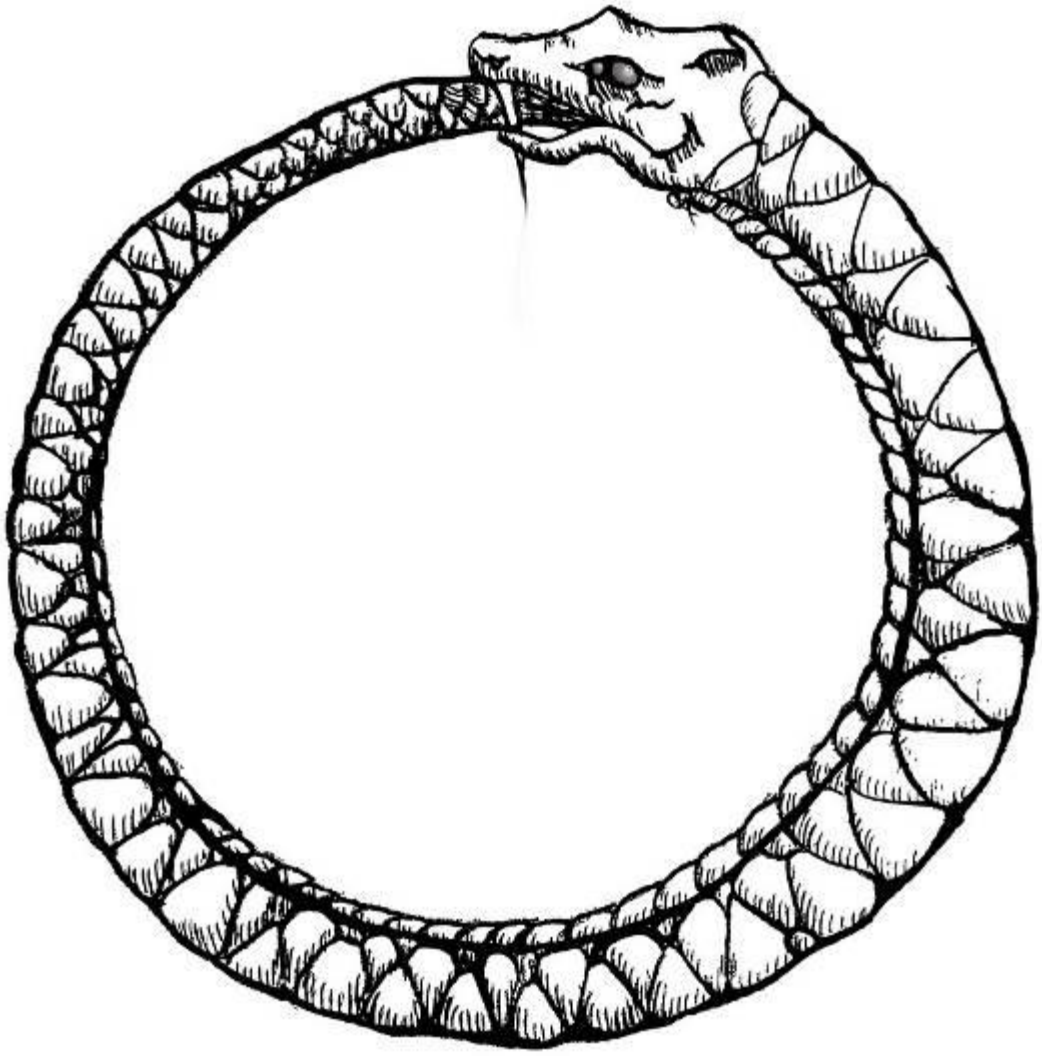

Figure 5: The Ouroboros

Methodological critique and reflexivity

Some limitations of this research were highlighted in the Methods chapter and this section will consider their potential impact in action during the research process.

The intensity of Para identity (and the Participants' preservation of it) raises the possibility of positive bias. Indeed several Participants when asked about any personal impact initially said there was none (positive or negative). However, as the interviews unfolded less polarised positions emerged naturally from different strands of narrative both explicitly and implicitly. Their minimising/normalising coping strategy may also contribute to positively-biased accounts. However, given its role it might be considered a finding not a bias.

A potential researcher bias towards the positive was also addressed by re-examining all transcripts for negative impact interpreted as positive. Although significantly fewer instances of negative aftermath emerged, they were present nonetheless and it is hoped represented fairly in the analysis. Furthermore, since the Participants' accounts revealed a long-term, integrated sense of growth via experience in the presence of positive and negative events (without apparently contradictory data), it is perhaps incongruous within a phenomenological framework to suggest otherwise, when self-perceptions as positively changed seem assimilated into their self-image and sense of being-in-the-world.

The issue of language as the mediator/interpreter of experience in IPA was addressed earlier. While the difficulties of putting traumatic raw experience into words is acknowledged, the Participants expressed themselves through various means including metaphor, which it is felt enriched understanding of their traumatic encounters. Tedeschi and McNally's (2011) exploration of interventions enhancing PTG in U.S. soldiers found metaphor in story-telling facilitated expression of complex experiences.

Interpretative phenomenology, arguably contradictory, is criticised for not being truly phenomenological. As Gadamer (1975/2013) suggests, understanding (i.e. describing) is an interpretative process, thus experience delivered through the lens of interpretation is changed. However humans express and make sense via language. While there are some experiences which may be simply 'felt' and not interpreted (perhaps listening to music) most engender interpretation and sense-making (Spinelli, 2005). For some this raises questions around validity. However IPA does not claim to capture the truthful essence of a universal experience (if indeed such a thing exists); rather it gets as close to the interpreted experience as possible, where interpretation is arguably a part of that experience. Although imperfect, language perhaps offers the best route to understanding experience which might otherwise be abandoned as a lost research cause. It just cannot be cast as the 'Truth'. The debate about whether language reflects or constructs experience will likely continue. However, if language constructs experience, it must surely be considered part of a valid route to understanding it.

This research required some Participants to recall events across three decades. Memory recall may be variable, subject to interpretation and possible degradation. Thus it could be argued that IPA investigates memory of experience rather than experience itself, an issue which appears currently unresolved. However, if considered representations of participants' experiences without inference about truth or reality, J. Smith views analysis of such narratives as valid in IPA (personal communication November 14, 2014).

The findings were not cross-validated by the Participants. Although potentially strengthening rigour, Giorgi (2008) and Langdridge (2007) highlight concerns over the utility of such feedback including the inaccessibility of academic analysis to individuals unfamiliar with the methodology and participants' discomfort when giving critical feedback. I explored my themes/findings within my IPA group who have an academic understanding but no combat experience.

However, Lt. Col. Peter Jensen, a US Special Forces veteran and Director of the US Center for Enhanced Performance at West Point (United States Military Academy), critiqued the analysis chapter. Since his own PhD employed existential phenomenological analysis and he was specifically asked to be critical, it is felt both aforementioned concerns were addressed.

To summarise, inter alia, he noted that the analysis 'resonated deeply' with his own experiences and recognised some sub-themes (such as Molehills) within his own participants' narratives to which he had not previously given conscious thought. This arguably offers some validation to this study's findings from an external source with appropriate combat and academic experience.

Finally, Willig (2011) points out that no single qualitative approach can illuminate human experience in its entirety. While IPA offers rich accounts, there is no attempt to explain experience (Willig, 2008) so the findings are necessarily limited. With hindsight, Grounded Theory might have illuminated the social processes behind the Paras' experiences as a group. Furthermore, a discourse analysis of the unexpectedly rich data could have also yielded some interesting findings (in particular concerning the linguistically-constructed nature of group identity and its tension with the individual). Ultimately though, a detailed examination of their lived experience seems best served through IPA, offering insight into a phenomenon which affects many soldiers and more broadly the general population. The findings may also inform future research discussed below.

Personal reflexive overview

A major concern throughout the research process was ensuring that my own experience was not imposed on that of the Participants. Although IPA is acknowledged as a co-construction of meaning - my interpretation of the Participants' sense-making (Smith, 2009), fundamentally the research explored their experience not mine. However, my own journey alongside them through the process was unavoidable but illuminating. The findings caused me to reflect

differently on my experiences and deepened my understanding of the past and its huge impact on how I encounter life now. Prior to this research I had not considered the impact of nearly dying on the ways in which I have lived my life since, both through the challenges and choices I have encountered and made. Furthermore I had no explicit understanding of the transformative and unfolding nature of my experience. My own journey through life to date was given a context which was not surprising, but finally made sense. Although the nature of the experience itself was entirely different to those of the Participants, the underpinning structural similarities were striking. From the ways of coping, the disconnections and connections and the significance of engaging with a vivid existence, I feel I have finally been able to understand a long complicated process bringing me to the present day. All humans are unique and thus will inevitably encounter their own journey. Making sense of that journey is equally helpful and challenging as the past is confronted from a different, but enlightening perspective.

Suggestions for future research

Although this study's sample was small and purposive and did not seek generalisable results, fruitful new research avenues have emerged:

The findings suggest an exploration of the use of myth and story-telling within individual and group therapy contexts might build on the work of Stolorow (2009) and Carr (2013), where interpersonal connections may be enhanced between traumatised individuals. Myth may provide a framework to help such individuals to make sense of the challenges they have faced and ways in which they might do this, potentially offering a view beyond the alienation of trauma.

An exploration of the female perspective of mortal peril is potentially interesting. This study's sample was all-male as there are no female paratroopers. Both the increasing number of female soldiers and the exposure of the general female population to mortal threat (assault, accident, diagnoses), suggests a gender-based

investigation might elicit a different understanding with implications for an insightful Counselling Psychology approach to traumatised female clients.

The same questions may be addressed with Paras who survived combat but suffered permanent physical injury, to explore whether well-being/growth is still experienced by those living with detrimental physical consequences of war and its impact on identity.

The reduction in size of the British Army is leading to the disbanding of traditional regiments, a potent source of myth and history. The findings of this study suggest that such changes may be detrimental to soldiers' mental and physical health and potentially military performance; research suggests very different rates of mental ill-health between the differently-structured US and British armies (MacManus et al., 2014). Further qualitative research focusing on the role of myth in soldiers' wellbeing, supported and played out through the regimental system might illuminate areas for quantitative investigation.

Finally, the idea that resilience and growth can flourish through adversity emerged from this research, supporting previous findings (Vaillant, 1995; Tedeschi & McNally, 2011). Further, given the nature of military resilience training, it is plausible that some adversity enhances resilience. In her keynote speech at the BPS DCoP 2014 conference, Professor Tanya Byron highlighted the damaging effect of our increasingly risk-averse society on the mental health of adolescents. Whilst there is no suggestion of deliberately subjecting Britain's youth to trauma, there may be merit in exploring the benefits of challenging environments. Indeed two Participants highlighted the potential for adventure training programmes to enhance resilience.

Implications for practice

While these Participants have maintained good mental health, others are not so fortunate. Although the military provides mental healthcare, therapists may still

meet ex-soldiers in clinical settings where it is proposed the findings of this study might inform a more holistic understanding and interaction in accordance with the aims and values of Counselling Psychology. Thus such insight might facilitate a more authentic therapeutic encounter. One of the challenges facing traumatised individuals (in particular soldiers) is a lack of understanding separating them from others. It is hoped this research can provide initial steps towards bridging that divide.

It seems plausible that we have much to learn from these Paras, who have successfully wrestled the human fear of death and traumatic encounters into more manageable forms without resorting to dysfunctional suppression and detachment from living. Recognising and understanding the potential for growth alongside trauma may render therapists better positioned to help broaden and enrich the horizons of traumatised individuals who believe the most likely (or only) outcome following trauma is negative. Furthermore, some of the ways in which these Participants coped (for example through humour and taking action) support other research findings and may provide helpful directions in the post-trauma therapeutic setting.

The findings revealed an overall experience characterised by disconnection and re-connection. This underlines the potential for a relational approach to working with trauma consistent with Carr (2013) and Stolorow (2009). The current guidelines for trauma (NICE, 2015) recommend interventions such as trauma-focused CBT where there is perhaps room for more emphasis on or development of relational aspects of such interventions/processes in facilitating change.

This might further inform practice by highlighting and exploring the ways in which disconnected, traumatised individuals might be helped, actively creating connections starting in the therapy room where for Counselling Psychologists, the relationship is central to the potential for change. This might be approached through exploring identity and ways of belonging. Examples from practice include an individual given a terminal diagnosis, who became invested in researching his

family tree, providing him with a sense of connection and enhanced understanding of who he was; another who managed to re-frame an abusive family relationship and created new ways of connecting to others by developing an identity through which he belonged in the world.

The research has also highlighted the importance of the Army's regimental structure to the Participants' experience and well-being. Enhancing structure in the lives of individuals is acknowledged as potentially helpful (for example in CBT). Myth offers a psychological structure and framework within which to manage our experience, giving expression to human psychological life and coping under any circumstances (Campbell, 1964). Campbell's emphasis on psychological aspects of myth illuminates their potential utility for counselling psychologists. In tackling trials and ordeals, myths offer hope in the face of adversity (Young, 2006). They do not suggest life is without challenge, but embrace it as a part of living, helping individuals navigate difficult experiences and seems compatible with an integrative/existential therapeutic approach.

Finally this study highlights the complexities of human relationships with death, (something which may invoke anxiety for many therapists). Thus it is hoped the nature of this research might encourage a broader dialogue around the issues of mortality. Allowing clients to approach this in an accepting environment may prove enlightening for both therapist and client. Furthermore for those suffering bereavement, illness or terminal diagnosis, encountering a therapist open to discussing death may offer their only chance to explore this fundamental dilemma within a culture which remains largely reluctant to speak of it.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings of this study support much of the pre-existing research into PTG (and indirectly PTSD) for soldiers in combat, particularly the seemingly blurred boundaries between the two. Furthermore they are consistent with existential philosophy on the nature of living and dying.

In capturing the experience of eight Paras' journeys from extreme adversity through to well-being and personal enhancement, this study may offer a useful contribution to the expanding field of PTG. The findings challenge misperceptions of media-perpetuated notions of traumatic impact as persistently negative (particularly the idea that most people who go to war return ravaged by PTSD).

Furthermore it is hoped this study's insight into the combat environment which has perhaps been under-researched to date, will enhance the slim body of research investigating lived experience on the battlefield to raise awareness in both political and social domains of what combat soldiers endure. It offers a glimpse into the ambiguous experience of the military/social divide, which many believe is increasingly problematic, offering insight into the enormous personal challenges of a job which makes extreme and conflicting demands on individuals. Although the public remains highly supportive of its troops, Garber (2015) highlights a tendency to polarise soldiers as either heroes or victims of war completely overlooking individual lived experience.

The unexpected findings concerning myth may also offer support to those who have been challenging the politically-motivated dismantling of the Army's regimental system.

From a Counselling Psychology perspective, the findings may enhance understanding for those working with veterans, a group often closed to 'outsiders' due to a seemingly unbridgeable experiential gap. The observations also support an emphasis on relational approaches to working with trauma and the potential benefits of developing better dialogues around death.

Finally, the last words must be devoted to the study's eight Participants, who appear to occupy a space between trauma and non-trauma. They experienced highly disturbing events and the psychological disconnection from their everyday lives that accompanied them - a sense of which remains. Unlike their traumatised

counterparts, they may have found ways to strengthen and reconnect to their lifeworlds, bridging trauma and non-trauma on a journey which appears to have facilitated growth. Although irreversibly changed in some ways (for they may never rebuild the illusion of certainty), they have seized a newfound understanding of the world characterised by loss and uncertainty, to connect to life with a renewed, long-term vigour; while the view ahead may be shorter the focus is much sharper. They embody Spinelli's (2005) understanding of individuals as driven to make sense of experience, which conceptualises meaning-making as key to being human. However, for these Paras although meaning-making underpins their experience, it could be viewed as a means to an end, facilitating their ultimate goal - a connection to the experience of living.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Recruitment poster

Paratroopers wanted for research

I am investigating ex-paratroopers, who have had a near death experience in combat.

I am interested in how you have made meaning of life after believing that you were about to die.

The interview will take up to two hours at a location convenient for you. It will be completely anonymous to protect your privacy. You will only be asked to discuss experiences you are happy to share & will not be pressed to reveal anything you are uncomfortable with during the interview.

This would be part of my doctoral research in counselling psychology at City University, London. If you think you may be interested in taking part or would like more information, please email me at:

Lucy.Longhurst.1@city.ac.uk

Emailing me does not mean you are committed to anything!

Research supervisor: Jacqui Farrants; J.Farrants@city.ac.uk
Tel: 020 7040 0172.

Appendix B

Web page created for recruitment purposes

Lucy_Longhurst http://www.parachuteregiment-hsf.org/Lucy_Longhurst.html

Lucy Longhurst

CITY UNIVERSITY LONDON

I'm currently studying for my doctorate in Psychology at City University, London and am interested in how people successfully negotiate their lives after near-death experiences in war.

I am really interested in paratroopers, due to their high resilience and extreme training. I have been in contact with Colonel Wills who has been very helpful and supportive. My interest goes way back, as a close family member served in the regiment for many years.

My research is not looking at mental health dysfunction.I am interested in how paratroopers have successfully navigated such an experience. All participants will remain anonymous with any identifying details/information removed.

If you have any questions you can either email me or please contact me via my Facebook account is:

You will only be asked to discuss experiences you are happy to share & will not be pressed to reveal anything you are uncomfortable with during the interview.

This would be part of my doctoral research in counselling psychology at City University, London. If you think you may be interested in taking part, or would like more information, **Emailing me does not mean you are committed to anything!**

Home Page

Appendix C

Re-worded recruitment poster

Paratroopers wanted for research interviews

My name is Lucy Longhurst and I am currently studying for my doctorate in Psychology at City University, London.

I am specifically interested in how people successfully negotiate their lives after near-death experiences in war.

