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How Do Those Who Have Served Deserve to Be Treated? Military Veterans in the U.K. Social Security System

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Abstract

Military service has often been a basis for civilian welfare entitlements. If mass wartime service justified collective provision, it is now suggested professional militaries have been co-opted to support reformed welfare models in which entitlement is increasingly conditional on individuals' commitment, discipline, and responsibility. "Forces Covenants" which explicitly connect the dedication and contribution of service to state assistance, symbolically re-enforce this shift. The U.K. state operates a highly conditional civilian social security system, and an active Armed Forces Covenant agenda. This article assesses the extent to which U.K. veterans who also claimed social security benefits support or reject the principles of conditionality. It contends military service continues to inform values they believe civilian services should follow. Although some align with conditional ideas of entitlement, others are at odds. This analysis adds to the understandings of contemporary welfare and the role of military identities after service.

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The links between the civilian welfare and the military are long-standing. The introduction of national welfare programs in Anglophone nations, such as the United Kingdom, Canada (Béland et al., 2020)—and to a lesser extent the United States (Stebenne, 2017)—shortly after World War 2 reflected the fact that mobilizing a whole society meant "war-related claims to entitlement" to health, housing, and social security applied to everyone as "warrior citizens" (Turner, 2001, p. 195). Entitlement was reciprocal but inclusive—"Welfare was a reward for the serving citizen" (Cowen, 2008, p. 255) and such inclusivity was intrinsically related to war (Titmuss, 2018).

From the 1980s, the same countries began to restructure their welfare systems, increasingly shifting from universal to more selective models of entitlement. The principle of welfare conditionality (Dwyer et al., 2023; Watts & Fitzpatrick, 2018) has been a dominant feature of reform, making entitlement to publicly funded welfare benefits and services dependent on fulfilling specified "conditions"—invariably compulsory work-related responsibilities (sometimes described as "workfare"), or prescribed behavioral standards (Deacon, 2005). This shift was accompanied by discourses indicating entitlement is less a right but something to be earned through individuals' contribution and conduct, self-sufficiency, resilience, and commitment to work. (Dean, 2007; White, 2000). It has also made clear the restriction or denial of entitlement on the grounds of behaviors or "conduct" identified as "irresponsible" or "unacceptable" (Mead, 1982; Murray, 1984).

However, if military service justified arguments for collective welfare entitlements after 1945, it is now suggested that it helps support conditional models (Cowen, 2008). This co-option is visible in the emergence of policies, such as the U.K.'s Armed Forces Covenant (Ministry of Defence [MOD], 2011) or the Canadian-Enhanced New Veterans Charter (Government of Canada, 2011), which emphasize the nation's duty to recognize the sacrifice and commitment of military personnel, both during and after service. This constructs a discourse in which those who serve are fashioned as "the exceptional, sacrificing worker" (Cowen, 2008, p. 258), celebrated as a model of deservingness—"If the soldier performed as iconic national worker citizen during the Second World War, he or she now stands astride what is perhaps a closing gap between an expanding workfarism and a resurgent militarism" (Cowen, 2008, p. 255). By valorizing the idea that recognition, respect, and entitlement are linked to certain behaviors, such "Covenant discourses" re-enforce the broader principle that provision of public goods is contingent on personal endeavor.

However, there is little understanding to what extent those who have actually served support or object to such principles. In general, civilian welfare remains underrepresented in scholarship on veterans[1] and vice versa, despite the fact that many veterans will engage with welfare systems after leaving service.

It is important to remember that within broader international trends, in each nation, the development of veterans' support strategies (and that of their welfare states) has followed distinctive courses. This also applies to the societal understandings of what constitutes the identity and status of those who served, which in turn may influence ideas of entitlement and "deservingness" to support (Dandeker et al., 2006). Therefore, this article focuses on the specific situation in the United Kingdom.

Based on groundbreaking Qualitative Longitudinal Research (QLR) of veterans with experience of the U.K. benefits system, this article assesses the extent to which they support or reject the central premises of conditionality and what entitlements they believe service should yield. It also explores whether military service continues to influence their perspectives, and if so why, and in what way.

We found general agreement with conditionality's core principle that entitlement to welfare benefits should be calibrated against contribution. Participants were often keen to distinguish the exceptional nature of military service—and how it created a model claimant, one who has publicly demonstrated to the nation their commitment to hard work and duty—in particular, from claimants without such an ethos. Such contribution was deserving of superior, or at least tailored entitlements.

Although this suggested many U.K. veterans support the principle of welfare conditionality, we argue there is a fundamental mismatch between *their* expectation of how reciprocal entitlement operates and that of the benefit system, which explains the alienation many experienced when claiming. For veterans, their *past service* justifies entitlement, but their experience proved receipt is contingent on *present and future* demonstrations of commitment, reversing the direction of reciprocity. Therefore, while Covenant and welfare discourses agree on the principle of reciprocity, their understanding of *how* it works is different, with profound consequences for veterans claiming benefits.

Their accounts also indicate how their experience as claimants was part of a narrative arc, in which military service is often the high point, emphasizing the importance of qualitative research in understanding how the lives of veterans "are storied and identity is narratively constructed" (Smith & Sparkes, 2008, p. 5). Service continued to influence their whole worldview. This revealed other values of solidarity, mutual support, trust, and respect, that often clashed with the confrontational, individualistic, and skeptical approach they perceived to operate in the benefits system.

Studying veterans in the benefits system helps inform wider understandings of welfare entitlement, post-service identity, and modern citizenship. This article augments scholarship on both military identity and welfare conditionality. We proceed with an introduction to the context of welfare reforms in the United Kingdom, before presenting a brief overview of the development of British state policy on veteran's support, and research on veterans and welfare. Our methodology is then outlined, followed by the findings sections that present our analysis.

Welfare Reform and Welfare Conditionality in the United Kingdom

Welfare reform has seen many nations introduce significant welfare-to-work, workfare, or active labor market policies (ALMPs) (Dean et al., 2005), in recent decades, adopting increasingly punitive approaches toward those claiming benefits, such as the removal of financial support (using benefits sanctions) for those who do not comply with the conditions of their claim (Adler, 2016).

Nonetheless, in the United Kingdom, reform has progressed further and faster than most (Taylor-Gooby, 2009) with the United Kingdom ranked second strictest internationally (Immervoll & Knotz, 2018). The last two decades have seen ever stricter conditions placed around eligibility to welfare. For example, the introduction of Employment Support Allowance (ESA) in 2008 saw disability benefits recipients subject to "workfare" for the first time (Bambra & Smith, 2010). Dwyer (2017) argues that ESA represented the "concerted first attempt to rewrite the citizenship contract for many disabled people and enforce work incentives as an answer to the assumed perverse incentives of the disability benefits system" (p. 139). Central to ESA was the introduction of the Work Capability Assessment (WCA), which assesses how a person's health condition/disability affects their ability to complete a range of functional activities and is used to determine fitness for work and subsequent benefit eligibility.

The introduction of Universal Credit (UC) in 2013 as part of the Welfare Reform Act (2012) was a further landmark moment. Described as "the most important and fundamental reform since the inception of the welfare state" (Couling, 2018 cited in Department for Work and Pensions [DWP], 2018, p. 3), UC increased and intensified the use of welfare conditionality (Dwyer et al., 2023; Dwyer & Wright, 2014), including the routine use of benefit sanctions.

Although gaining greater significance since the 1990s, such reforms draw on longstanding debates about the "perverse incentives" of welfare, which, some argue, encourages reliance on state support rather than self-sufficiency (Mead, 1982; Perkins, 2016), with some claimants perceived as particularly "undeserving" due to conduct deemed 'undesirable' Murray, 1984, 1990; Welshman, 2013). The conditional approach is seen as explicitly behavioral in intent, viewing "benefit recipients as inherently deficient and in need of intervention to become 'active'" (Wright, 2016, p. 236).

"Conditions of conduct" are a central element of governance, in which entitlement is dependent on individuals' commitment to values of hard work, aspiration, and personal responsibility; however, "conditions of category" act as an initial gatekeeper, including or excluding particular social groups on the grounds of their perceived deservingness (Clasen & Clegg, 2007). The narrative of the "deserving/undeserving" claimant has been an important discursive device within welfare conditionality (Lister, 2021)

Political and media discourse in the United Kingdom has also been identified as helping to promote a narrative of un/deservingness, by characterizing social security claimants as "shirkers" and "scroungers" (Garthwaite, 2011). The putative values of the

restructured welfare state, whether expressed directly through policy statements or through institutional practice, can be "re-enacted and internalised by citizens" (Edmiston, 2015, p. 4). Claimants absorb such "dialogues of contribution and individual behaviour" (Dwyer, 2002, p. 289) and use them to emphasize the legitimacy of their own entitlement—their "deservingness"—vis a vis stigmatized or "undeserving" others.