I am focusing my studies on members of The Parachute Regiment as my *(close family member)* served for 18 years and I have been interested in the Regiment since I was 12 years old.

I understand something of the high levels of resilience and fitness that Paratroopers have to display during their training and that is why I am keen to interview you.

The interview will take place at a location convenient to you. It will be **completely anonymous** to protect your privacy. You will only be asked to discuss experiences that you are happy to share and will not be pressed to reveal anything that you are uncomfortable with during the interview.

If you later feel that you wish to withdraw your interview you will be free to do so.

RHQ PARA have approved my study.

If you think that you may be interested in taking part or would like more information then please e-mail me at:

Lucy.Longhurst.1@city.ac.uk

E-mailing me does not mean that you are committing to anything.

Utrinque Paratus

Appendix D

Initial question list

1. What does it mean to be a Para?

2. How did your training impact on you as an individual?

3. Can you tell me how (if at all), your training affected your feelings and beliefs about death?

4. What does it mean for you to win in battle?

5. Can you describe a time in combat when you believed you were about to die?

6. Can you describe that in as much detail as possible?

7. Can you describe how you experienced life in the days/weeks immediately following this event?

8. How did you make sense of your experience?

9. How did you feel about death after your experience?

10. What did survival mean to you?
    a) As a soldier
    b) As a man

11. If your life has changed since this happened, can you tell me how?

12. Can you describe any impact of this experience on you as a person?

13. Can you describe any positive/negative aspects of your experience?

14. How did you make sense of this?

Appendix E

Ethics release form

APPENDIX 7: Ethics Release Form

Ethics Release Form for Student Research Projects

All students planning to undertake any research activity in the School of Arts and Social Sciences are required to complete this Ethics Release Form and to submit it to their Research Supervisor, **together with their research proposal clearly stating aims and methodology**, prior to commencing their research work. If you are proposing multiple studies within your research project, you are required to submit a separate ethical release form for each study.

This form should be completed in the context of the following information:

- An understanding of ethical considerations is central to planning and conducting research.
- Approval to carry out research by the Department or the Schools does not exempt you from Ethics Committee approval from institutions within which you may be planning to conduct the research, e.g.: Hospitals, NHS Trusts, HM Prisons Service, etc.
- The published ethical guidelines of the British Psychological Society (2009) Guidelines for minimum standards of ethical approval in psychological research (BPS: Leicester) should be referred to when planning your research.
- **Students are not permitted to begin their research work until approval has been received and this form has been signed by Research Supervisor and the Department's Ethics Representative.**

Section A: To be completed by the student

Please indicate the degree that the proposed research project pertains to:

BSc ☐ M.Phil ☐ M.Sc ☐ D.Psych ☒ n/a ☐

Please answer all of the following questions, circling yes or no where appropriate:

1. Title of project

The Impact of Acute Mortal Peril Upon the Paratrooper's Subsequent Experience of Life.

2. Name of student researcher (please include contact address and telephone number)

Lucy Longhurst.
Flat 2,
No.3 Belsize Park,
London NW3 4ET

Student No. 830530212

33

Tel: 07789 375918 / 0207 443 5459

3. Name of research supervisor

Dr Jacqui Farrants

4. Is a research proposal appended to this ethics release form? **Yes x** No

5. Does the research involve the use of human subjects/participants? **Yes x** No

If yes,

a. Approximately how many are planned to be involved? 8

b. How will you recruit them?
Informally through personal contacts and via advertising on regimental websites with permission from the Regimental Lieutenant Colonel of The Parachute Regiment.

c. What are your recruitment criteria?
(Please append your recruitment material/advertisement/flyer)
Former paratroopers (preferably) otherwise Falkland's veterans, of any age who have experienced near-death in combat. Fluent English speakers with a reasonable level of articulacy given the type of data required for the chosen methodology. They will all be volunteers who have not suffered any serious mental health issues as a result of their experience. (Appendix 1 of research proposal: Recruitment poster/flyer)

d. Will the research involve the participation of minors (under 18 years of age) or vulnerable adults or those unable to give informed consent? Yes **No x**

d1. If yes, will signed parental/carer consent be obtained? Yes No

d2. If yes, has a CRB check been obtained? Yes No
(Please append a copy of your CRB check)

6. What will be required of each subject/participant (e.g. time commitment, task/activity)? *(If psychometric instruments are to be employed, please state who will be supervising their use and their relevant qualification).*
Prior to being asked to take part, there will be an informal telephone screening process. At the interview, each selected participant will be given the explanatory statement/information sheet (appendix 5) and asked if they have any questions. They will be given the informed consent form to read and sign in their own time. They will be interviewed for approximately one hour, recorded on a small unobtrusive digital audio device.

7. Is there any risk of physical or psychological harm to the subjects/participants? **Yes x** No

If yes,

a. Please detail the possible harm?

Although psychological harm is not anticipated due to the exclusion criteria, the telephone screening and the participants' prior knowledge of the research aims and requirements, it is possible that talking about their close encounter with death may bring up some unexpected and difficult feelings. It is also possible that those screened by phone who are not invited to take part, may feel slighted.

b. How can this be justified?

I am investigating the phenomenon from a functional stance thus aim to exclude participants who appear vulnerable or who have a history of mental health issues in relation to their experiences such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The informal telephone screening questions will help to exclude inappropriate candidates (appendix 2). An open and transparent explanation of the research will be provided beforehand, to ensure participants fully understand what they are being asked to describe. Questions beyond the scope of the research will not be asked and due to the nature of the methodology, will not be challenging or directive. The participants' experience will guide the direction the interview takes. Participants will not be pressed to reveal anything that they do not wish to share and will be allowed to stop the interview at any time. However, if particular topics are excluded from research on the grounds of potential participant distress, then many important issues will remain under-researched, preventing certain groups from the benefits of potential findings.

c. What precautions are you taking to address the risks posed?

In order to minimise potential distress to unselected participants following the informal telephone screening, steps will be taken to make clear that selection to take part (or not), is dependent on specific research criteria not on personality traits. The pre-selection screening process would seek to exclude those who may be vulnerable. Details of local services where appropriate help can be sought, for distress resulting from this research process will be supplied before the interview (appendix 3). If participants become visibly upset during the interview, it will be stopped and as an immediate measure I would use my skills as a counselling psychologist trainee to help alleviate their upset at least on a temporary basis. If they appear to be suffering an emotional crisis, I would keep them safe until I was able to summon professional help. However, this is not anticipated. Participants will not officially be debriefed due to the transparent nature of the research and its aims. However, participants will be offered the chance to ask any questions about the research process immediately after the interview and in the future (appendix 6).

8. Will all subjects/participants and/or their parents/carers receive an information sheet describing the aims, procedure and possible risks of the research, as well as providing researcher and supervisor contact details?

Yes x No

(Please append the information sheet which should be written in terms which are accessible to your subjects/participants and/or their parents/carers)

See appendix 5.

9. Will any person's treatment/care be in any way be compromised if they choose not to participate in the research?

Yes **No x**

10. Will all subjects/participants be required to sign a consent form, stating that they fully understand the purpose, procedure and possible risks of the research?

Yes x No

If no, please justify

If yes please append the informed consent form which should be written in terms which are accessible to your subjects/participants and/or their parents/carers) (Appendix 4)

11. What records will you be keeping of your subjects/participants? (E.g. research notes, computer records, tape/video recordings)?

There will be digital audio recordings of all participant interviews. Each of these will be transcribed verbatim into word documents and both notes and audio stored electronically. Research notes will be made immediately following each interview. Personal information such as addresses and telephone numbers will also be noted and stored electronically.

12. What provision will there be for the safe-keeping of these records?

All audio recordings and computerised notes/transcripts will be encrypted and stored electronically on a hard drive inaccessible from the internet. Any hard copy notes will be kept in a locked cabinet. Private details such as names/addresses will be encrypted and stored electronically, separate from all other information/data.

13. What will happen to the records at the end of the project?

In accordance with City University's ethical requirements, all records will be stored securely for 5 years after the research has been officially completed, at which point it will be permanently destroyed.

14. How will you protect the anonymity of the subjects/participants?

All identifying data such as names/places will be removed or changed to preserve anonymity. The participants' personal information as stated above will be stored securely but separately to research notes and data.

15. What provision for post research de-brief or psychological support will be available should subjects/participants require?

A list of psychological services local to each participant will be supplied before the start of the interview process. It is felt that a specific post-research de-brief will be unnecessary due to the open and transparent nature of the research which will be fully explained beforehand. However, participants will be encouraged to ask any questions they may have about the research or the process itself and given contact emails/numbers for myself and my supervisor, should any questions arise later.

(Please append any de-brief information sheets or resource lists detailing possible support options)

Details of support organisations local to the individual will be supplied where possible. However details of national services will be given where local services appear limited (appendix 3).

If you have circled an item in **underlined bold** print or wish to provide additional details of the research please provide further explanation here:

Signature of student researcher ---------- Date ------

CHECKLIST: the following forms should be appended unless justified otherwise

Research Proposal	☐
Recruitment Material	☐
Information Sheet	☐
Consent Form	☐
De-brief Information	☐

Section B: Risks to the Researcher

1. Is there any risk of physical or psychological harm to yourself? **Yes X** No
If yes,

a. Please detail possible harm?
There may be issues around personal safety when meeting previously unknown participants.

b. How can this be justified?
It is considered a small risk, not significantly greater than might be encountered in everyday life. Furthermore, some participants are likely to be found via personal contacts, others through more official channels thus they will be aware that there are ways in which they can be traced were any incident to occur.

c. What precautions are to be taken to address the risks posed?
Where possible, all interviews will be conducted in private areas of public spaces such as rooms at the university or an army base. If interviews are conducted in participants' homes, sealed details will be left with a responsible person, only to be opened if prearranged criteria are not met.

Section C: To be completed by the research supervisor

(Please pay particular attention to any suggested research activity involving minors or vulnerable adults. Approval requires a currently valid CRB check to be appended to this form. If in any doubt, please refer to the Research Committee.)

Please mark the appropriate box below:

Ethical approval granted ☑

Refer to the Department's Research and Ethics Committee ☐

Refer to the School's Research and Ethics Committee ☐

Signature ---------- Date 8/3/13

Section D: To be completed by the 2nd Departmental staff member *(Please read this ethics release form fully and pay particular attention to any answers on the form where **underlined bold** items have been circled and any relevant appendices.)*

I agree with the decision of the research supervisor as indicated above ☐

Signature ---------- Date 8/3/13

Appendix F

Verification of research insurance

Arthur J. Gallagher International

8th July 2013

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

We, the undersigned Insurance Brokers hereby certify that we have place the following Insurance:

VERIFICATION OF INSURANCE

Unique Market Reference:	TBA
Type:	No Fault Compensation for Any Investigational Study and or Trial
Insured:	City University London
Period:	From: 8th July 2013 To: 31st July 2014 Both days inclusive at Local Standard Time.
Interest:	This Policy will indemnify/cover City University for Insurance in respect of their Legal Liabilities arising out of the insured's activities and as more fully disclosed within the Policy Wording.
Limit of Indemnity:	GBP 10,000,000 Any one Claim and £12,500,000 in the aggregate, including costs and expenses
Excess	GBP 2500 Each and Every Claim, including costs and expenses
Underwriter:	Newline Syndicate 1218

This document is for information only and does not make the person or organisation to whom it is issued an additional Insured, nor does it modify in any manner the Contract of Insurance between the Insured and the Insurers. Any amendment, change or extension to such Contract can only be affected by specific endorsement attached thereto.

Should the above mentioned Contract of Insurance be cancelled, assigned or changed during the above policy period in such manner as to affect this document, no obligation to inform the holder of this document is accepted by the undersigned or by the Insurers. The information provided is correct at the date of signature.

Authorised Signatory
Gallagher London.

Appendix G

Informal debrief and support services information

Thank you for taking part in my research. I really appreciate the time you've given to me. If you have any questions either now or in the future, please don't hesitate to contact me or my supervisor via the contact information supplied to you. If you feel any distress as a consequence of taking part in this research, the services listed below may be able to help you address issues that have arisen.

Support services

NHS

http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/Counselling/Pages/Introduction.aspx

http://www.nhs.uk/ServiceDirectories/Pages/ServiceSearchAdditional.aspx?ServiceType=TherapyAndCounsellingServices

Charity sector

http://www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk/

http://www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk/LocalCruse.html

http://www.relate.org.uk/home/index.html

Military

http://www.ssafa.org.uk/

http://www.combatstress.org.uk/

Appendix H

Informed consent form

Informed Consent Form for Research Participants

Research Title: The Impact of Acute Mortal Peril Upon the Paratrooper's Subsequent Experience of Life.

I agree to take part in the above City University research. I have had the research explained to me and I have read the Explanatory Statement which I may keep for my records. I understand that agreeing to take part means that I am willing to:

- Be interviewed by the researcher
- Allow the interview to be audio recorded
- Make myself available for a further interview should that be required

Data Protection

This information will be held and processed for the following purpose(s):

- Verbatim transcription and analysis
- Write up as part of the thesis
- Possible inclusion in articles for publication

I understand that any information I provide is confidential, and that no information that could lead to the identification of any individual will be disclosed in any reports on the research, or to any other party. No identifiable personal data will be published. The identifiable data will not be shared with any other organisation.

I understand that my personal information will be stored separately from any transcripts and audio recordings and that all names and identifying data will be changed or removed from any of the written materials. Both the written and audio data will be encrypted and stored securely on a hard drive that is inaccessible to the Internet. These steps will be taken to protect my identity from being made public.

I agree to City University recording and processing this information about me. I understand that this information will be used only for the purpose(s) set out in this statement and my consent is conditional on the University complying with its duties and obligations under the Data Protection Act 1998.

The right to withdraw

I understand that my participation is voluntary, that I can choose not to participate in part or all of the project, and that I can withdraw at any stage of the process without being penalised or disadvantaged in any way.

Participant name (please print):

Participant signature:

Date:

Researcher name (please print):

Researcher signature:

Date:

Appendix I

Participant Information sheet

I am currently studying for a professional doctorate in counselling psychology at City University, London. For my research I am investigating how people make meaning of their ongoing lives having experienced near-death in combat.

I am particularly interested in Paratroopers, partly because their job may expose them to such experiences, but also because of their particularly strong group identity, their resilience and their intense training.

My research will explore individual experience i.e. I am not trying to generalise one experience to everyone. I will need 8 participants who have successfully navigated their lives since this experience without suffering long-term mental heath difficulties.

Most research looks at how people fall apart after such events, however I am interested in those who have successfully moved on with their lives and in some cases perhaps even grown as a result of the experience.

I hope that the findings will enhance what is currently a very small field of knowledge about successful outcomes after trauma, which can then be used to help those who have suffered negative outcomes.

As part of this research I have received ethical approval from the university ethics committee. This will ensure your privacy and anonymity and will also protect your psychological well-being. It is intended that taking part in this research will not be distressing for you. You will not be asked nor pushed to reveal things you do not wish to share. You will however be asked to describe your experience in as much detail as possible. If this results in any unexpected distress, you will be able to stop the interview at any time, either for a break or to terminate it. Should you feel you

need ongoing help, I will also be giving you details of local and national services which may support you.

Below are the contact details of both myself and my supervisor:

Researcher: Lucy Longhurst: Lucy.Longhurst.1@city.ac.uk Tel: 07789 375918

Research supervisor: Jacqui Farrants Email: J.Farrants@city.ac.uk Tel: 020 7040 0172.

City University, London,
Northampton Square,
London, EC1V 0HB

Comments or Concerns

If you have any comments about the research, please contact:

Anna Ramberg
Secretary to Senate Research Ethics Committee
Research Office, E214
City University London
Northampton Square
London EC1V 0HB

email: Anna.Ramberg.1@city.ac.uk
telephone: 020 7040 3040, asking for Secretary to Senate Research Ethics Committee (project name: The Impact of Acute Mortal Peril Upon the Paratrooper's Subsequent Experience of Life)

Appendix J

Letter to the Regimental Colonel

Dear Colonel Wills,

I am currently studying for my professional doctorate in counselling psychology at City University, London. For my research I am investigating how people make meaning of their ongoing lives having accepted they were going to die. I am particularly interested in Paratroopers, partly because the nature of their job may expose them to such experiences, but also because of their particularly strong identity as a group and their intense training regime.

My research will be qualitative, looking to elicit the individual experience, not to generalise one experience to all. I am hoping to find 8 participants who have had a near death experience in combat i.e. they accepted they were about to die and then did not. I'm interested in this topic from a functional viewpoint - how these soldiers successfully navigated their ongoing lives after nearly dying. I will be seeking to exclude those who have suffered severe mental health issues as a result of this experience. It is hoped that the findings may enhance a very small field of knowledge about successful outcomes after trauma (since most research seems to focus on dysfunction and mental health problems such as post traumatic stress disorder), which in turn may be used to help those with negative trauma experiences.

It has been suggested that I take an informal route for recruiting participants via social media or through advertising on the regimental website.

As part of this research I am submitting an ethics proposal form for university approval. This ensures confidentiality and anonymity of participants and also seeks to protect their psychological well-being.

I am hoping it might be possible for me to advertise for participants on the regimental website. I will be looking for ex paratroopers since I understand that use of those currently serving would mean a lengthy engagement with military ethics processes.

I would really welcome your input and would be happy to answer any questions.

Very best wishes,

Lucy.

Appendix K

Telephone introduction and screening questions

Very broadly how I introduced the topic and research requirements:

I wanted to have a chat with you on the phone to make sure you understand what this research is all about, to see if you are interested in participating, to make sure that your own experiences are suited to this research, and match the research requirements. There may be someone who's had an experience like this but who doesn't quite fit the criteria of this study. You may also find that after this chat, you feel it's not something you want to continue with which is fine too.

I'm looking for 8 paratroopers who have nearly died in combat who are willing to talk about their experience in detail and also about what life has been like ever since. I'm interested in the event itself; what happened, how you felt, what you were thinking, anything at all however small. I'd also like to hear about how you experienced your life after that. I'm keen to hear as much detail as possible, even if you think it's irrelevant.