Veterans, the Covenant, and Welfare in the United Kingdom

The welfare reforms (and discourses) outlined above have occurred at the same time as a concerted drive by successive U.K. governments to embed much greater recognition of the contribution of the Armed Forces community within public policy and delivery. The most visible commitments are the Armed Forces Covenant (MOD, 2011), a "promise by the nation ensuring that those who serve or who have served in the armed forces, and their families, are treated fairly", the Armed Forces Act 2011 (UK Parliament, 2011) and Armed Forces Act 2021 (UK Parliament, 2021)

However, as Dandeker et al. (2006) show, the groundwork for the Covenant was laid in the early 2000s, when a significant shift in the policy began. Driven in part by negative press coverage, and pressure from service charities, strategic interventions, such as the MOD's "Veterans Initiative" sought to develop a coordinated, state-led approach on:

> how to limit the social exclusion experienced by some veterans, defined not only in terms of position in the labor market but also by wider social participation, including being valued and remembered by civilian society. (Dandeker et al., 2006, p. 162)

During this period, the inclusive "at least one day of service" definition of a veteran become standardized into U.K. state policy. On one level, this choice could be seen as politically expedient, as such inclusivity did not require any distinctions to be made about entitlements to state support based on the length of service or combat experience. However, such a broad definition presented a challenge, particularly for governmental bodies "engaged in determining who does and does not qualify for receipt of support and services due to their military standing" (Dandeker et al., 2006, p. 162).

Since the Covenant's introduction, an expansion in the oversight and management of the veterans' agenda across government has occurred (Ingham, 2014). In 2018, the U.K. Government launched the first ever U.K.-wide "Strategy for Our Veterans," (HM Government, 2018), followed by the creation of the first ever cross-ministerial Office for Veterans Affairs (OVA) in 2019 (HM Government, 2023a).

Individual departments have developed their own strategies as part of the Covenant, including The Department of Work and Pensions (DWP), which is responsible for the U.K.'s social security and pensions system. Veteran's specific initiatives include early access to the Work & Health Programme[2] (HM Government, 2023b), exemption from the U.K. "benefit cap"[3] policy (Kennedy et al., 2016), if a claimant

is in receipt of Armed Forces Independence Payment (AFIP), Armed Forces Compensation Scheme (AFCS) or War Pension, and the introduction of an Armed Forces Marker on UC (HM Government, 2022, pp. 66; 69). A central element in the DWP's support for veterans and their families is a network of Armed Forces Champions[4], an initiative that was augmented in 2021[5] (Scullion et al., 2024). When launching the DWP's enhanced offer of support to veterans, the Minister for Welfare Delivery Will Quince MP stated:

> The Armed Forces do our country proud and we are forever grateful to them for the sacrifices they make in order to serve our nation. Those who are serving in the Armed Forces provide an invaluable contribution to society and it's important they, and their families, feel fully supported when claiming benefits. (Confederation of Service Charities, 2021)

Government ministers and MPs have repeatedly made similar pledges (HM Government, 2019).

Notwithstanding these "Forces-specific" options, veterans are not segregated within the civilian benefit system. Even if they can avail themselves of some of the easements introduced by the DWP, in general, veterans accessing mainstream social security benefits must engage with the same processes as any other benefit claimant. Although not the focus of this article, it is also worth noting that the U.K. civilian benefits system runs in parallel (and can interact), with a range of compensation and pension entitlements for veterans (Brooke-Holland et al., 2023), which can add further complexity for veterans who are navigating the landscape of financial support in the United Kingdom.

Despite the known challenges of managing the ongoing transition from military to civilian life, in areas such as employment, which might increase the likelihood of engagement with mainstream social security—information on veterans who are also claimants is limited, with extant research primarily quantitative in nature (Olsen, 2006, for the United States; Serfioti et al., 2022, for the United Kingdom). Although evidence suggests U.K. veterans are more likely to be in employment than their civilian counterparts, (HM Government, 2022, p. 65) and unemployment benefit claim rates drop dramatically within 2 years of leaving, "The most consistent predictors of post Service benefit usage included low rank, unplanned leaving or medical discharge and having a history of claiming benefits before joining the Services" (Serfioti et al., 2022, p. 17). Other surveys have indicated that "Households containing working age adults in the ex-Service community are over twice as likely to receive sickness or disability benefits as UK adults in general" (The Royal British Legion, 2014, p. xiv), while Burdett et al. (2021) found mental health conditions developed in service are a predictive factor for benefit uptake. A rare qualitative study of veterans' attitudes to welfare was a U.S.-based study carried out by Feinstein (2015). This suggested those seeking support faced an unsettling paradox. On one hand, their resilient military persona implied that asking for help was a source of shame because

it "engender(ed) the stigma associated with being a welfare recipient," linking them to groups who had been seen to "fail" (Feinstein, 2015, p. 6). On the other hand, their public esteem implied they were fully "deserving" and entitled to such services from a grateful nation, as and when needed. Consequently, they inhabited an ambivalent "dual status." However, as Feinstein points out, while it is highly conditional, the U.S. civilian welfare system is extremely limited and parallel Veterans Agency provision is very different to the United Kingdom.

Method

In recognition of this evidence gap, a QLR study, the Sanctions, Support & Service Leavers project, was developed specifically to explore the experiences of U.K. Armed Forces veterans as they navigated the social security system. (Scullion et al., 2019, 2023, 2024; Young et al., 2024). Running from 2017 to 2024, it continues to represent the only project of its kind, generating a unique dataset generated from 250 separate interviews with 108 veterans during the period. Participants were recruited using purposive non-random sampling (Mason, 2018) via a range of organizations, including Armed Forces charities and other third-sector organizations, Armed Forces and Veterans Breakfast Clubs, local authorities, and housing/accommodation providers. Inclusion criteria required participants to be claiming one of the main U.K. out-of-work benefits: ESA, Jobseekers Allowance (JSA), or UC at the first interview. The research team sought to re-interview participants up to a maximum of five times over the project's lifetime. Semi-structured topic guides were used, based on the research team's extensive knowledge of welfare conditionality, and a substantial review of relevant literature on military–civilian transitions. Ethical approval was granted by the relevant ethics panel at the University of Salford.

Interview transcripts were uploaded to NVIVO QSR software, and a coding framework based on the topic guide areas was used to assign data. Using an inductive, interpretivist model, a thematic analysis was conducted based on a close reading of individuals' data across successive waves of interviews. Emerging concepts were sense-checked at regular meetings of the whole research team. This analysis was used to generate a variety of research outputs. To produce the findings for this article, the lead author revisited participants' responses to two specific questions. At the first interview, participants were asked:

1. Do you think it is reasonable to attach conditions/expectations to people who are claiming benefits? If yes, which people/groups of people should have conditions? What should the conditions be? If no, why not?
2. Do you think putting the same expectations on Armed Forces Service leavers as other benefit recipients is fair? Why/why not? What should be expected of them?

At each follow-up interview, participants were reminded of their previous response and asked if their views had changed.

Although quantitative approaches could have supplied the proportions for and against certain approaches, qualitative techniques offered the necessary tools to understand the rich detail of veterans' responses, the motives behind them, and the nature of their justifications.

As the final rounds occurred while the lead author began the analysis for this article, they were able to "sense-check" their understandings with participants—which helped to boost the authenticity by seeking validation of the meanings being constructed as interviews were still proceeding. To avoid the risk of a single researcher's subjective interpretations misrepresenting the data, the lead author's analysis was subject to peer review by other team members at regular intervals during the development of the article. Through these methods "qualitative trustworthiness" in data analysis was achieved. (Lincoln & Guba, 1986)

Findings

Past Service = Entitlement Now?

The first part of our analysis of veteran's responses looked for evidence that would indicate support or rejection of conditional values in the benefit system. There was significant support among participants for the general principle of conditionality contained in q.1., that benefit claimants—whether they had served or not—should be expected to look for work to maintain their entitlement to continued financial assistance.

However, participants overwhelmingly agreed that whatever claim others might have, *previous* military service should provide some measure of benefits entitlement in the present.

Service was seen as a particularly prestigious demonstration of hard work, duty, and commitment, a proof that did not lose its currency, and which for some demanded superior reciprocal entitlement or alternatives from the standards applied to others. This suggested veterans did support conditional models of welfare. For many, the value of service remained unchanged, regardless of how long ago they had left, although for some longer service and combat experience justified greater entitlements. Nevertheless, many believed their experiences indicated the benefits system did not recognize it.

Entitlement was often described in stark reciprocal terms, whether on an individual basis—"I've risked my life, I've been shot at, why should I not be entitled to, like, benefits?." (veteran claiming ESA) or a collective one: "they've (veterans) done their bit for everybody and it's payback" (veteran claiming UC).

The majority believed that veterans should be treated differently to benefit claimants who had not served. However, a division emerged between those who felt that the unique nature of military service *in of itself* had earned them superior treatment—whether that involved more entitlements and fewer or no conditions (Group 1)—and those who felt such treatment was justified by the disadvantages

veterans can face navigating civilian systems, such as the long-term legacy of service on their health and well-being (Group 2).

In Group 1, there were a small number who regarded military service as negating *any* conditions on their claim whatsoever, on the basis it represented an exceptional form of contribution and commitment to the nation. One participant suggested *any* veteran, regardless of the length of service, should receive a full war pension to avoid contact with the social security benefits system "because . . . they've served their country already" (veteran claiming ESA). Another regarded any conditions as unfair:

> they should leave you. You've done your bit . . . You fight for your country, and all they do is harass you . . . and I have to do this, and I have to do that (veteran claiming ESA)

This was expanded on by another participant who argued that the demands should be reversed, so that instead of conditions being placed on him, the obligation should be on the benefits system: "I think I've served my country enough. Why don't they pay for me to work?" (veteran claiming ESA).