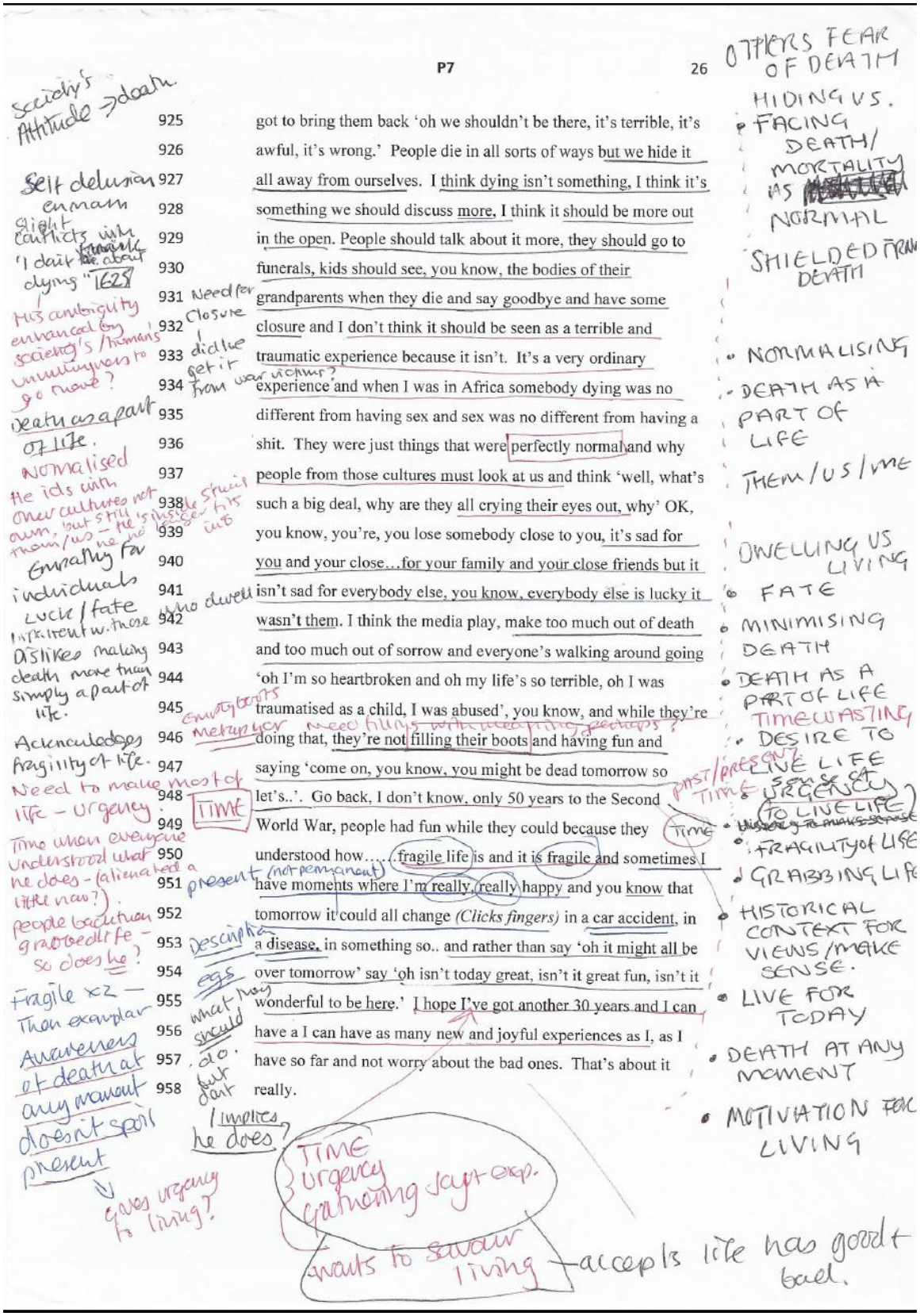
I have a few questions for you if that's ok?

1. Have you had an experience like this?
2. How long is it since this happened?
3. Did you find it shocking?
4. Have you suffered any mental health difficulties as a result of this experience?
5. Have you ever experienced mental health issues at any other time?
6. Do you ever get flashbacks or nightmares about your experience?
7. Have you been able to discuss the experience with anyone else?

8. Has anyone recommended you seek treatment for any distress since the event?

Appendix L

Analysis of transcript (Felix)



Appendix M

Excerpt from Carl's Excel tab:

Exploratory comments, transcript, emergent themes

Line no.	Exploratory Comments	Original transcript	Emergent Themes
789-812	His view of life/death has changed. He lost his faith – he was fighting to save someone else's life and no help came. This feels significant in light of entering priesthood earlier in his life. He felt helpless & his God was nowhere to be seen. He seems scathing: 'magic' doesn't exist (so now God does not exist for him?). He has since changed religions (revenge?) - conflicts with 'god bollocks'. He wants to have faith but couldn't stay with the god who didn't show up. That faith died alongside his friend. On the battlefield, he lives in the short term. His rifle, not god will take him to next year. The certainty of life is possibly lost. In combat it's down to chance and to him = fundamental shift? He's alone? He describes the battle of Goose Green; outnumbered and beat the enemy against the odds, proving the superiority of the Paras. Reinforcing group ID/self-esteem. He was part of creating history and a place in it for himself which seems very important throughout.	C: Death as far as I'm concerned, you're meat for the worms. Now all this, my religion changed, my views, only because my mate was killed, Dutt Mark Dutton, and, you know, you look at, when you're trying to help somebody, you can't, but Dutto died and I was mates with him down, sort of, we were mates in the back of P Company, it was myself, him and Spotty sort of all taking a photograph in Kenya and I just thought 'there's nothing you can do for him', you know, he's foaming at his mouth, he's been shot and you think, you know, 'he could do with a hand here'. It doesn't happen. None of this magical wand is going to come down. So all my beliefs, you look at it and you think 'we're killing each other here'. Don't get me wrong, I'm no Holy Joe now, but that said I've started going back to church but with a different religion. But when you start looking at on the battlefield the only thing that's going to save you is your rifle, whatever's in your magazine, your bayonet and you may get to next year. None of this 'pray to God (excuse the French) bollocks', you can pray all you want but if a bullet's got your name on it, you're going down, end of. So on the battlefield it's your just sheer tenacity and I'll say and it sounds gung ho. It was just the sheer bollocks, Goose Green has gone down as one of the greatest infantry battles ever taken place and that's not trying to ramp the regiment up. Because we had no support, we went in with a rifle and a bayonet with numbers three to four times against us and we took them on and we beat them and that was just by sheer aggression.	Meat for the worms Loss: God + mate Grief Watching the body closing down to die New faith vs. new understanding (survival down to him) Helplessness/shock Time: no guarantees Fate/random chance Historical significance: Legacy Reinforcing superiority of Paras/ group self- esteem Beating the odds Conflict: New faith vs. 'God bollocks'
849-864	He describes another threat, an air strike. Foetal position (unconscious body response to threat) as a missile literally bounced between them (from British anti tank missile). Second friendly fire incident & yet another random escape from death. What is the impact of escaping death so often? Touches on poss of dying; metaphor; toast-consumed by fire. Possibly increases the feeling of invincibility & feeding the virtuous circle of: belief Paras are best – never giving up – winning- reinforcing belief- etc. He then describes their counter attack & how they chased the enemy down – feeling of cartoon-like chaos – Keystone Cops- he is able to see both danger & humour in a close combat situation.	C: So they were firing these Milans off, we were all sort of down in this gully and six Argentine Pucaras flew over, if they'd have flew down the gully and struck us, we'd have been gone, we'd have been toast but they didn't they flew over and they flew off somewhere else and this first Milan went off and it went boom, second one fired and it went whoosh and myself and Jack literally went into the foetal position because this missile bounced between us within the arming distance and didn't go off. So it was the second time we could have been taken out by our own fire and whoosh it bounced off and 'what the...' raking alley was up there? Anyway, we fired the third one, it hit this bunker and this Argie came out so we all ran up the hill, we were sort of like gorse line up there and we were firing at this Argie and you could see him run out and he stopped, he was traced to go left and right and he ran back into the bunker, opened fire on us again and we all ran down the hill, it was like a Keystone Cops scene.	Pondering non-existence Random survival Body (foetal) response to threat Luck Unfriendly fire Enhancing invincibility? Chaos Chasing the enemy down Humour in danger: Keystone Cops

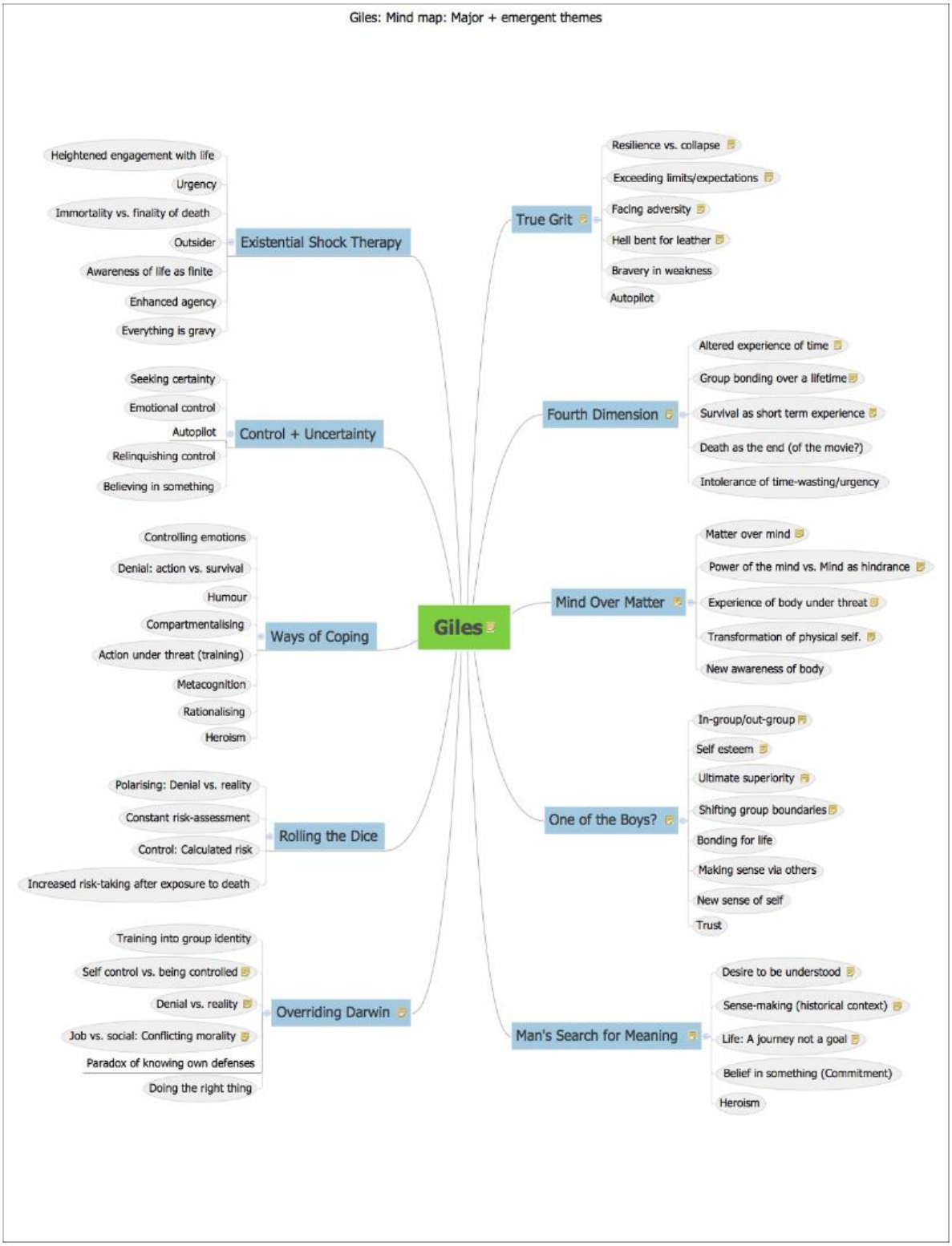
Appendix N

Major themes table (with corresponding emergent themes): Giles

Mind over matter	One of the Boys?	True Grit	The Fourth Dimension	Man's Search for Meaning
Matter over mind	In-Group/Out-Group	Resilience vs. collapse	Altered experience of time	Desire to be understood
Power of the mind vs. mind as hindrance.	Self esteem	Exceeding limits/expectations	Group bonding for life	Sense-making (historical context)
Experience of body under threat	Ultimate Superiority	Facing adversity	Survival as short term experience	Life as a journey not a goal
Transformation of physical self	Shifting group boundaries	Hell bent for leather	Death as the end (of the movie?)	Heroism
New awareness of body	Trust	Bravery in weakness	Intolerance of time-wasting/urgency	Believing in something (Commitment).
	Bonded for life	Autopilot		
	Making sense via others	Persistence		
	New sense of self			
Overriding Darwin	**Ways of coping**	**Rolling the Dice**	**Control vs. Uncertainty**	**Existential shock therapy**
Training into group identity	Controlling emotions	Polarising: Denial vs. reality	Seeking certainty (Pregnant man)	Heightened engagement with life
Self control vs. being controlled	Denial: Action & survival	Constant risk assessment	Emotional control	Urgency
Denial vs. reality	Humour	Control: Calculated risk	Autopilot	Immortality vs. finality of death
Job vs. society: conflicting morality.	Compartmentalising		Relinquishing control	Achievement
Paradox of knowing his defences	Action under threat (Training)		Believing in something (confidence).	Outsider
	Metacognition		Increased risk-taking; exposure to death	Awareness: Life as finite
Doing the right thing	Rationalising			Enhanced agency
	Heroism			Everything is gravy

Appendix O

Mind Map: Major themes: Giles



Appendix P

Super-ordinate themes, Sub-themes + participant quote locations

Super-ordinate theme	Sub-themes	Quote location Participant initial + Page number
Identity	**Everyone Else is a Hat**	A13, A20, A 26, A31, A36, A62, A66, A71, A76, A138, A149, A167, A176, A225, A340, A406, A604, A610, A614, A626, A653, A670, A682, A868, A879, A783, B42, B48, B50, B59, B71, B375, B578, B586, B598, B604, B607, B608, B611, B620, B630, B644, B650, B654, B662, B748, C7, C15, C21, C39, C72, C124, C141, C193, C200, C223, C347, C364, C383, C396, C408, C428, C434, C440, C448, C455, C465, C475, C483, C555, C804, C923, C1024, C1034, C1112, C1191, C1223, C1279, C1328, C1347, C1387, D10, D15, D31, D71, D75, D81, D103, D109, D126, D140, D155, D177, D184, D185, D188, D193, D196, D212, D241, D358, D568, D577, D611, D612, D645, D659, D686, D701, D707, D715, D724, D747, D764, D869, D918, D930, D939, D951, D973, D1142, E25, E37, E65, E76, E87, E98, E108, E116, E130, E197, E209, E437, E524, E596, E601, E614, F49, F64, F72, F97, F106, F123, F137 F183, F219, F326, F676, G17, G73, G86, G116, G134, G171, G242, G304, G312, G330, G456, G495, G886, H31, H37, H43, H106, H145, H162, H402, H631, H778, H795, H938, H1049, H1088, H1233.
	Rite of Passage	A149, A167, A176, A340, A604, A610, A614, A868, A879, B630, B644, B650, B654, C193, C455, C555, D611, E130, E524, F72, F137 F676, H43, H402.
	Two Worlds Colliding	A52, A81, A86, A383, A426, A391, A530, A546, A558, A598, A650, B503, C30, C246 C1079, C1094, C1106, C1114, C1130, C1223, C1235, C1262, C1270, C1289, C1336, C1359, C1366, C1425, D196, D344, E592, F197, F211, F282, F306, F335, F510, F539, F612, F637, F644, F684, F942, G786, G882, H66, H81, H384, H556, H751, H758, H804, H804, H811, H828.
Tempering the Sword	**The 'Oh Shit' Moment**	A305, A326, A358, A406, B155, B163, B203, B217, B322, C544, C715, C746, C774, C785, C853, C901, C908, C964, C1008, D453, D839, D842, D1056, E239, E352, E364, E496, F404, F424, F462, G449, G485, G556, H250, H1119.
	Body of Evidence	A283, A371, A425, A513, A880, B203, B209, B213, B229, B325, B334, B345, C461, C552, C 561, C578, C583, C587, C600, C664, C770, C855, C975, C1034, C1049, D332, D392, D404, D411, D437, D815, D1113, E249, E272, E402, E449, E467, F393, F405, F492, F703, F728, G315, G355, G573, G583, G584, G598, G603, G604, G613, H467, H531, H1085, H1100, H1183, H1202, H1211.
	Fourth Dimension	A273, A311, A468, A471, B171, B184, B217, B225, B327, C580, C716, D905, D1061, D1073, D1090, D1093, E249, E315, F409, F414, F419, F775, G586, G587, G598, G602, H462, H465, H635.
Riding the Emotional Storm	**Taking Action**	A244, A448, A487, A494, B92, B101, B328, B349, B354, B394, C512, C1309, D253, D382, D471, D477, D820, D840, D897, D1091, D1108, E334, E360, E366, E370, E385, E393, E404, E499, E505, E639, E643, F256, F263, F319, F394, F425, F466, G558, G572 G597, G599, H284, H322, H635, H1250, H1296.
	Humour	B242, B256, B773, C1336, C1349, C1120, C1337, D844, E267, E418, F234, F243, F270, F284, F394, G761, G770, G795, G808, G872, G901, H666, H673, H682.
	Making Molehills out of Mountains	A141, A329, A344,A371, B234, B242, B244, B272, B307, B394, B709, B711, C697, C789, C936, C1247, C1251, C1256, D348, D469, D478, D819, D874, D879, D1134, E318, E417, E483, E551, F285, F316, F410, F419, F486, F495, F552, F570, F749, F933, F939, G636, G638, G648, G654, G801, G928, H339, H482, H487, H539, H549, H561, H1307, H543.
	Denial	A253, A292, A301, A331, B83, B114, B262, B291, B307, C512, C519, C675, D269, E138, F364, F621, F628, F725, G277, G301, G681 G693, G697, H334, H407.