Some believed veterans should receive extra support or priority for employment opportunities. Those with combat experience were seen by some as an even higher priority for being "cushioned" by the benefits system. However, if frontline service gave precedence, for others, it was questionable if those who served short periods should receive any consideration, implying they had not contributed enough to deserve it:

> I reckon it depends on service and time spent, like 24 years in the military serving the country they should get more rights, but then for four weeks and they call themselves veterans and stuff like that, it's not acceptable, is it? (veteran claiming UC)

This hinted at a hierarchy of deservingness, dependent on the length of service and relative level of risk, but it also indicated that the tensions around who should and should not be included in the definition of a veteran continues to be a significant one for veterans themselves. An important consideration is that those interviewed for the study included both those who had served recently and those who left several decades ago, when, as Dandeker et al. (2006) pointed out, terms such as "ex-service" were more commonly used than "veteran," which may affect views on entitlement and deservingness. As one stated:

> I've never claimed to be a veteran. I'm ex-Army or ex-Forces. For me a veteran is somebody who probably went to war or something like that. When I first came here, I felt like a total fake. (veteran claiming UC)

Our sample also included a small number who had either not passed out of training or had served very short periods of time for a variety of reasons, such as undiagnosed health issues, an injury, care needs of a family member, or had been expelled for unacceptable behaviors. For some, this was unacceptable as grounds for entitlement, but others pointed out that Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) could be acquired

even in training or that very short periods service could involve combat, that left an individual with long term re-integration challenges.

A contribution unrecognised?

More commonly, Group 1 interviewees suggested service justified less stringent conditions:

> I just want to get what I deserve . . . I've done 20 years in the British Army serving my country, and I come back, and it's this—and they still to this day send me letters telling me that I've got to go for job interviews. (veteran claiming UC)

This quote highlights the disconnect between many veterans' views—that past service justified entitlement now—and their experience of the benefits system, which appeared to see it as dependent on commitment now.

In this group, participants often felt the benefits system did not appear to recognize the special merit of military service. A participant illustrated this through his experience of the benefits system: "you can mention that you're a veteran and again there, they're just like, right, they don't care. Yes, you've done the Army, so what?" (veteran claiming ESA). This may be why many felt disillusioned with the U.K. Armed Forces Covenant. Referring to its pledges, one sarcastically commented "A lot of them (DWP staff) think we should be just treated like everyone else, but obviously the government thinks different." (veteran claiming UC). Reflecting on difference in status and identity of veterans in the United Kingdom and United States, one compared the former unfavorably:

> if you go over to America and say you're either military or veteran, it opens a lot of doors . . . Over here, you have to almost beg. I'm like, does that not count for anything? (veteran claiming UC)

For many, this lack of recognition equated to a lack of respect for service. A small number felt a separate, veterans-led, system was needed because they would understand the military mindset; dealing with benefits staff who did not have this knowledge resulted in mutual contempt.

It was suggested a completely separate benefit system should still deploy conditions, albeit more relaxed. If Group 1 argued for superior treatment, Group 2 indicated that because civilian systems operated on such different principles to the military, veterans needed time to adjust—therefore, applying the standard conditionality regime was tantamount to a disadvantage. One proponent of this explained that the ongoing process of transition particularly affected those with long service records:

> if someone's done a good length of service and they're coming out in civilian life, it is going to take a very long period of time for them to rehabilitate back into the civilian world. (veteran claiming UC)

The physical and mental impact of service was also deemed grounds for fewer conditions and penalties. Although there was a sense that anyone with disabilities should be treated more leniently, the particularly damaging nature of service incurred illnesses and injury was seen as extra justification for reduced work searching conditions.

For some veterans, the benefits system needed to take account of the fact that at a deeper level, service left a permanent imprint on their identity, necessitating different treatment. For example, one commented that "veterans and ex-soldiers, they think differently to civilians" so a standard work search and sanctions approach would be unsuitable—"Right, you do this job, or you get no benefit," . . . they're not going to know how to cope with that (veteran claiming UC)

Part of distinguishing their specific contribution, (and thus particular deservingness), was to contrast their actions with other groups of claimants they perceived to be less deserving, drawing on common stereotypes aimed at stigmatizing migrants, drug users, and others. Notably claimants described as "workshy" were mentioned far more than other groups, not just because they were seen to subvert the principle of reciprocity but also because they rejected the ideals of hard work many associated with service. One surmised that Job Center Plus[6] staff were not "tuned to the Forces" because they were used to dealing with those who (in his opinion) were not willing to work. (veteran claiming ESA). He envisioned how if he worked there and a veteran came in, even if they had left years ago, "first of all, it tells you that's someone that's willing to work . . . so if it was me, I'd be like—you know, you'd go out of your way to see what's available." (veteran claiming JSA). Thus, military service was central to the legitimization of their claim in relation to others.