Super-ordinate theme	Sub-themes	Quote location Participant initial + Page number
The Tempered Self	**The Texture of Time**	A165, A467, A622, A842, A879, A885, B116, B435, C1358, C1434, C1447, C1455, E162, E527, E564, E567, E597, E606, E620, F863, G278, G278, G316, G741, G756, G787, H48, H340, H722, H787.
	Raised Awareness of the Fragility of Life	A259, A271, A285, A371, A415, A891, B91, B116, B120, B184, B237, B258, B331, B387, B391, B480, B677, C683, C729, C767, C782, C795, C802, C1052, C1149, C1165, C1168, C1193, C1206, C1444, D276, D294, D485, D499, D517, D547, E157, E162, E174, E501, E557, F260, F369, F398, F416, F489, F493, F607, F949, F755, F926, F945, G178, G267, G290, G349, G375, G427, G435, G478, G608, G626, G655, G663, G715, G791, G857, G930, H78, H309, H352, H357, H380, H420, H720, H1127.
	Doors of Janus	A838, B492, E597, E623, F316, G608, H800.
	Doors Closed	A139, A580, A588, A622, A642, A839, A846, A849, A862, A890, A891, A924, B443, B447, B462, B511, B517, B598, B654, B672, B683, B729, B737, B782, B788, C440, C1074, C1186, C1188, C1193, C1210, C1214, C1296,C1481, C1490, C1496, D147, D523, D545, D579, D619-37, D921, E178, E527, E546, E549, E563, E567, E573, E579, E604, E612, E664, E703, F401, F669, F690, F755, F757, F819, F835, F850, F896, F945, F954,F896, G403, G635, G923,G936, G942, G658, G697, G703, G710, G824, G748, G930, H899, H914, H937, H952, H966, H1295.
	Doors Open	A451, A462, A589, A594, A643, A665, A833, B432, B499, C701, C1171, C1441, C1492, D507, D511, D555, E592, F532, F694, F710, G608, G621, G945, H877, H1130.
Survivor's Search for Meaning	**Making Sense of the Self in Historical Context**	A17, A123, A151, A165, A211, A266, A277, A287, A558, A582, A627, A637, A642, A665, A890, B402, B412, B629, B789, C53, C62, C162, C262, C1089, C1108, C1121, C1347, D285, D294, D890, E138, E620, F56, F77, F87, F302, F505, F567, F629, F783, F825, F948, G181, G214, G250, G273, G676, G699, G890, G938, H256, H291, H324, H667, H723, H738, H747.
	Myth-Making	A149, A444, B194, C361, C397, C434, C567, C572, C574, C734, C770, C1003, C1172, D141, D285, D654, D962, D1096, E186, F49, F149, F178, F194, F204, F349, F584, F766, F861, G211, G822, H46.
	Creating Purpose	A155, A287, A572, A580, A584, A589, A627, A778, B402, B412, B455, B462, B513, B519, B525, B741, B745, B757, B784, B1297, C266, C1156, C1198, C1210, C1501, D164, D542, D543, D559, D563, E678, E685, E693, E700, F851, F860, F868, G743, G788, G822, H890, H914.

Appendix Q

Reflective diary excerpts

Week 5

I have been wondering whether I need to ask participants more explicitly about the meaning of their lives, if/how it's changed after these combat experiences. It's tricky because some very relevant info has been emerging quite naturally so far, but I'm curious to know if I'll get more from them by addressing it more directly or whether that will actually result in less. Generally I think 'if it aint broke…' bla bla. I interviewed a Major General who was a Falklands commander yesterday. He shared some extremely interesting thoughts about resilience in action on the ground. Interesting to hear how resilience seems to differ not only between individuals but also in the same individuals on and off the battlefield (i.e. in different contexts)…Also, the surprising stressors which seem to affect the group (and even more so, those which don't).

Week 9

I have discovered a curious parallel process in my first 3 interviews…whenever I ask directly for detail about a near death experience they seem to skirt over it and appear almost dismissive of it. When I zoomed out to broader views of their experience they were much more detailed and seemingly expressive. Similarly in combat when they described specific individually-experienced events they were again almost dismissed, yet when talking about a generalised threat to life, like overhead bombing or fire fights they were much more revealing. Another detail which seems connected to this is the way they avoid when asked directly. Several have started by not really answering the question, but after some considerable and seemingly unconnected preamble, will seamlessly (mid-sentence) slide into talking about facing death. Group identity is screaming off the page of all three so far. Although my background research indicated the significance of this, it is quite overwhelming to encounter face to face.

March 7th 2014

I have noticed over a period of time in personal therapy, that insightful observations and interpretations (unconnected to the research), are bringing up aspects of how I talk about/respond to my own challenges and life generally which often seem very similar to some of the observations I've made during the analysis of my data. Sometimes I just sit there thinking 'that's what they (participants) do'. For example, using quite minimising vocabulary to describe very unpleasant things (e.g. 'it wasn't nice…it was pretty tough……much worse things happen to other people'). He says I always make molehills out of mountains which I think is a brilliant theme label for one of the ways in which my participants manage things.

April 7th

The process of analysing has brought up the issue of social withdrawal after returning home. This is something most of the participants have alluded to but one in particular is quite explicit about it. He said at the end of it all he withdrew socially for some time. Strangely a close friend of mine commented only a couple of weeks ago that I had done this too as a child for several years. For the participant, it seemed that his experiences and new understanding of his world created a gulf between him and all others who could not contemplate the world he now inhabited. I think that struck a chord. For me I suspect it was also a way of re-grouping, time to process the experiences/changes that had occurred. This participant also expressed the belief that having gone through such adversity, he felt there was nothing he couldn't overcome (even death perhaps). Although rationally I know this cannot be true, I do feel a bit like that. There's a feeling of power (over oneself and so-called destiny) and it creates a confidence in life because nothing will ever be as bad again. He described it as I might have described it myself! This is also something which emerged independently in personal therapy.

While this is all really interesting it has made me revisit all my transcripts to see if I am imposing my own things unknowingly and again to see if I am only focusing on these them because they coincide with some of my experiences. I feel a bit paranoid! ☺

I am making sure anything which seems to crossover, is truly present in their narratives and searching for things I may have overlooked. I have also identified many things which do not coincide with my own experiences, so there is some comfort in knowing that more themes are emerging that are distinct than which seem shared.

Appendix R

Counselling Psychology Review publication: March 2015

Trainee Prize Winner 2014

A life worth living

Lucy Longhurst

Context & Focus: *This article explores the therapeutic journey between a Counselling Psychologist in Training and a suicidal client over the period of a year. An integrative model (drawing on Existential therapy, CBT and ACT) was employed to address multi-faceted and complex issues including the loss of identity, hearing voices, the meaninglessness of life and the explicit wish to die. While this article is based on real clinical work, it draws upon material from several cases and has been fictionalised to preserve anonymity. Further, both the article and the related clinical work complied with the British Psychological Society's ethical guidelines and those of City University London.*

Keywords: *Integrative therapy; existential therapy; CBT; ACT; suicide ideation; the meaning of life; valued living; hearing voices.*

Introduction/Implicit rationale for the choice of the case

I ENCOUNTERED 'Billy' whilst working as a counselling psychology trainee within a multi-disciplinary team at a psychiatric hospital. He was referred from his NHS trust after attempting suicide and I later selected him for my case study due to the interesting challenges we both faced during the course of therapy. CBT alone (the hospital's primary model) proved insufficient for engaging Billy, who felt he had lost his reason for living. He was struggling with specific issues around meaning and identity, thus an existential approach appeared appropriate. However, as he progressed (by no means linear) his changing needs demanded therapeutic flexibility, whilst remaining theoretically grounded. O'Brian, (2004) argues that no one theory or model is sufficient to understand the complexities of being human. For Billy, an integrative model certainly appeared appropriate for addressing his complex concerns, as he asked 'who am I' and 'what is the meaning of life?' Unable to find answers, he felt stuck; looking regretfully back and unable to see a future. His felt only option was suicide.

Summary of theoretical orientation

Existential therapy (ET) provided the core into which Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) were integrated. The following highlights aspects of ET relevant to this study plus its theoretical integration with CBT and ACT (themselves summarised in Appendices 1 and 2 respectively).

ET views humans as creatures of continual change within finite lives in the context of environmentally-created opportunities and limitations (also personal strengths and weaknesses). It aims to elucidate client problems, perceiving them as basic dilemmas under the portmanteau term of the human condition (Deurzen & Adams, 2011). Despite its philosophical underpinnings, Manafi, (2010) suggests ET is a very practical model with the phenomenological method (Appendix 3) providing the only consistent reference to technique across the range of existential models (Cohn, 1997). Taking a holistic view of the client's life, ET explores meaning, values and learning to live in line with personal ideals. Client experience is prioritised directly in the here-and-now rather than being filtered through theoretical frameworks (Manafi, 2010). Yalom, (1980) suggests authentic living requires actively choosing rather than living by happenstance. Such authenticity requires acknowledging possibilities and limitations,

Part 2: The journal article

Transcending the Effects of Trauma? Paratroopers and the Role of Regimental Myth.

Author: Lucy Longhurst

City University London

Author note: This article was submitted as part of the doctoral thesis portfolio for the D Psych Counselling Psychology Programme at City University London, supervised by Dr J. Farrants. The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical requirements of the BPS. Correspondence should be sent to Lucy.longhurst.1@city.ac.uk

Abstract

Media and internet coverage of recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (Burke, 2004; Greene, 2005) has contributed to the perception that combat troops generally return traumatised, perhaps raising awareness of the horrors soldiers endure, lending weight to the notion that posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in particular is inevitable. While a terrible condition, it affects far fewer British soldiers than is generally perceived. Most figures for the occurrence of combat PTSD vary from similar, to slightly higher than the general population (MacManus et al., 2014). However even the worst indicate the majority return home mentally well. This misperception alongside curiosity about other outcomes following traumatic encounters in war instigated research investigating the experience of mortal peril and its impact on eight British paratroopers. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) revealed five super-ordinate themes reflecting aspects of their experience. One unexpected sub-theme, Myth-making was interpreted as offering psychological protection against the unimaginable horrors to which they were exposed. This article briefly outlines the research, then expands on the protective role of myth in mediating participants' wellbeing, further proposing that the Army's regimental system facilitates this via myth. Since findings cannot be generalised, future research might explore the long-term impact of dismantling this centuries-old tradition.

Introduction

The main contemporary research emphases into responses to traumatic stress appear dominated by the medical model, taking a disease-orientated approach (Benight, 2012). Much research has focused on negative outcomes of combat such as PTSD, despite evidence that most combat troops return from battle mentally well (Hotopf et al., 2006). The more common consequences of encountering trauma or adversity are reflected in smaller, but growing fields of research such as posttraumatic growth (PTG) and resilience.

The aforementioned research enlisted eight former British Paratroopers (Paras) who volunteered to take part in the study exploring the experience of encountering mortal peril in combat and its subsequent impact on living. All had emerged from their traumatic encounters mentally well. Names and identifying details were changed preserving anonymity and the research was conducted in accordance with the British Psychological Society Code of Ethics and Conduct (2009).

Existential philosophy plus (in particular) the work of Ernest Becker and Robert D. Stolorow, provided a theoretical backdrop to the study. Stolorow (2007) proposed that a loss of absolutes or certainties in life alienates traumatised individuals who now know what others cannot know, further maintaining the trauma through psychological disconnection from others. Yalom's (1991, p.119) suggestion that "human connectedness" ultimately overcomes death terror may offer one path to better understanding how death may be encountered without rendering individuals psychologically crushed. Terror Management Theory (TMT) (Greenberg et al., 1990) is based on the work of Becker (1997) who proposed that cultural hero-systems of meaning, buffer against death anxiety (salience), where group-membership and adherence to its ethos, offers a sense of immortality - survival beyond physical death.

Semi-structured interviews were analysed using IPA, an idiographic approach committed to exploring how people make sense of experience (Smith & Osborne, 2013). Five super-ordinate themes (plus sub-themes) emerged: Identity, Tempering

the Sword, Riding the Emotional Storm, The Tempered Self and Survivor's Search for Connection.

The theme of Identity (Paras as elite and invincible) wove an indelible thread throughout their experience, predating their joining the Paras and ultimately offering a sense of immortality beyond physical demise (Becker, 1997). Other themes reflected; the participants' encounters with the perceived moment of death - an embodied experience revealed through sensory and temporal distortions; the ways in which this was managed emerged via sub-themes of action, humour, denial and minimising; the sense of self encountered change in both the short and long-term aftermath, revealing contrasting consequences of battlefield experience (e.g. disconnection from life as they knew it, versus powerful enhancements to their experience of being alive); and finally, these participants found various ways in which to reconnect, potentially offering a richer view of how they encountered the Grim Reaper yet remained psychologically robust.

Myth and mortal peril

One such mode of connecting/re-connecting emerged in the striking sub-theme of Myth-making. Myths are timeless tales which have reflected and shaped human life, possibly dating as far back as Neanderthal man. Often reflections of real events, they represent our attempts to explain and explore the realm of our desires, fears and longing, to provide stories and narratives about the meaning of being human (Armstrong, 2006).

The work of mythologist Joseph Campbell (1949/2008), offers an interesting backdrop to these participants' experiences. He argues that mythology connects humankind to the experience of existence and tells them what it means (Young, 2004), serving both sociological and psychological purpose. The former endorses a moral order, connecting individuals to society's ends and where heroes (Campbell suggests) are crucial for embodying the values of a world-order providing the impetus for ongoing existence. Myth's psychological function serves as a guide through challenging times. Campbell proposed the main theme of classic mythology

to be mortality – one of humanity's main concerns and knowledge of which forms the basis for all suffering. His emphasis on psychological aspects of myth illuminates their potential utility for coping with the stresses of life.

Jonathan Young (psychologist and Campbell's archivist) suggests that in tackling trials and ordeals, myths offer insight into managing and maintaining hope in the face of adversity (Young, 2006). So, while myths depict life with all its challenges, like existential philosophy they embrace adversity as a part of living, helping individuals through their most difficult experiences. Thus in viewing the trials of modern life as initiatory exploits, Campbell perhaps uniquely demonstrated their connections to ancient myths (Young, 1994).

One of Campbell's legacies was his concept of the monomyth; he proposed that all myths through time, across cultures are underpinned by the same basic structure. This supports the notion of myths as universal tools for human living and dying, for making sense of the world and individual experience, psychologically contained within a realm greater than the individual. The broad structure of the monomyth, described by Campbell (1949/2008) as the hero's journey; (departure, transformation, return) may be akin to a path through a particular challenge or through life itself. The middle part of the journey involves a series of initiatory adventures including challenges of facing enemies, creating allies and braving ordeals. Whilst Campbell was criticised for interpreting myths as reflecting inward, psychological journeys (Jacobs, 2004), from a phenomenological perspective they might be viewed as psychological processes in the intersubjective world. Thus, the monomyth as a guide to inner life out-in-the-world seems plausible - a universal structure leaving room for individual experience and interpretation within a lifeworld inexorably connected to others.

Campbell was inspired by the work of Freud and Jung, in particular the latter's archetypes. Of course, Jung himself wrote extensively on the subject of mythology (for example: Jung, 1916). However exploration of his ideas may go beyond the scope of this article. Despite these influences, Campbell's notion of the individual

may also be conceptualised as phenomenological. He proposed that each represent an essential part of the bigger picture of a society from which they are indivisible: ”The essence of oneself and the essence of the world: these two are one” (Campbell, 1949/2008 p.386). Language, attitudes and desires tumble forth from the individual’s cultural heritage and thus the memes upon which they are built are derived. They are as much a part of their culture and history as those are of them since they are formed by and create an integral part of it. If they break away, Campbell suggests, they disconnect from the core of their existence.

Myth and the military

For millennia, armies across the world have recognised the utility of myth in the military and have attempted to foster it, demonstrated for example by the Eagles of the legions of Rome (Warry, 1980) comparable to regimental colours (flags). This has provided the motivation for soldiers to face and fight to the death for an identifiable ‘cause’, underpinned by the same inspiration albeit wrapped in its particular cultural hue. Potentially quietening the noise of death salience, it facilitates their functioning in the extreme and often terrifying environments of war. It is therefore plausible that soldiers fight not only for their country/comrades but for or against a cultural ideology. Indeed Middlebrook (2009) highlights the German Jews fighting under assumed names in the 21st Independent Parachute Company at Arnhem.

Thus it is argued that myth and ritual have long been utilised by leaders to enhance military effectiveness. David Glantz’s (2005) exploration of the Red Army’s morale in WWII illustrates this. A notable military historian, Glantz reveals that although fear and hatred of the enemy was understandably an overriding motivation, discipline, fear and brutality were also constant drivers holding Soviet troops together in utterly appalling conditions. However, fear and hatred of their own commanders was also apparent. Confronted with these conflicting motivations, Glantz suggests that they turned instead to their ancestors for inspiration, to those who had resisted Mongol Tartars, Teutonic Knights, Poles, French and Germans. Thus the myths arising from the deeds of their forefathers offered patriotic cohesion, unity

and meaning, in the face of death. Furthermore and most significantly, Stalin's recognition (out of desperation suggests Glantz) of the utility of patriotism in such circumstances, led him to resurrect the traditional military ranks, medals and awards (previously abolished by the Bolsheviks) alongside the names of Russia's historically significant military leaders (Glantz, 2005).

Within the British Army, the regimental system provides a framework within which military myth (rooted in reality) may flourish, offering not only a strong cohesive identity but arguably enhanced psychological resilience when encountering significant traumatic events. An important aspect of the regimental system is that soldiers have traditionally recruited from distinct geographical areas often reflected in the regimental title, thus strong bonds are formed between the regiment and the community from which it is drawn. Each regiment is characterised by a distinctive esprit de corps originating from the regiment's traditions and history (French, 2008). This includes its own battle honours displayed on colours, unique ceremonial uniforms, marches and songs, role and recruitment. These facilitate the creation and reinforcement of moral cohesion, as families, friends and neighbours serve side-by-side.

French (2008) considered this as critical to the infantry's military effectiveness; hence amalgamations of regiments since the 1950s have drawn strong criticism from those fearing the consequences of what is seen as the dilution of the regimental system. Each regiment's unique culture and philosophy are passed on and thus regiments' antecedents endure, carried forwards by those which follow. Maintaining the history, traditions and standards of their regiment is of utmost importance to infantrymen as much in peacetime as in battle (French, 2008). Indeed, during the most life-threatening encounters in the Falklands, Chapman (2013) notes the highly motivating need to maintain the standards of those Paras who had come before them.

While each regiment constructs its unique myth, for the current participants, Campbell's (1949/2008) sociological function may be fulfilled through a broader

British Army-level myth seated within the regimental system to which its soldiers become connected. This huge hierarchy transports them through space and time, linking them to the story of battles won and lost, deeds of heroism and occasionally cowardice; retreats from disaster, charges to victory; flags and traditions, the nation defended; battles of the Empire, the squares of Waterloo; and the Thin Red Line. They are connected to traditions of British soldiers, outnumbered but refusing to give way to the advancing enemy. They embody the values and moral order of the Army, furthermore with the potential for joining the pantheon of heroes, who (as Becker (1997) reminds us), play a crucial role in any social world.

Some regiments were created with specific functions in mind such as the Parachute Regiment, which is unique in that there is no geographical delineation for recruitment. Regimental cohesion derives from its elite status; every member has passed the highly demanding Pre-Parachute Selection Course known as P Company (Chapman, 2013). Arguably, Campbell's (1949/2008) Hero's Journey may ring particularly true on the battlefield for all Paras, who undertake especially dangerous missions, often isolated and ahead of conventional ground troops. They personify the values through which their military world-order lives or dies which as Campbell suggests, provides strength and direction for the group's ongoing existence.

The psychological function of myth serves to propel us through important life-stages of change and crises (Campbell, 1964). This study's participants are steeped in Parachute Regimental myth reflected in the super-ordinate theme Identity. It is also strongly represented in The Survivor's Search for Connection, through multiple references to popular culture and to historical military events and people, to which/whom they now feel connected. Nowhere is the need for managing life under any circumstance more apparent than in combat. Campbell (1964) argues that myths carry us beyond experience into the unknown. For Paras (for whom leaping into the dark unknown enemy territory represents just the start), the psychological function of myth seems crucial. Indeed, the Para myth can be viewed within the structural context of Campbell's momomyth; departure-transformation-return, where their transformation, unique among regiments, celebrates battling

against hopeless odds, taking on superior enemy forces with surprise, determination and elan and holding on till the bitter end where others retreat.

Myth and the participants

Myth pushes the boundaries of existence, as if lighting the way ahead towards more meaningful living and perhaps engenders their new sense of purpose. This is consistent with the participants' group identity and ideals which themselves connect directly to the Regimental myth. There are interesting parallels between myth and Becker's (1997) concept of the cultural hero-system. Both offer a greater context in which to make sense of themselves and their experience, thus helping to contain the fundamental human anxiety (fear of death) arguably maintaining good mental health. At times of crisis such as mortal peril, they may engage more keenly with myth (strengthening the anxiety-buffer), consistent with TMT (Wong & Tomer, 2011) even when it increases the likelihood of dying.

Damian was in an open top vehicle in the midst of a fire-fight Afghanistan:

> *I basically stood on my seat and fired a 40 Mil grenade. I think I got him* [laughing] *I put a grenade right into the area where he'd shot at us from and I was pretty chuffed with that. [D31:1108]*

Although risky, he makes himself a bigger target in order to succeed. His identity as elite drives his desire to be the best, living up to the Para myth. Natural survival instincts to take cover are completely overridden as he actively risks death to enhance/maintain group identity.

Research has highlighted the protective nature of purposeful activity and Sutker, Davis, Uddo and Ditta (1995) proposed that highly committed individuals embody a sense of purposefulness that helps them find meaning in life and protects against battle stress. After traumatic encounters, it seems the overlapping of myth, history and group identity may powerfully reinforce the participants' commitment and connection to life, to death and to the cause/ideology, engendering a desire for

purpose and meaning. Indeed, Yalom (2011) emphasises the strong links between death terror and the belief one has not lived life to the full.

Campbell argued that myths expand our horizons (Young, 2004) and proposed three forms of access to contexts beyond individuals and which seem consistent with the findings of this study: 1. The myth itself; 2. Personal experience of it; 3. Image and symbolism.

1. The myth itself: The pre-existing Regimental myth contributes to the participants' determination to become Paras, defines who they want to be, who they become and strengthens group commitment:

> *Basically* [exhales audibly] *ever since I was a little boy I wanted to be a Paratrooper, since I was about seven years old. [D3:103]*

This reveals how the powerful Parachute Regiment myth reaches beyond the Paras, capturing his youthful imagination, providing inspiration and connection to this group which remains today. Damian's almost incredulous excitement about what this means, cannot be physically contained as he exhales.

2. The story achieves tangible form - a fusing of myth and man through dramatic participation, accessed here via active service; essentially an embodiment of the greater context, transcending expectations:

> *It wasn't that long ago I was a brick layer. I was firing at this Argie plane thinking 'If only my mum and dad could see me now'. That was the thought that went through my head. [C15:555]*

Carl is living the dream. He has personally engaged with the myth with which he is now merged.

> *…what was a story <u>before</u> is now a part of my <u>life.</u> [C31:1127]*

Active service created shared understanding, forging connections between generations previously separated by experience for which there were previously no words:

> *I'd never talked to my Dad about the Second World War because he never wanted to until I came back from The Falklands and we had shared experiences*. *[A17:622]*

Tangible experience gives Alex access not only to the Para myth, but to that of the antecedent regiments and generations. Past, present and future connect as he carries his and others' experience forwards.

3. Campbell's final step beyond the individual is achieved through the image and symbolism of the distinctive, hard-won Para uniform, through medals and traditions unique to the Regiment. Felix described his thoughts when he and others embarked on a one-way mission to destroy the Argentinian jets during the Falklands, essentially being sacrificed for the greater good/cause:

> *This is <u>why</u> we wear this cap badge, this is <u>what</u> our raison d'etre is you know, this is our life and if, when the shit gets going you can't get up and do what you're supposed to do then you shouldn't be here and the idea that you shouldn't be there was unthinkable. You would rather die than disgrace, it's not so much disgrace the Regiment and disgrace the cap badge, it's disgrace yourself because everything you'd lived for was in that symbol and then to turn around and say 'I don't want to do this'. You couldn't and nobody did. [F10: 349]*

Felix summed up the power of group identity, shaped in training, reinforced via adversity, consolidated in battle, embodied in the red beret. The loss or weakening of the group (through cowardice/failure) was a far greater threat than the loss of his own life, thus preferring death over failure. "…*it's worth dying for, not to be seen as*

a coward" [F9:332]. Death for Felix in this context may be conceptualised as heroic, ultimately offering what Becker (1997, p.5) terms "unshakeable meaning" or perhaps immortality. Dying for a cause may imply physical death, but living as a coward would render life devoid of meaning.

Building on his third form of access to mythic reality, Campbell highlighted ceremony and ritual as crucial to the process (Young, 1994). Rituals evoke the energy of our past, infused with all the meaning brought to bear through ancient myths (Campbell & Moyers, 1988). Ritual offers in-depth expression to human existence. While in ancient times, social events were structured around religious ritual, today in secular lives it is seen within customs around eating together, in law courts, in military contexts and in death (Campbell, 1972). Honouring the dead may be significant to the wellbeing of the living, apparent in broader contexts; Campbell pointed to the state funeral of J.F. Kennedy to underline the crucial function of such ritual to society (Campbell & Moyers, 1988).

Indeed ceremony and ritual permeate the military and, as Stalin discovered play a significant role in maintaining morale and psychological wellbeing when fighting a war. The importance of some ritual around death however small, even under the most impossible circumstances of battle, was emphasised by a WWII Red Army soldier who described how they were forced to bury their dead in unmarked graves lest the enemy discover them, but nonetheless with speeches, bullets fired and a marking of the spot on a map (Glantz, 2005).

When death rites are disrupted, the psychological impact may be devastating. Alex explained his attempts to organise the funeral of one of his men killed in the Falklands, underlining the significance of performing death rituals (however basic) in war:

> *…the guy said 'well I'm terribly sorry but the man who digs the hole isn't here…there's no hole for him'…[]…it was the worst thing I'd <u>ever</u> had to do in my whole life bar <u>none</u>. His mates got off the helicopter and I had to ask for*

> *volunteers to dig the hole and as we dug the hole, it filled with water so we laid him in a puddle and covered him in mud and we had our funeral and it was the most depressing moment that you could imagine. [A22:806]*

While the death of comrades in battle was challenging, it seems being robbed of the ceremony and ritual surrounding it also took a heavy psychological toll. Alex spoke with tears in his eyes, the impact of this still felt more than thirty years after the experience:

> *….the callousness, carelessness, lack of care of <u>the</u> <u>system</u> over the death of one young boy was the focus of <u>my</u> trauma for a long time afterwards and I couldn't speak about that without being affected by it emotionally. [A23:829]*

Alex revealed the importance of ceremony and ritual to his mental wellbeing and more importantly the sense of psychological disruption when organisational errors impeded them. It is plausible therefore that when myth and reality collide, psychological protection is reduced/lost if the system in which myth resides, fails. This highlights the significance of the regimental system in maintaining myth, crucial to psychological wellbeing and military performance.

Rituals are also carried out on a personal level, keeping the dead connected to the living:

> *There's a friend, I still go back to his grave…[]...it's in Aldershot, I put flowers on the grave, tend it because his parents are in Doncaster. So I go back to the cemetery and sit there, sad as it may sound, take a can of beer pour it on his grave and have a can with him. [C32:1154]*

Carl keeps the memory of his friend alive; sharing in death what was shared in life. In Campbell's (1949/2008) terms, the loss of one is a loss for the whole.

The potential for heroism and merging indelibly with the myth is highly motivating. Ben's decorated military action in Iraq not only engendered a huge sense of achievement, but the public ceremony surrounding it facilitated cultural reinforcement of the Parachute Regiment myth:

> *It was people from my own unit that wrote the citation, it was endorsed by the men on the ground that I'd done a good job. I got feedback from numerous people and that was very deeply, personally satisfying…it was the highlight of my military career. [B19:663]*

This highlights the distinction between his identity formed in part by becoming a Para, and then by fighting heroically in combat with the Regiment, after which he is integral to the myth. Rites and deeds consistent with cultural ideals consolidate the individual (the decorated hero) within the group, in turn, emphasising the aforementioned "essential oneness" (Campbell, 1949/2008, p.384). This strengthens their connections and arguably their psychological robustness. Indeed, paratrooper L/Cpl Joshua Leakey who recently became the first living recipient of the Victoria Cross (Britain's highest military award) for service in Afghanistan made it clear his was an achievement for the group. "I don't look at it about being about me in particular, I look at this as representing everyone from my unit, from my battalion, who was involved in the campaign in Afghanistan" (Lloyd, 2015). The gain for one is a gain for the whole.

The potential for immortality and meaning beyond individual extinction perhaps broadens understanding of why people lay down their lives for others or for a cause/ideology. Young (1996) suggests it is no longer necessary to revisit ancient tales in order to find meaning; they are to be found in abundance within popular culture. The humanist, Richard Norman also highlights the role of creativity through art and literature as a guide towards meaningful life. He challenges the suggestion that only religion can offer humans significant purpose and meaning, arguing conversely, that religion is actually just one of the ways in which stories/narratives can render life meaningful (Norman, 2004). Throughout history, the Arts (music,

literature, poetry, art) have been imbued with myth and today's route to mythological expression also includes television and film.

Campbell believed George Lucas gave the "most powerful spin" to the timeless tale of the hero in his Star Wars Trilogy. Lucas indeed acknowledged Campbell's influence in writing the screenplay which retold the initiatory adventures Campbell described, underpinned by his proposed monomythic structure (Campbell & Moyers, 1988 p.xiv). The participants' accounts were filled with references to popular culture:

> *Everyone else was firing like <u>hell</u> into this area and it looked like something out of Star Wars it was amazing but really bloody dangerously amazing. I mean Tracer, 50-Cal GPMG Tracer flying <u>straight</u> past us at every angle coming from the enemy and going towards the enemy so it was an amazing thing to see but it was fricking dangerous. [D30:1100]*

Lucas's initiatory adventures resonate with Damian as he connects to the vivid experience of existence when in mortal peril. Campbell suggested that through Star Wars, Lucas had recreated the ancient hero as accessible to 20/21st Century Man demonstrating that it was not technology which would save humankind, but intuition, conceptualised as "our true being" (Campbell & Moyers, 1988 p.xiv). This perhaps demonstrates the potential for psychological containment against the terror of death, when in battle and faced with mortality, such that high-level functioning may continue.

Myth in popular culture may create both expectations of what is to come and how to react. As Carl waited for the landing-craft ramp to go down on the beaches of the Falklands (leaving them completely exposed), he recalled a scene from a film:

> *We'd had the unfortunate advantage or disadvantage of seeing 'The Longest Day'. As soon as that ramp goes down, what happens? A machine gun opens up. So our expectations* [were] *of a machine-gun opening up. [C16:572]*

Carl knows not only what to expect but how to respond (standing his ground in the face of death) which creates an unbroken line of heroism connecting him back to his predecessors on D Day. This connection is also reflected in British military traditions such as the Battle of Waterloo Commemorative Dinner and more specifically for Paras, Arnhem Sunday and Rhine Crossing commemorations (British Army, 2015). Furthermore, recruits are taught basic regimental history, while officers are tasked with a more in-depth knowledge in order actively to uphold its ethos. This overlaps with the sub-theme Making Sense of the Self in Historical Context, since myth provides connections to the meaning of the past as well as making sense of the present. The concept of heroism underpinned by myth plays an important role, especially initially for getting men into battle:

> *A lot of young boys (because it comes with the sex), have a heroic ideal of a Rupert Brooke approach to dying for one's country. [A5:149]*

Once engaged in warfare, creation and maintenance of myths and of heroes becomes an active pursuit rather than simply an ideal and serves to align both incentives and needs of individuals with the greater cause/machine for which they risk life and limb and with society. Fighting for a common cause perhaps invests death and suffering with meaning and purpose, whether it be the Fatherland, La Belle France or the Empire:

> *I never thought that we wouldn't win. I was sorry that they were dead, but [] they fell in a justifiable and worthwhile cause. [E5:180]*

Ewan copes with the death of colleagues in the Falklands, safe in the knowledge that their early demise is meaningful and that they are now a part of the myth.

Unlike legends, myths may reflect concrete events (Campbell, 1964). Indeed as Carl discovers, sometimes art (or film) imitates life:

> *Private Ryan says, 'Ten seconds, God be with you'. Ours got something like 'Thirty seconds, good luck', almost the words from the film or the film took the words from our landing-craft. [C16:580]*

Film communicates the myth through which modern-day experience may be understood and contained. It helps Felix transcend the temporal world of suffering and death by giving voice to things that are beyond words, but as Campbell (1949/2008) suggested are understood through the metaphors contained within the myths:

> *Did you ever see the film The Deer Hunter? When <u>he</u> arrives back from Vietnam and all his friends are going 'Fucking A, come and see us' you know, and then he's just cold with them. That was <u>me.</u> [F14:505]*

Felix perhaps alludes to Stolorow's (2007) unspeakable disconnection from others arising from his encounters with mortal peril. Interestingly Hellman (1982) proposes that the Deer Hunter utilises the western, the primary American myth – itself underpinned by the monomyth (Campbell & Moyers, 1988), to explore Vietnam as the country's collective trauma. Here myth allows Felix to identify with the protagonist's detachment ("*cold"*) from both himself and others following his own exposure to the highly traumatic events of war.

Thus, it seems combat experience can lead to a more nuanced reaction towards myth:

> *As one of the famous First World War poets put it, dying for your country actually isn't that sweet, and that came out of experience. [A5:151]*

Alex's comment again demonstrates how myth might not always survive the collision with experience. The protective veil it affords may be attenuated or lost during encounters with particularly harsh realities of combat.

For these participants, returning to the fold (regiment/group) post-battle facilitated their reconnection to the myth. However, it seems religious faith may also be tested in combat. The controversial French novelist Houellebecq recently highlighted the void left by the 18th Century Western shift away from mythical traditions towards science, citing a recent resurgence of religion as filling the existential emptiness of Enlightenment man (Schofield, 2014). Nevertheless, it seems Carl's connection with Regimental myth (illustrated through multiple references to popular culture and British military history) transcended his faith, after watching a comrade die. This was tested to breaking point when the raw realities of war severed connections to it: "*When I went to the Falklands I gave up my religion"* [C1:35]. Without religion, Regimental myth perhaps helped Carl fill the void, reconnecting him to his (Para) cultural worldview in order to make sense of and contain his horrendous experiences as part of something greater than himself:

> *…on the battlefield the only thing that's going to save <u>you</u> is your rifle, whatever's in your magazine, your bayonet and you may get to next year. None of this 'Pray to God (excuse the French) bollocks', you can pray all you want but if a bullet's got your name on it, you're going down, end of. [C22:800]*

The super-ordinate themes emerging from the participants' accounts were interpreted as a series of connections and disconnections in response to their highly traumatic encounters. Disconnection in various forms characterise negative psychological consequences of trauma such as PTSD (e.g. American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Conway, 2013). It is argued that these participants remained mentally well in the long term due to the new and strengthened connections they established and in no small way due to the protection and connection afforded by

myth. Furthermore, it is the regimental system which provides the primary vehicle through which the British Army conveyed myth to these men.