However, a minority challenged these narratives, arguing military service gave no justification for special or superior entitlement in the benefits system now. In our sample, those who argued veterans required no priority or tailored services tended to frame their answer not in terms of a unique principle of sacrifice but in terms of fairness. They often suggested the system itself needed more care and consideration and compassion not only for veterans but many other groups, including asylum seekers. For example, several pointed out that PTSD could affect anyone, whether they served or not. As one explained, this could penalise:

> other people that are equally deserving of help when it's needed, but if they do that [give support] because I'm ex-forces, it's case of snubbing the people who've never done military service . . . If I said, 'Oh, I'm ex-armed forces,,' and sort of think, well, I'll get preferential treatment, that means it's going to hit somebody who hasn't been in the armed forces. It's like you're putting me on a pedestal. (veteran claiming ESA)

In complete contrast to the perspective of the participant noted above who lauded the way veterans were treated in the United States compared to the United Kingdom, one veteran argued against the "unique sacrifice" ethos espoused by the latter:

> I don't believe that service people deserve anything more than anybody else. To me, this is a very American way of looking at things, but nobody I joined up with was joining up for flag and country. (veteran claiming UC)

Not all had definitive views, and often their status as veteran and claimant represented something of a dilemma: "A part of me would say no because we're the same as anyone else . . . The other half of me would say, 'Yes, we have done x, y, z for the country'." (veteran claiming ESA). Even where the idea of deservingness was rejected, military service was still a central factor in shaping their views of entitlement, and continuing to be a frame of reference when reflecting on their interactions with the benefits system, even decades after leaving the Forces.

The Wider Relevance of Military Identities

If interactions with the benefits system revealed how military service continued to frame expectations about entitlement, it also revealed the presence of other values specifically identified with service.

The importance of collective solidarity, especially for those who may need help, was regularly emphasized. Forces solidarity was framed as a communal support network "where your friends are like your brothers." (veteran claiming UC), or "it's like a family, even like your bosses, you can talk to everyone" (veteran claiming ESA) The legacy was an enduring ethos of mutual care: "That's how we've been taught. If you can walk and the other bloke can't, we're going to help him walk, and then we'll worry about you later on" (veteran claiming UC)

One striking feature was the stability of such views regardless of how long ago an individual transited. Having left the Forces two decades previously, one explained why he was disinclined to claim benefits:

> I was trained to care for others, and support others, protect others and that, and because of that, and because of who I am, I do find it difficult to ask for help. The first and only time I went into the Jobcentre it was overpowering for me, I left . . . . . It doesn't matter how long I've been out of the Army; for 22 years that's the person I was. (veteran claiming UC)

There was an assumption that the benefits system would operate on the same principles as the military. Respondents commonly articulated the difference between the values they identified with service—such as honesty, loyalty, and integrity—and the skepticism they experienced in their interaction with the benefits system. One man described how veterans "go in [to the benefits system] open and honest, expecting to come out with help, but if you're open and honest you generally get rejected . . ." (veteran claiming UC)

References to care (or the lack of it) toward veterans featured regularly often contextualized in terms of the damage incurred through service. There was a repeated emphasis on the lack of empathy—"I don't think there's any compassion there." (veteran claiming ESA).

Although calls for system with more care and support were frequent, where things went well and participants felt they were treated better, this was usually where the system had displayed these values. A consultation with a work coach surprised one:

> In an odd way, it felt like she cared, and I don't think I've ever had anyone in the Jobcentre go out of their way and talk to me like that, which threw me off, because I was expecting a war. (veteran claiming ESA)

Just as important was where it had shown respect and recognition for their service. After getting into an argument when his Job Center appointment ran late, one man was taken aside by a DWP Armed Forces Champion who reassured him:

> he said to me, "Look, mate, I know you're trying, I know what you do within the community as well, so don't worry about this bit. We'll just get through this bit together" . . . . He went above and beyond his call of duty and it was noticed. (veteran claiming UC)

If many perceived a confrontational, demanding, and uncaring approach, then there was also evidence that a more empathetic approach, one that did recognize past military service, was occasionally demonstrated.

Discussion

U.K. military veterans who claim civilian social security benefits find themselves at the juncture of two contemporary policy discourses (Scullion et al., 2021). Both are based on a core principle of reciprocity, and both raise wider questions of entitlement and inclusion in modern societies. The first—"Covenant discourse"—emphasizes the contribution and sacrifice of service personnel and the reciprocal duty of the nation to recognize this. Underlying the second—welfare reform—is the principle of responsible self-sufficiency as a "civic duty"; this emphasizes welfare recipients must accept responsibility to "maximise (their) human capital" and take up "opportunities that are made available to individuals to enhance their productive potential and their labour market readiness." (Dean, 2007, p. 18). Such principle mean benefits are "effectively reserved for 'deserving' citizens. Only those identified as having made some prior form of individual commitment to the common good are afforded a right to welfare." (Dwyer et al., 2023, p. 15).

Cowen (2008) suggested by celebrating ideals of duty, commitment, and service on behalf the nation, the Covenant discourse metaphorically re-enforces of principles underpinning welfare reform, which reward "dutiful, hardworking citizens" (Patrick, 2017, pp. 300–301). Theoretically, the argument is plausible, but is based on identifying links between policy documents and political statements in the respective military and welfare spheres.

However, while there may be similarities across nations, as Dandeker et al. (2006) pointed out, the particular history of the relationship between the state and the

military, and wider attitudes to both the Armed Forces and welfare in the United Kingdom cannot be ignored when we come to consider questions of entitlement for veterans to all forms of state support. For example, they argued the U.K. governments' choice of an inclusive definition of a veteran did not fully resolve wider societal debates about who counts as a veteran—is it based on the length of service, or experience of combat, for example? It also left a major question unanswered—should entitlement to support after transition be focused on those who had incurred sacrifices during service (however defined) or those who faced social exclusion (e.g., employment barriers) after entering civilian life? This generated sociological questions about whether military service should be regarded as a unique social contract with the state which per se created entitlement to support, or whether there were different levels of entitlement depending on need. Because this was unresolved, they suggested that contestation over resources and legitimacy was likely to be inevitable.

This article set out to test whether elements of these discourses were present among benefit claimants who previously served in the military and to what extent they overlapped. On one level, this is important because studying popular attitudes can help researchers to see how far policy rhetoric is accepted or rejected by different social constituents (see Dwyer et al., 2023, ch. 7 for a discussion of welfare). Given the supposed role of service men and women as "icons" of deservingness for modern welfare states Cowen identified, a comprehensive assessment of veterans' views was overdue. It also allowed us to test whether the questions Dandeker et al. posed in 2006 were still visible in veterans views of entitlement today.

Our analysis showed veterans keen defenders of conditionality (Dwyer et al., 2018), although this was often qualified by the proviso that it should only apply to those physically and mentally capable of fulfilling such obligations. In some regards, their views were consistent with attitudes to welfare conditionality expressed by other groups (Dwyer, 2002, Dwyer et al., 2023). They routinely distinguished themselves from groups they perceived as "undeserving" as both a legitimacy for their claim and to avoid the stigma associated with the benefits system.

However, they differed on several key points. Many (but by no means all) subscribed to the view that past military service was a unique form of work, which was often framed in terms of a commitment to "Queen and Country." Consequently, they had "banked" the right to future entitlement in the benefits system, regardless of how long it had been since they had served.

Our analysis did find participants had differing views about who counts as a veteran, with some arguing for priority based on factors, such as length of service or involvement in conflict over those with shorter or less risky records, while others strongly rejected this. This confirms that the inclusive definition of "veteranhood" adopted in the United Kingdom continues to be contested and continues to influence questions over the prioritization of resources and entitlement as Dandeker et al. (2006) predicted it would (p. 173).

Despite this belief, they invariably had negative views of the benefits system's operation. This suggested a fundamental difference in their interpretation of deservingness

and entitlement and that of the system itself. Most veterans' expectation was that military service—no matter how long ago—was proof, not only of their hard working, dependable, and responsible character—but as a passport to benefit entitlement. The onus was on the government to recognize their entitlement, not on them to prove it.

If, for veterans past service loses none of its worth, their experience suggested the benefits system valued only present and future demonstrations of responsibility and effort, rather than previous contributions, no matter how nationally important, risky, or costly.

For them, the benefits system displayed no capacity for "remembrance"—to use a military term. The perceived erasure of their contribution was often the hardest thing to take. In that sense, welfare conditionality has no memory. This helps to explain the disconnection between expectations and experience—but also suggests a key difference between welfare conditionality and Covenant discourses, despite apparent similarities. It implies that the validation of military service promoted in the Covenant may be useful as a discursive tool for promoting "reconfigured new norms of conduct and belonging" (Cowen, 2008, p. 233) in contemporary welfare but it does not actually reward it. Cynical reflections on the real world value of the Armed Forces Covenant by veteran claimants were one indication of this. For them, the promise that past service to the common good is a route to entitlement (Dwyer et al., 2023) is unfulfilled.