In post-battle management of traumatic encounters, the role of myth appears to remain significant. Myth may re-draw connections lost: "*I can look back and tie myself to historical events"* [B22:797] and reinforce participants' renewed connection to life. The importance of ceremonies, memorials and remembering emerged throughout their accounts. When Alex describes the unusually emotional response from his men (attending an Arnhem commemoration service), unable to sing in the cemetery, it is as if they are as one with their forefathers.

> *…we'd not long come back from the Falklands. These guys who* [usually] *create mayhem, the lumps in their throats were too large to sing hymns in the cemetery. There were a lot of tears because <u>finally</u> we could appreciate what those old guys had gone through. [A18:627]*

Strong, painful emotions arising from this new connection, metaphorically and physically *('lumps'*) impede verbal expression. Empathy is instead expressed via the body [*a lot of tears*]. They are now merged with the myth via shared experience and as Campbell (1949/2008) suggests, feel the suffering and loss as their own.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is argued that for these participants the regimental system facilitated the crucial role of myth in enhancing psychological resilience in combat and maintaining it in peacetime. Myth may serve to get men into battle potentially drawing on its power to quell the innate fear of death, offering contexts greater than themselves and ways in which to manage the challenges they face. The notion of heroism during battle may keep them fighting, however once death or extreme adversity is encountered, it seems the power and protection of myth may be temporarily reduced leaving the individual more isolated, perhaps disconnected from the myth, the group and their traditions. Post battle, the regimental context facilitates the individual's reconnection to that myth which surrounds and supports

the group as a whole. Myth-making also offered these Paras a bridge between generations and a greater understanding of their predecessors' experiences. This in turn served to reinforce the Regimental myth, a context in which to make sense of their individual experience as part of a greater whole. Relationships with others (both past, present and indeed future as the myth lives on) were strengthened, underlining the complexities of intersubjectivity through time/space and context. Finally in light of these findings, future research might focus more broadly on the impact of further amalgamations and/or dismantling of regiments on both the psychological wellbeing and military performance for soldiers in battle.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Submission guidelines.

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Book Chapter

Meehl, P. E. (2006). The power of quantitative thinking. In N.G. Waller, L.J. Yonce, W.M. Grove, D. Faust, & M.F. Lenzenweger (Eds.), *A Paul Meehl reader: Essays on the practice of scientific psychology* (pp. 433–444). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

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Part 3: Professional Practice

Advanced Case Study

A Life Worth Living

Introduction and rationale for the choosing the case

I encountered 'Billy' whilst working as a counselling psychology trainee within a multi-disciplinary team at a psychiatric hospital. He was referred from his NHS trust after attempting suicide and I later selected him for my case study due to the interesting challenges we both faced during the course of therapy. CBT alone (the hospital's primary model) proved insufficient for engaging Billy, who felt he had lost his reason for living. He was struggling with specific issues around meaning and identity, thus an existential approach appeared appropriate. However as he progressed (by no means linear) his changing needs demanded therapeutic flexibility, whilst remaining theoretically grounded. O'Brien (2004) argues that no one theory or model is sufficient to understand the complexities of being human. For Billy, an integrative model certainly appeared appropriate for addressing his complex concerns, as he asked "who am I" and "what is the meaning of life?" Unable to find answers, he felt stuck; looking regretfully back and unable to see a future. His felt only option was suicide.

Summary of theoretical orientation

Existential therapy (ET) provided the core into which Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) were integrated. The following highlights aspects of ET relevant to this study plus its theoretical integration with CBT and ACT (themselves summarised in appendices A+B respectively).

ET views humans as creatures of continual change in the context of environmentally-created opportunities and limitations (also personal strengths and weaknesses) within finite lives. ET aims to elucidate the client's problems by perceiving them as basic dilemmas under the portmanteau term of the human condition (Deurzen & Adams, 2011). Despite its philosophical underpinnings, Manafi (2010b) views ET as a practical model underpinned by a focus on lived experience. Furthermore, the phenomenological method (appendix C) provides the only consistent reference to technique across the range of existential models (Cohn,

1997). As Manafi suggests, the practice of ET has shifted away from the notion of isolated individuals with intrapsychic issues and into the relational space in which we actually experience life and its challenges (Manafi, 2010a).

Taking a holistic view of the client's life, ET explores meaning, values and learning to live in line with personal ideals. Client experience is prioritised directly in the here-and-now rather than being filtered through theoretical frameworks (Manafi, 2010b). Yalom (1980) views authentic living as actively choosing rather than living by happenstance. Such authenticity requires acknowledging possibilities and limitations, plus the ongoing creation of identity whilst facing uncertainty about future events and inevitable death.

That we are free to change our response, underpins Sartre's conceptualisation of responsibility, a given of existence (Cohn, 1997). In existential terms, avoidance of freedom and responsibility means we live in bad faith (inauthentically) and lies at the heart of human existence (Deurzen & Adams, 2011). So rather than trying to eliminate particular symptoms or suggest that diagnoses are unimportant, ET tries to access their context, seeking to understand clients living in their world at any particular time. The broadest aim of existential therapy is thus to find a more authentic way of living (Yalom, 1980).

Integration of ET, CBT and ACT

CBT's dualistic epistemological position suggests anything beyond the broadest association with ET may be challenging, particularly in light of the fundamental existential notion of being-in-the-world, thus inseparable from others. However, Corrie and Milton (2000) propose that the significance of the interpretative characteristics of life experience offers a cross-over, potentially augmenting both models therapeutically. The ET concept of values incorporates all aspects of past/present/future, enhancing cognitive methods and offering potential for self-exploration, including who we might become (Corrie & Milton, 2000). Reciprocally, ET's understanding of the roots and consequences of sustaining values and beliefs (emotionally and behaviourally – two components of being) may be enriched when

conceptualised as schemas. Indeed, Leahy (2003) suggests that in describing and analysing experiential categories, cognitive therapy may even be conceptualised as phenomenology. Furthermore, empirical evidence demonstrates increased efficacy in cognitive therapy when addressing existentially-based issues (Addis & Jacobson, 1996).

Emphasis on the therapeutic relationship is conspicuous in counselling psychology regardless of model. Although CBT therapists are solution-focused, directive, 'experts' pursuing change, which contrasts with ET's support in elucidating lifeworld structures and limitations from which meaning may emanate, both are challenging and collaborative. The existential relationship promotes mutual exploration, with both client and therapist being present in the experience (Spinelli, 2009).

The combination of ET and ACT perhaps offers a more obvious integration platform with shared underpinning philosophies and the potential for creating rich, meaningful lives. Neither model seeks symptom reduction; while ET explores experience and being-in-the-world, ACT emphasises ongoing present moment awareness, valued directions and committed action. A further point of contact may be the concept of avoidance. ET illuminates the ways in which clients live their lives, helping them tackle rather than avoid problems; ACT encourages acceptance in the context of life's unavoidable pain (Harris, 2007).

The context for the work

The referral

Billy was referred from his NHS trust after a suicide attempt. The hand-over notes were functional, briefly describing events leading to his emergency admission, plus a history of depression and a previous suicide attempt (an overdose aged 17).

The presenting problem

Billy was assessed by a consultant psychiatrist, diagnosed with depression, anxiety, borderline personality traits and prescribed anti-depressant and anti-anxiety medication. He reported hearing a voice urging self-harm and suicide and was placed under 1:1 observation. Despite a history of depression and the previous suicide attempt, no intervention from mental health services (aside from overnight hospital admission at that time) had been recorded since. He was risk-assessed throughout therapy. All names/identifying details were changed to preserve anonymity.

First meeting

I first encountered Billy in the hospital's CBT group. A heavily-tattooed 38 year-old Caucasian man, he was dressed in black, his face obscured by long unruly hair offering glimpses of multiple piercings. A polite, intelligent (if battered) individual, he appeared constantly anxious, repeatedly stating that he had no reason for living. He remained unchanged for some time with CBT grasped intellectually, but reportedly unfelt. He continually expressed his wish to die and the feeling of being alone; the voice was his only companion. When we began sessions I initially felt overwhelmed by his helplessness, his desire to die and his absolute certainty of the futility of life. Our sessions were simply a better way of passing time while he was forced to live. We agreed to meet for weekly, 50 minute sessions for the duration of his stay at the hospital.

Biographical details

(Genogram: Appendix D).

Billy lives with his partner of 14 years and prior to hospital admission, ran his own music production company, although he had been unable to work for several months prior to this.

He described a fearful childhood, witnessing daily verbal and physical fights between his parents, who were both reportedly heavy drinkers. He perceived his (younger) brother as favoured and rewarded for 'attention-seeking' behaviour. Emotional expression (particularly 'negative') was rejected as over-sensitive and

unmanly. He also reported an absence of physical comfort or guidance from his parents throughout childhood.

During his early teens, his now-deceased maternal grandmother (also a heavy drinker) revealed that both parents had an estranged child each from previous relationships. Although confirmed, his step-siblings were never mentioned and he described his parents' lack of curiosity towards their children as 'incomprehensible' (a lack, apparently applicable to Billy).

He left school at 16 despite hopes of progressing to university, his parents actively discouraging not only academia but his considerable creativity such as painting, writing and music. While his relationship with his father was emotionally distant (shaking hands, back slapping) that with his mother appeared more explicitly problematic as he described incidents resulting in his public humiliation. The family dynamic Billy described was evident during hospital visits.

Formulation of problems

This formulation addresses Billy's experience in the four existential worlds (appendix E) since ET forms the core of this integrative model (see appendices F and G for brief CBT/ACT formulations respectively). From an existential perspective, Billy appeared to have relinquished responsibility for creating a life worth living through personal choice and freedom. Any attempt to live authentically was caught between ontological guilt; regret at lost opportunities in an unlived life and ontological anxiety; fear of uncertainty and of future possibilities (Yalom, 1980). His guilt stemmed not only from perceived transgressions, but for being different, not speaking out, and for attempting suicide.

Billy's early experience in the physical dimension was of rejection, disconnection and emotional absence. The lack of physical comfort or security yielded an unsafe, unsatisfying world, compounded by school bullies further emphasising physical and emotional vulnerability. His relationship with mortality in this dimension seemed ambiguous. He feared ageing and dying yet paradoxically sought physical death

through attempted suicide and psychologically via suicide ideation and a self-destructive inner voice.

In the social dimension he experienced alienation from his “working class” family through his desire to study and to explore the world, exacerbated by his parents’ dependence on him. He expressed feelings of superiority towards them, yet continually sought unforthcoming approval, comfort and acceptance. Fearing rejection, he adopted acceptable “masks” to conceal seemingly unacceptable parts of himself. Expression of ‘difficult’ emotions elicited rejection or punishment. Thus connection with others became fraught with danger (threatening survival in childhood, later a terrifying isolation). Intimacy was conditional upon concealing emotions or pleasing people.

This allowed others to conceptualise him as strong and able to assume responsibility for the family. This dynamic played to his desire to please in order to gain acceptance and belonging but which ultimately resulted in the stark awareness of being alone. He thus faced the paradox of denying himself the thing he craved most; connection to others. His fear of rejection too painful to bear, elicited self-imposed isolation via his appearance, seemingly-superior attitudes and by pre-empting rejection by rejecting others first. Although his superior stance could be viewed as grandiose, it appeared underpinned by low self-esteem given his consistent self-hatred (perhaps reconcilable with Kohut’s theories on self-esteem and narcissism (1971, as cited in Bateman & Holmes, 1995: appendix H), but beyond the scope of this study). On the one occasion he believed he had formed a meaningful friendship, it ended in suicide for which he was blamed by the deceased (via text), their family and most importantly himself.

In the psychological dimension, Billy struggled to experience himself as ‘whole’, perhaps due to aspects of him deemed unacceptable by others. Isolation led to the creation of a fearful yet creative inner world which when expressed elicited silence, criticism or ridicule. The voice increasingly urged suicide and self-harm and Billy described himself as a ‘terrible human being’. His fear of ageing and decay may

have stalled his living in the present; unable to make life decisions or imagine a future, while regretting his lost past.

In the spiritual dimension Billy desired certainty from an uncertain world, unsurprising given his unpredictable early experiences. This manifested in rigid emotional control ("emotions are messy") and intellectualising distressing events. Frankl (2004) suggests rational explanations may satisfy the drive for meaning-making, temporarily alleviating anxiety. Billy's 'ideal' world underpinned by values of knowledge, fairness/justice, love/caring, creativity, honesty and independence was a far cry from his lived experience. Such inauthentic living led to an existential crisis of isolation, identity and meaning, leading to his admission to hospital.

Therapeutic aims

Patients at this hospital choose whether or not they attend groups and/or individual sessions. This means negotiating a therapeutic 'contract' can be challenging. Furthermore, patients may be recalled to their NHS trust without notice. We thus agreed to meet every week at the same time for 50 minutes for the duration of his stay, a contract he honoured. Due to his presentation, initially ET alone formed the basis for therapy. ET prioritises experience and 'being with' clients, so there were no specific therapeutic goals (such as reducing symptoms), rather a broad aim to facilitate addressing his issues rather than avoiding them (Deurzen & Adams, 2011). By getting as close to his experience as possible, it was hoped a holistic view of his life might aid exploration of meaning and values in the service of finding a more authentic way of living (Yalom, 1980). Upon discharge, Billy continued sessions in outpatients. After 30 weeks and notable changes, he requested meeting bi-monthly. After 43 sessions, we began meeting once a month, explicitly working towards ending.

The development of the therapy

Since my collaboration with Billy did not progress in a linear fashion, I have chosen to represent the development of therapy thematically. Three themes wove a thread

throughout the therapeutic experience: Interpersonal relationships; the Voice; and Meaning-making. These themes are intrinsically linked and thus (in the spirit of the phenomenological method) no attempt is made to create a hierarchy of importance. They are simply presented in the way I feel best represents the therapy, incorporating the content, process, difficulties and supervision.

Introduction

Initially, Billy appeared fragile, so I prioritised just being with him. I struggled to stay with his feelings of helplessness, meaninglessness and failure underpinned by his long-term experience of being unheard, trying to comprehend his stance of unremitting futility. He described life as a series of disconnected events – temporary distractions ("creative highs") such as writing and composing interspersed with much-dreaded extreme low points. Despite overwhelming pessimism, Billy's dark humour made its presence known across sessions. I felt he was somehow testing me, to see what I could handle. This actually facilitated therapeutic bonding significantly, though I remained sensitive to times when he used humour to disguise distress.

Attempting to get as close as possible to and understand the world of another is fundamental to an existential approach (Deurzen & Adams, 2011) but Billy's initial helplessness was extremely challenging for me. Although primarily a psychodynamic/analytic concept, attention to transference proved illuminating. Yalom (2011) re-conceptualises this as use of here-and-now feelings and recommends constant awareness of this in therapy. Billy's helplessness triggered feelings of extreme discomfort in me (due to past physical illness and some similar family dynamics). I oscillated between overwhelming helplessness, anxiety and irritation when he appeared unable to pick himself up and get on with things - my own (occasionally unhelpful) response to life's challenges.

Attempting to avoid my discomfort I felt the urge to 'assist' him (to reduce my anxiety) and hurry the process. I found myself rushing, rather than moving at his pace, however this was quickly identified in supervision and I slowed down by

returning to the phenomenological rule of description and to his experience. Supervision helped me contain my own feelings and proved an incredibly useful process of development, enriching my understanding and allowing me closer to Billy's experience. While his story unfolded, I made no demands on him and our relationship began to develop. I hoped the therapeutic relationship could at least facilitate the new experience of being heard. Beyond this, I attempted (not entirely successfully) to set aside any desire for his 'recovery'. As Strasser and Strasser (2002) highlight, in ET, anxious therapists hoping for positive results may hinder the client's self-discovery. For Billy, the meaninglessness he encountered meant there was no point, that he could not be 'mended'. So I suggested we use therapy simply as an exploratory process, reducing the pressure on him to recover which he was resisting at that time.

Interpersonal relationships

As Cohn (1997) suggests it was not my aim, nor role to judge Billy's authenticity. However, since his distress appeared closely linked to difficulties in his relationships with others - an existential given (Cohn, 1997), I hoped to assist him not only in gaining a different perspective but finding new responses to his conflict. Billy's relationship with the world appeared fearful and defensive, underpinned by suspicion. Initially, he was vague about family relationships describing them as 'supportive' and 'always doing their best', which contrasted with descriptions of intense isolation and loneliness. This vagueness sparked my curiosity but at this stage his fragility made challenge inappropriate and I attempted associative interventions in the service of disclosure and self-expression (Strasser & Strasser, 2002).

We gently explored his early experiences and as our relationship strengthened, he slowly invited me into his world of guilt, shame and self-blame but always presenting as emotionally flat. He returned to a childhood of rejection, emotional absence and disconnection, describing himself as "so different to them" that they (family) could not be expected to cope. Over time this exploration helped Billy realise he had blocked emotions in order to avoid punishment and rejection.

Formerly viewing this as strength, he began to question its current utility. He explored how such emotional 'control' might have led to his family's increasing dependence (viewing him as strong and capable of coping), exacerbating his isolation.

Interestingly, it was his relationship with his mother which facilitated explicit expression of anger (about humiliating past events) and using these to explore previously-blocked emotions for the first time. In early sessions, he claimed to feel no anger towards his "favoured" brother (who suffered depression) explaining that having looked after him, he simply felt protective. However, later as emotional engagement in sessions increased he was able to express both anger towards him for taking advantage of favouritism and sadness for his depression, learning to hold both these simultaneously as valid modes-of-being. It also facilitated an understanding that despite his perceived privilege, his brother may have experienced his own childhood difficulties.

A joint formulation allowed Billy to see life as a continuum, joining the dots between experiences and his modes-of-being (products of his beliefs), where emotionally absent parents left no space for developing an experiential template for later emotional expression. Thus with nothing to contain it, anxiety demanded he protect against it. He eventually realised how people-pleasing and assuming responsibility for others (particularly his brother), became his survival mode and escape from rejection. The therapeutic relationship provided opportunities to explore this as he tried to please me (and others in groups) with clever intellectual discussion and impeccable behaviour, while resisting emotional engagement. He feared the vulnerability underpinning closeness to others whilst experiencing the desire to be with "intelligent, rational people"- i.e. predictable and consistent perhaps in ways his family was not. Making explicit, the links between his behaviour in and outside therapy, facilitated his understanding that paradoxically it increased his loneliness and distanced him further from others; connection and belonging being the very things he desired. To encourage new perspectives, we explored not only his negative experience of existential isolation, but its reverse, more positive

benefits. I.e. embracing a reality rather than denying it and its relationship to his much-valued independence.

For many sessions, he suppressed emotions using thoughts, rationalising the world around him which was apparent in his values-system; highly prizing knowledge. However, I was cautious about explicit exploration of emotions as supervision had highlighted my tendency to rush, rather than staying with him. Tentatively encouraging reflection on the meaning of his limited emotional responses however proved fruitful; while anger meant fundamental loss of control (representing ultimate helplessness) the more explicitly connective emotions such as happiness, for him meant risking a threatening (past parental) rejection. He experienced the world and others in it, as acting upon him, where he felt helpless to help himself, only serving the interests of others. Rejection was enhanced by his chosen physical appearance, once describing himself as "someone people avoid". His friend's suicide strongly reinforced his fear of vulnerability and connection, emphasising perceived dangers of intimacy. He explored associated guilt and unexpressed anger towards himself and his friend over many months, choosing ultimately to accept some responsibility, not for the death, but for their relationship prior to the suicide. Over time as his response to it changed, he reported that its impact was waning and the nightmares had stopped.

He was initially cautious about emotional expression during sessions (revealing his fear of upsetting me and losing "this safe place"). When he began to open up, I simply stayed with whatever he brought. As he tussled with conflicting desires for both vulnerable connection and for the safety of emotional blocking and distance, I could see parallels with my own childhood. Being with him in his (even muted) distress, facilitated an almost cathartic acknowledgement of my own past. Supervision enabled me to contain his visceral emotional experience in sessions, helping me not only cope, but to use the roller-coaster nature of the therapeutic journey creatively. Initially, because Billy experienced such helplessness, any sign of change engendered in me relief and reduced anxiety. Conversely, often after two weeks of change, a return to meaninglessness and self-harm felt brutal. The

concept of polarities proved invaluable, both as a tool for me and for enhancing Billy's sense of authenticity. For example, exploration of anger vs. forgiveness offered the opportunity to hear and embrace them both as part of his whole experience.

Since CBT may be flexibly woven into discussions using accessible, everyday language, I tend to avoid directive CBT jargon, particularly important here given Billy's early rejection of the model. ACT's focus on acceptance, plus the CBT concept of reframing (Westbrook, Kennerley & Kirk, 2011) helped Billy recognise the past loss of parenting, associated opportunities and to adjust expectations around family, accepting them as they are and seeking things they were unable to offer elsewhere. I was careful to ensure he did not simply shift blame from himself to his family for perceived and experienced problems, but to explore the notion of shared responsibility. This enabled him to connect his defensive patterns of surviving early rejection and isolation to his current experience, providing greater opportunity for change. Subsequently, he began exploring ways in which he alienated others such as behaving/feeling superior and always emphasising difference rather than belonging. This also illuminated the consequences; on one occasion, he described insisting work colleagues ignore his birthday, and then reported disappointment when this was respected.

Exploring relationship dynamics brought those with his partner to attention, whose behaviour, described over some months, appeared consistent with severe depression. He discovered this relationship played into a familiar dynamic, satisfying conflicting demands of having someone to care for rather than himself, kept at arm's length "to protect her" from his difficulties (e.g. unshared thoughts about suicide and the voice) then feeling unheard, rejected and unsupported when attempting closeness (repeating family dynamics).

This elicited a shift in understanding of responsibility and agency. The dissociation between feelings and behaviour was maintained until he gradually realised how the latter reduced his chances of ever belonging. Further as Deurzen (2012a) suggests,

by reframing depression as a stance adopted towards the world, rather than resulting from deterministic childhood events (a perspective common to psychoanalytic approaches), Billy slowly began to shift away from the notion of victim-of-circumstance to consolidate his sense of agency and consider other options. During these sessions, CBT increased opportunities to challenge his core beliefs/schemas (I am helpless, worthless, a failure) enhancing his understanding of the origins and repercussions of maintaining certain beliefs or values.

Furthermore, as Corrie and Milton (2000) propose, far from conflicting with existential practice, behavioural experiments (e.g. Greenberger & Padesky, 1995) helped Billy discover that some beliefs were no longer 'true', thus adding flexibility to his search for meaning. For example, a CBT approach to assertiveness (Butler & Hope, 2007) for managing unreasonable family demands increased his sense of agency and confidence despite initial attempts seeming to fail. Persistence paid off and eventually family interactions improved. Relinquishing responsibility particularly for his brother, not only facilitated his own agency but interestingly (perhaps coincidentally) his brother finally moved out of the parental home. Furthermore, graded-exposure to a social life offered opportunities to challenge the belief that he could not cope with others, nor they with him, gradually learning to stay with his initial discomfort when socialising (Leahy, 2003).

The Voice

Billy described the voice, which appeared in his early teens, as the "bad part" enhancing his sense of disconnection. Urged by the voice, he continually expressed his desire to die, the meaninglessness of life and his feeling of being a worthless outcast. I encouraged him to describe his experiences in detail asking exploratory/clarifying questions. Initially when I was struggling to be with his helplessness, Billy himself focused my attention, the cornerstone of phenomenological tradition (Deurzen & Adams, 2011). He wrote me a letter expressing a desire to share his "terrible madness" just for one minute, so I could understand it *for* him as he felt unable to describe it eloquently enough. He had felt unheard (my repetition of his past experience). During my struggle to be with him, I

had made assumptions about hearing voices and failed to observe the key phenomenological rule of (attempting) epoché.

Simply trying to set aside my own beliefs, offered me better access into his exhausting world of roving sensory spotlights relentlessly highlighting random conversations, toilets flushing, car horns, accompanied by the voice screaming ever-more violent demands for self-harm and suicide. This facilitated a more visceral understanding of the constant fear and anguish he experienced. Collaborative exploration highlighted when the voice was harshest and its potential triggers. Incorporation of CBT diary-keeping (e.g. Westbrook, et al., 2011) illuminated connections between social interactions and the voice, worsening at moments of emotional arousal, particularly with family.

As my understanding increased, our relationship grew and he began to explore the function of this voice. Initially he felt it might be a companion to his loneliness (indeed later once its occurrence receded, he reported "kind of missing it"). He described its first appearance when, aged 13 he witnessed a serious physical fight between his parents. Urged by the voice, he began hitting himself with a metal bar. While verbal pleas had gone unheard, this stopped the fight.

From here, exploring its function further, he suggested it might facilitate being heard since no one listened when he was compliant. However, although the voice/self-harm elicited superficial attention, we considered unwanted consequences. Aside from a night in hospital, his teenage suicide attempt resulted in total silence from the family and a request to take his dog to be put down the day he returned home. His recent admission to hospital elicited similar-seeming indifference from them, offering a new perspective on the utility of his self-harm.

Linking childhood emotional expression to rejection and punishment, Billy speculated that the voice might also provide a warning system to block unwanted feelings thus leading to their physical manifestation in self-harm. We explored the idea that the voice raised awareness of unmet needs. He began investigating ways

in which he might self-soothe, later describing lying on the floor listening to music and the feeling of well-being like “a ball of energy in my chest” spreading throughout his body. In time he realised that change only occurred as he took responsibility and interacted differently with the world.

Both ACT and ET emphasise being present but at times Billy’s efforts to resist or avoid the voice often reduced his engagement in sessions. The ACT Metaphor (appendix I) enhanced understanding that such efforts actually increased that which he attempted to avoid. Although conceptualised slightly differently, both models view suffering as inevitable. Moments of peak distress outside therapy often led Billy to self-harm so we explored ACT defusion techniques, including letting go metaphors (e.g. leaves on a stream) encouraging observation of the voice without reacting (Harris, 2007). We also played with the voice, as he visualised a volume button, turning the sound up and down to extremes. He reported that accepting rather than avoiding the voice gradually reduced anxiety and provided some respite from distress (Harris, 2007). This helped him understand its transient nature, slowly enhancing his ability to cope without self-harm which became less frequent.

Implicit understanding (derived from childhood experiences) that parts of him were unacceptable, underpinned his feeling of disconnection. Billy’s sense of himself as a curious, creative and sensitive being was deemed wrong by others, with such rejection impacting self-esteem and contributing to anxiety and confusion about who he was (Strasser & Strasser, 2002).

Accepting the voice as a part of his being rather than a distinct entity proved pivotal; firstly, he began to understand how different parts actually formed the whole; secondly, once he allowed the voice into therapy, experiencing acceptance not rejection promoted further emotional engagement. Subsequently he began expressing overt hurt, fear, sadness and anger. The voice began to recede with occasional recurrences. Supervision helped me frame these as opportunities to enhance his sense of authenticity, with both relapse and ‘progress’ as valid ways of being-in-the-world.

Meaning

Billy's experience corresponded with Strasser and Strasser's (2002) finding that clients suffering depression believe their existence lacks meaning; similarly, with Yalom's (1980) suggestion that the inability to find coherent meaning in a senseless world, leads to anxiety and helplessness. Sartre (2003) believed any such search futile, encapsulating a circular paradox which Billy met head-on; the search for non-existent meaning he had yet to create. I tried to comprehend Billy's experience existentially as relating to meaning and his mode of being-in-time (Deurzen & Adams, 2011). He was unable to see a future and move forwards, appearing actively to carry with him, past rejection, isolation, neglect and guilt.

His inability to connect to his artistic self (procrastination, writer's block, fear of failure) was distressing, so we explored the concept of meaning and his responsibility for creating that (Deurzen, 2012b). He began using the 'downs' to connect to his ability to be 'up' and creative. In assuming responsibility for others, Billy had avoided engaging with his own life (eliciting anxiety), potentially living inauthentically and lacking purpose. Deurzen (2012a) posits that symptoms (in Billy's case self-harm; anxiety; depression) express disconnection from responsibility. We explored the meaning of his suicide ideation and self-harm. He described wanting to push the boundaries further each time (perhaps closer to death). Paradoxically he sought to feel something, to feel alive, bringing to mind Yalom's (2011 p.30/1) notion of "existential shock therapy".

While ET explores the value-system created by the client which as Yalom (1980) suggests forms a virtuous circle with meaning, ACT sees the elucidation of values as crucial to the process of creating meaning (Harris, 2007). Incorporating ACT's explicit exploration encouraged Billy's proactive engagement rather than his default intellectualisation. Identifying his values inspired change, e.g. he began studying philosophy and while his valued 'knowledge' was nurtured through intellectual growth, it also served to heal lost opportunities, enhance low self-esteem, and create a more meaningful existence.

Furthermore, highlighting values enabled the reframing of Billy's return to work. A financially beneficial, but intellectually un-stimulating job was conceptualised as an impermanent but important means-to-an-end, offering valued independence with future freedom to choose differently. This reinforced agency and responsibility. Billy identified 'progress' relating to confidence, perfectionism and a shift in previously-held polarised views; he approached philosophical study as a life-long endeavour and any failure on that path as valued learning. This highlighted differences between his goal of an A* and the value of knowledge, which he gained regardless of goal. Thus identifying the grey area between previously polarised positions offered access to a future. Interestingly, this was when he first reported no longer wanting to die. The voice stopped demanding suicide and he linked his new-found purpose and meaning to his explicit decision and desire to live. Finding purpose through study also facilitated shifts in work relationships. Colleagues interested in his philosophical pursuits requested he begin hosting small discussion groups at lunch, shifting his identity a little from outsider towards belonging, although this remains challenging.

The conclusion of the therapy and the review

Ending was something we discussed throughout therapy. I have been mindful of the importance of this for Billy given his experience of rejection. However, although clearly valuing the process, he always maintained the hope of moving forwards without therapeutic support. Thus it was important to progress towards ending at his pace. After successfully reducing the number of sessions to twice a month, he requested reducing to once every four weeks, with a view to ending within two months.

Billy is now able to express his feelings about childhood and has begun to accept his past. Although he still hears the voice on occasions (indeed he accepts that it may always be a part of his experience) he is coping without the need for self-harm. In one session he reported an "epiphany" when last tempted to cut himself, asking "why am I doing this when I know I don't want to"? He realised in that moment that

he could choose differently and says he has made a very explicit choice not to self-harm again. He consistently puts down more healthy boundaries with others and feels he has developed more realistic expectations of family, friends and colleagues. He also acknowledges his role and responsibility in creating relationships of worth. In philosophy he has found renewed meaning and identity, with which he can build a future having just enrolled in an undergraduate degree. This has helped reduce his fear of ageing and decay, perhaps now mediated by the potential for leaving a legacy (consistent with Yalom's (1991) theories about easing a fear of death).

Billy now accepts the unpredictable nature of living, acknowledging that inevitably, tough times lie ahead, however he feels better prepared for this. He has been discharged from his CMHT whilst remaining in the care of his GP. After ending, he requested returning for 'top up' sessions if required, which was agreed however I sense this will not be necessary.

In evaluating this work, I feel that a more experienced existential practitioner might have facilitated Billy's understanding and interpretation of his situation sooner as my initial anxiety and tendency to rush may have impeded his progress. Together we built a strong therapeutic bond which on occasions, withstood some very robust challenges. If nothing else, I hope that this provides Billy with an experience to carry forwards into creating future relationships. It has taught me the very real benefits of letting go of expectations (particularly hopes of 'recovery') to facilitate agency and potential for change within the client.

This journey was at times challenging, frustrating and anxiety-provoking. It was also a journey filled with warmth and humour even though I was forced to meet my own demons head-on confronting my struggle with helplessness, perfectionism, difficulties in my own childhood and differentiation from family. My ability to sit with and contain another's experience of helplessness without feeling overwhelmed by unwanted memories has increased immeasurably. Indeed it has become something to use positively in therapeutic encounters rather than something to dread. Further, in encouraging Billy to consider values rather than

goals, my own perfectionism was challenged as I experienced vicariously, advantageous change versus the relentless pursuit of the impossible, which regardless would never be enough.

Although I had made peace with my own family difficulties some time ago, that journey was quite unconscious. Being with Billy as he struggled explicitly with (and eventually accepting) his family situation, allowed me to revisit my own experience alongside him, making sense of my formerly intuitive reaction to adversity. Moreover, in understanding my need to rush, I am now much more aware of the importance of working at the client's pace, which has already enhanced my work with others. Further, I have found that maintaining an existential attitude regardless of client or model, augments therapeutic encounters. Description and attempted epoché in particular allow breathing space from the urgency placed on many therapists to produce 'results' where none appear forthcoming. Without the jargon and direction, CBT and ACT felt natural partners to ET, a creative, flexible and much-overlooked model. I will carry this invaluable experience with me going forwards. Billy proved a thought-provoking and inspiring individual who has changed me (possibly as much as himself) through his determined persistence to create a life of purpose, in the face of severe difficulties and inevitable ongoing challenges.

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Appendices

Appendix A: CBT Theory

Combining cognitive therapy (Beck, 1979) and behavioural approaches (e.g. Skinner, 1953), the underpinning assumption of CBT is that thoughts, feelings, behaviours and physiology comprise an integrated system where alterations in one, affect change within the others (Curwen, Palmer & Ruddell, 2003). Collaborating with the therapist, clients are encouraged to tackle their idiosyncratic thinking patterns and behaviour using logic and evidence (Leahy, 2003). The behavioural component of CBT includes testing the challenges made to irrational beliefs via behavioural experiments, reinforcing more rational beliefs in practice (Leahy, 2003). For example, such experiments might enable clients to experience that fear (prompted by beliefs) leads to no actual change in their lives (Leahy, 2003). Graded exposure allows clients to test negative thoughts/beliefs about feared events at a manageable pace, gradually learning through experience, that specific stimuli are tolerable (Leahy, 2003). Meanwhile, reframing encourages a broader view about events, situations or stimuli leading to more choice and greater flexibility of thought and behaviour (Westbrook et al., 2011). ET differs fundamentally to behavioural models in its stance on therapeutic change. Change is a main objective of CBT (and ACT), although simply viewed as an inevitable by-product in ET (Spinelli, 2007).

Appendix B: ACT Theory

Drawing on existential philosophies, ACT aims to create a full, valuable and meaningful life, while accepting the unavoidable pain that accompanies it (Harris, 2007). However, it remains a third wave cognitive behavioural therapy model which privileges the idea of the normal human mind's bias towards detrimental emotional and cognitive practices (Hayes, Stosahl & Wilson, 2012). It promotes values-guided action to address existentially-driven questions such as what matters to you; who you want to be and what you want to do in the limited time you have (Harris, 2009). Exploration of values may be proactive, using worksheets or value cards to promote collaborative discussion and exploration of what you really want in life and the actions necessary to work towards that (Harris, 2006). The ACT model is represented by the Hexaflex (see below) comprising 6 essential elements (including acceptance; defusion; self-as-context; contact with the present moment; values; committed action). ACT discourages attempts to control thoughts and feelings, assisting clients in simply noticing, accepting and welcoming challenging internal events (Harris, 2006). Unhelpful control strategies (e.g. drugs/alcohol) are conceptualised as experiential avoidance (Christodoulou, 2013). The Triflex (see appendix G) groups the core processes into three functional entities:

1. Defusion and acceptance encourage separation of thoughts from feelings and making room for them (in ACT terms 'opening up')

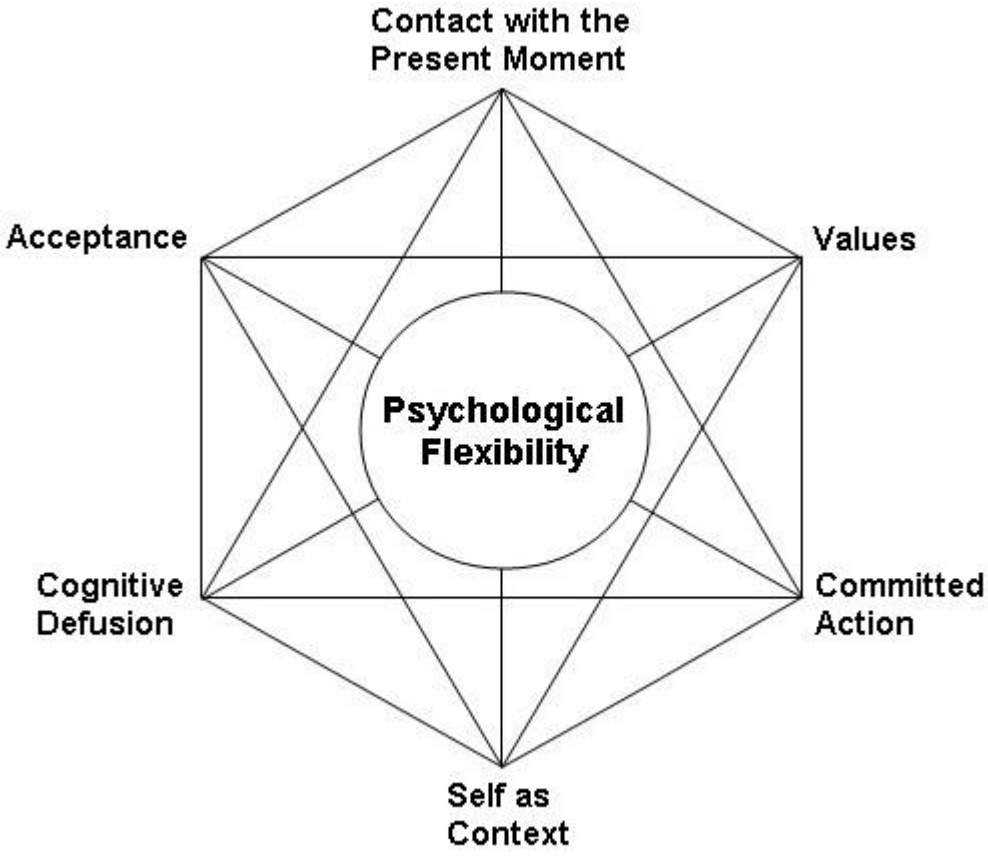
2. Contact with the present moment and self-as-context prioritise all aspects of the here-and-now (i.e. 'being present').

3. Values and committed action promote action in the service of growth and development of one's life ('doing what matters') (Harris, 2009 p.12).

A variety of defusion techniques encourage distance from unhelpful thoughts. Harris (2009) recommends these techniques to promote collaboration in finding novel ways in which to respond to these thoughts facilitating new attitudes. The

techniques involve playing with thoughts and images e.g. being sung to Happy Birthday or heard in silly voices. These may be accentuated by 'letting go' metaphors such as watching leaves on a stream or balloons floating away. The fundamental aim is to help clients develop psychological flexibility (Harris, 2007).

ACT Hexaflex: (Harris, 2009)



Appendix C: Phenomenological method

Cohn (1997) posits the phenomenological method based on the ideas of Edmund Husserl, as the only consistent nod to technique across the range of existential models. Thus, it is regarded as a heuristic rather than definitive guide (Langdridge, 2007). Spinelli (2005) outlines three steps to the phenomenological method. Each step conceptualised as a specific focal point in a whole, rather than distinct from the other two.

Epoché

This necessitates standing aside from our own experience; bracketing assumptions/biases which incline us towards particular explanations (i.e. the natural attitude) in order to focus on the immediacy of experience with an open mind (Langdridge & Butt, 2007).

However, while epoché may serve to justify the phenomenological approach epistemologically, such assertions of cognitive privilege seem an odd basis for such claims of transcending Cartesian thinking. Were individual/social; mind/body truly inseparable, the notion of conveniently side-stepping such a 'whole' at will through perceptual gymnastics would be unthinkable - a problem recognised by existentialists such as Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012), so is accepted as something to aim for.

Description

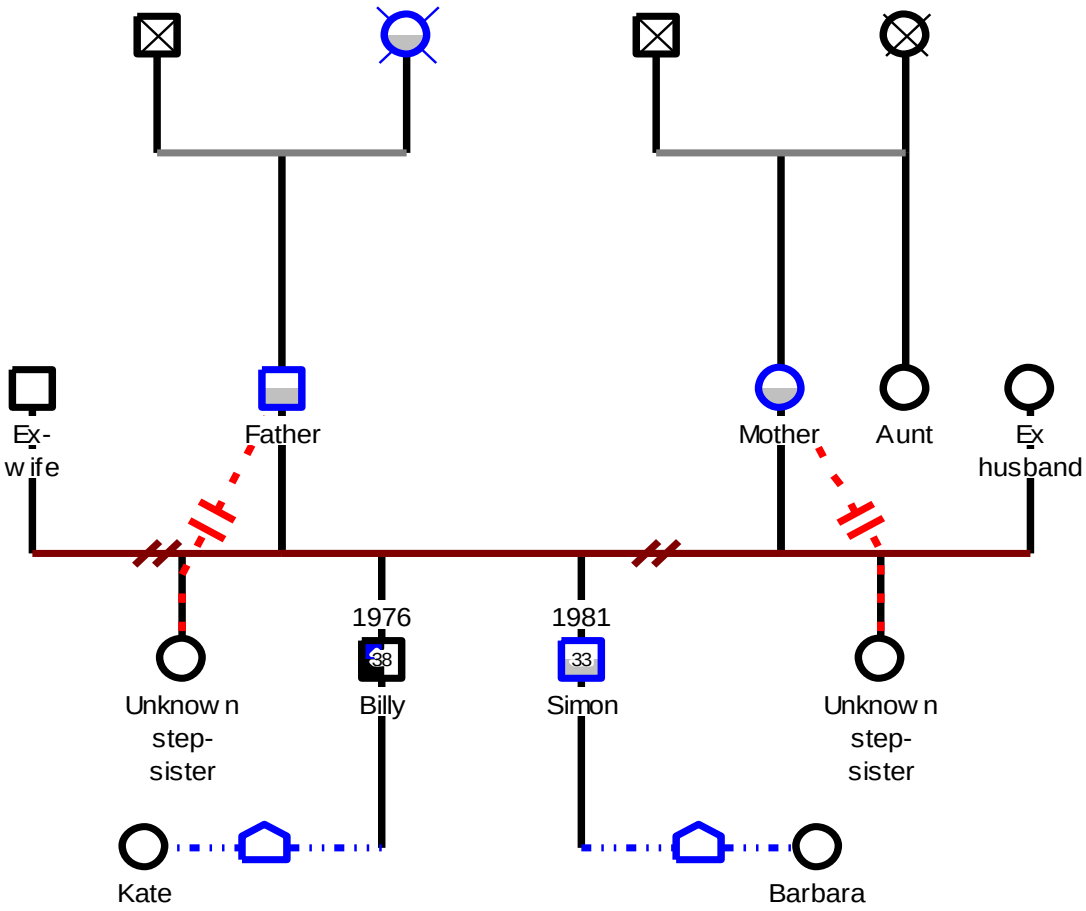
This spotlights description rather than explanation, where the initial focus remains on immediate, concrete impressions (Spinelli, 2005). Explanation involves stepping back and distancing us from immediate experience. Spinelli also suggests the rule of description seeks a similarly unattainable ideal to that of epoché, in that no description can be void of explanation.

Horizontalisation

This helps avoid creating hierarchies of significance or importance, treating everything as valued equally (Langdridge, 2007). Spinelli (2005) suggests that we are better able to arrive at an unprejudiced view by making no assumptions, describing what is being experienced and avoiding hierarchical suppositions.

Reflexivity is central to these ideas, underlining the importance of personal therapy and supervision. Being aware of our own worldview (attitudes and assumptions) offers the possibility of getting closer to understanding the world of another.

Appendix D: Genogram



Appendix E: Four Existential Worlds

The physical dimension concerns very early experiences where we first relate to our own bodies in a physical environment and includes physical comfort and security. Here love provides reassurance, satisfaction and safety (Deurzen, 2010). Limitations due to illness or aging may be considered on this dimension (Deurzen & Adams, 2011).

The spiritual dimension concerns our stance towards the unknown, the creation of our 'ideal' world plus our corresponding values system and how we attribute meaning to our experiences (Deurzen, 2010). Implicit values and beliefs may determine how we live life. Personal reflection provides opportunities to find meaning in life (Deurzen & Adams, 2011).

The psychological/personal dimension emphasises our relationship with ourselves, our inner world, personal identity, past experience and future possibilities. Life's events can impede our search for the feeling of being of substance, with a solid sense of self. Confusion about who we are is enhanced when we encounter the unexpected (Deurzen & Adams, 2011).

Socially we are relating with others and the world around us responding to our class, race and culture. We may contemplate the necessity for others, facing the ambiguity of resisting closeness yet needing other people for emotional and physical well-being and survival. We face aloneness (knowing our experience can only ever be ours alone), yet our past/present/future is bound to others, in conflict, competition, and failure (Deurzen, 2010).

Appendix F: CBT formulation

Early experiences include neglectful, emotionally unavailable parents due to reported alcohol-dependency. Billy perceived himself as the less-favoured child to his “attention-seeking” younger brother. He was bullied at school but maintained some friendships. His overt distress as a child/teenager was ignored and rejected by his parents leading to core beliefs/assumptions of I am unlovable, I am an outsider, I am worthless plus perfectionist tendencies through attempts to please. These tendencies may have been reinforced in the knowledge that his parents had already completely rejected/abadonned his step-siblings. Critical incidents include teenage drug use; an overdose at 17 - for which he was hospitalised overnight but recieved no further help and which was never subsequently discussed; the suicide of friend (for which he was blamed by the family). He was made responsible for his brother aged 13 and was viewed as the dependable one in the family. He became the go-to family member for all issues, enhancing feelings of being different - an outsider with no one to care for him. Triggers for hospital admission included: sudden realisation he/we are all alone; his family's oppressive dependency/lack of support; his partner's low mood. Thoughts of: I have no future, there is no point, I am different to others, I am stuck where I am, I am not a whole person, I must help others, I don’t deserve help, no one can help me, elicited emotions of fear, anxiety, low mood and anger (unexpressed). This was emphasised by unwanted thoughts of The Voice about suicide and the futility of life. Resulting behaviours included self harm; isolation; social withdrawal; self-differentiation; people-pleasing. He also began to hear a loud aggressive voice urging self-harm and suicide. The interaction of thoughts, feelings, behaviours and physiology created a vicious cycle where each contributed to maintaining the others.

CBT formulation diagram

Past experiences; vulnerability factors: Neglected in childhood, emotionally absent, alcohol-dependent parents/grandmother, perceived as less-favoured child, attention-seeking brother; bullied at school. Two unmentioned/unmet step siblings.

Precipitating factor/critical incidents: Drug experimentation; OD at 17 – no help/ignored; suicide of friend (blamed by family). Responsibility for brother in early teens; rejected by parents when emotional; abandonment by those considered friends. Appearance of the voice in teens.

Core Beliefs / Assumptions:
I am an outsider, I am unlovable, I am worthless.

Triggers:
Realising we're all alone; Partner's low mood; family dependency;

Protective factors: Partner, job, some friends; creativity (writing, reading, music composition, philosophy).

The problem: Depression; Anxiety; BPD traits; suicide ideation.

Thoughts: I hate myself, I am worthless, I have no future, there is no point, I am different to others, I am stuck where I am, I am not a whole person, I must help others, I don't deserve help, no one can help me, I should not be here. I will be rejected. The voice: I must kill myself/die.

Behaviours: Self harm; isolation; social withdrawal; differentiation; people pleasing.

Emotions: Low mood, fear, anxiety, (anger)

Physiology: Dizziness, feeling uncomfortable in own skin (itchy), decreased libido.

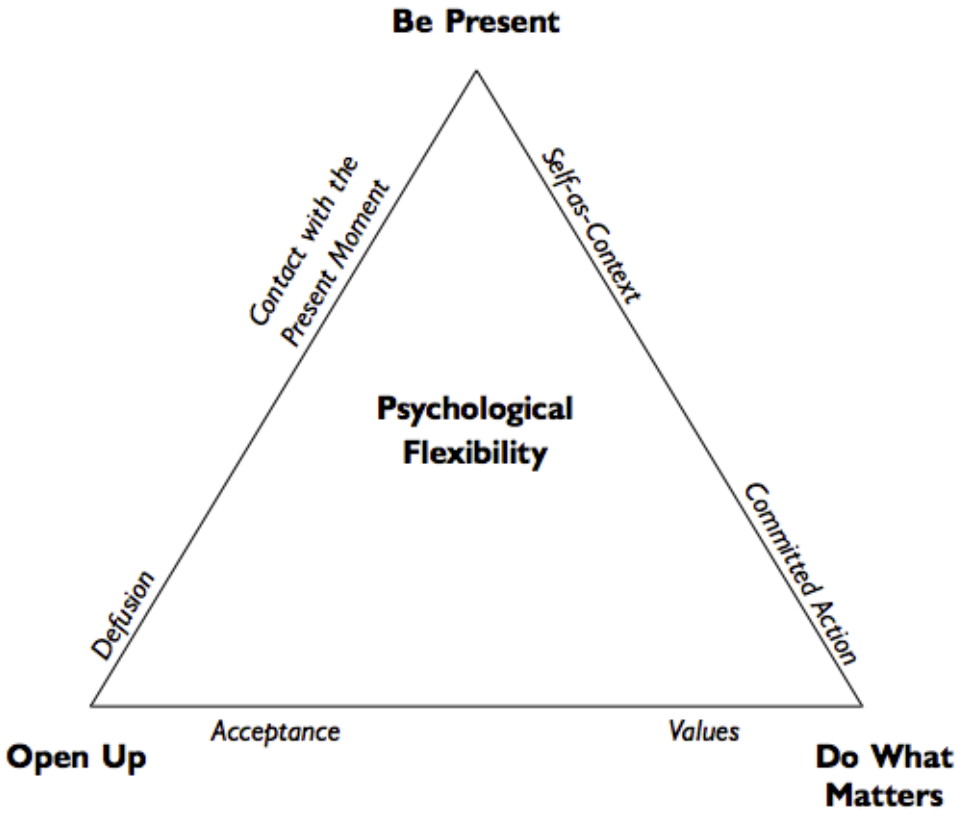
(Maintaining Cycles: Thoughts, feelings, behaviours)

→ Thoughts →	→ Feelings: →	Behaviours →
I am worthless I hate myself, I have no future, I am unlovable My life is meaningless I must kill myself ←	Low mood fear anxiety anger ←	Self harm isolation social withdrawal differentiation people pleasing ←

Appendix G: ACT Formulation

Billy's presentation may be represented using the ACT Triflex below summarising the six core processes. When we began therapy, Billy's contact with the present moment was poor. He appeared caught up in negative thoughts about the past, eliciting rumination about the impossibility of any future. He reported being on auto-pilot, unable to feel anything i.e. to engage with self-as-context; in ACT the notion of the observing self – awareness of what we sense, feel, think and do. He was fused with thoughts of being utterly worthless and of life's meaninglessness, seeing the world as polarised dualities (e.g. right/wrong, situating himself as wrong). He was unable to manage challenging feelings and emotions (such as anger/guilt) likely due to growing up in a family where emotional expression and vulnerability were unacceptable. This exhausting struggle to evade unwelcome internal events led to experiential avoidance (Christodoulou, 2013), manifesting in teenage drug use, self-harm and attempted suicide. Such avoidance, served only to enhance the distress he experienced, eliciting feelings of helplessness (rather than committed action) which increased as he lost touch with his values (e.g. knowledge, fairness/justice, love/caring, creativity, honesty and independence), allowing the world to act upon him, negating any sense of personal agency.

ACT Triflex (Harris, 2009)



Appendix H: Kohut

Psychodynamic therapy emphasises unconscious processes as they appear in the present (Lemma, 2003). Therapeutically, it aims to increase self-awareness/understanding of the impact of past on present behaviour, exploring unresolved conflicts that arise from early dysfunctional relationships now manifest in unhelpful behaviour. Kohut's (as cited in Bateman & Holmes, 1995) Self Psychology offers a theory of deficit (as opposed to conflict) resulting from insufficient environmental input in development. For example, a lack of mirroring from the care-giver may lead to low self-esteem and difficulties in experiencing oneself as a central entity (Lemma, 2003). Such low self-esteem and a sense of worthlessness may be eliminated by a perceived/expressed superiority over others. Furthermore, this sense of worth and well-being, are met in relationships with others (Lemma, 2003).

Appendix I: ACT metaphor

The 3-part ACT Metaphor demonstrates how cognitive fusion and experiential avoidance play a role in psychological suffering. It is usually demonstrated experientially and incorporates the idea that resisting or avoiding thoughts is exhausting, leading to collapse and being overwhelmed by the very thing we seek to avoid. Accepting them as part of the landscape whilst appreciating many other aspects of our life leads to reduced anxiety as we relinquish the exhausting struggle to control or avoid, indeed making room for unwanted thoughts (Harris, 2007).