However, our quest to understand questions of entitlement also revealed how military service continued to shape participants' whole value system. The deep influence of service on individual's identities and how they perceive the social world is a significant field within veterans' studies (Dolan et al., 2022; Thompson et al., 2017), which have attempted to elucidate the constituent values of military identity—such as duty, loyalty, commitment, self-sacrifice, discipline, and how they may interact with civilian life (Demers, 2011).

There is some evidence how military identity can be problematic for engagement with welfare and vice versa. Thompson et al. (2017) commented that veterans in receipt of disability benefits are among those transiting who can experience unique identity shift problems that complicate the construction of an integrated post-military identity" (p. 42). Studies (Bowen & Martin, 2011; Cooper et al., 2018; Higate, 2001; McGarry et al., 2015) suggest aspects, such as "resilience" (including notions of hardness and self-sufficiency), could lead to an increased risk of reluctance among veterans to seek help, which may have implications for many welfare services. Yet specific investigation into the role of military identities in shaping attitudes and beliefs about welfare—and conversely, the latter's role in shaping post-service "selves"—is absent. A recent overview of research on veteran identity (Dolan et al., 2022) did not mention welfare at all. Given that Atuel and Castro (2018) argue that the salience of veterans' identity is always contextual, with perspectives on past military experience shaped by present civilian spaces, the lack of insight from such a large area of civilian provision is notable.

Our analysis highlighted a broad range of values that participants attributed to their service. Hard work, pride, respect, resilience, and discipline were regularly cited but so was trust, inclusivity, solidarity, and mutual care. They contrasted these with the distrust, disrespect, and lack of care (Scullion et al., 2023; Young et al., 2024) which many perceived in their treatment by the benefits system, an alienating experience for a cohort that expected government systems to champion them.

Where interactions with benefit staff had been more positive, it was generally because individual workers in the benefits system displayed some of those values and moved beyond the present to recognize the contribution the ongoing impact of their military identities. The repeated demand for respect and recognition of service highlighted how their military identity continued to influence not just their sense of who they are but also the basis of their interactions with institutions.

Although we do not suggest our evidence supports any particular theory of military identity, it does confirm the continued significance of military identities for many, but not all, veterans in their experiences of the civilian benefits system, supports existing studies suggesting that transition remains an ongoing process, and is perhaps never complete (Brunger et al., 2013).

Finally, it is worth noting that the interview space gave individuals not only time to reflect but also to "re-narrate" some aspects of their past. As Walker (2012) comments interactions bring different meanings to a soldierly past, thus potentially posing an existential crisis to what had been a secure identity. In this regard, responses which were ambiguous suggested the interview space allowed the opportunity to revisit and re-assess identity—"opening up the possibility for more progressive identity restructuring" (Brunger et al., 2013, p. 95) and perhaps helped their ongoing management of military and civilian personas.

Conclusion

Two decades ago, Cowen contended the increasing valorization of military service symbolized by "new style" Covenants was a paradigm for new models of welfare, which operate on the principle that entitlements are conditional on individuals' own contributions, commitment, and discipline.

This study sets out to understand whether those who had served and claimed benefits supported such principles. Our evidence indicates while many did, they encountered a conditional benefits system which largely discounted the validity of past demonstrations, expecting ongoing proof. A time-limited approach to conditionality expose a real-world incompatibility between the welfare discourse with the pledges of the U.K.'s Armed Forces Covenant.

For social security scholars, veterans provide a unique perspective to ongoing debates about the changing nature of social rights and entitlements. Civilian welfare will continue to be a major part of public provision in the United Kingdom, and conditionality will continue to be a core element. Veterans will continue to engage and interact with the range of services. Nonetheless, efforts to make the benefits system

more aware of veterans also proceed. This makes it essential to map the changing landscape of welfare to understand how it may affect their experiences and beliefs.

We have also shown how military service continues to influence interaction with civilian services after transition, focusing on a field that has previously attracted minor attention. This adds new qualitative data to scholarship on military identities and how it evolves in different civilian contexts, spaces, and times, but it also reiterates the urgency of identifying how veterans can maintain "civilian compatible identities alongside useful military ones" (Walker, 2012, p. 300). Researching and analyzing such experiences contribute to our understanding of the ongoing transition from military to civilian worlds, but as importantly, advances insights into how and where post-service identities (and the values underpinning them) manifest in the context of contemporary welfare states.

Civilian welfare will remain a highly relevant area of research for mapping the evolution of post-service identity and veterans' inclusion in general.

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Notes

1. The definition of veterans in this case follows the U.K. government definition—see Office for Veterans Affairs (2020).
2. The Work and Health Program is a specific employment support program operated by the U.K. Department of Work & Pensions (DWP) targeted at a range of groups, including veterans. https://www.gov.uk/work-health-program
3. The "benefit cap" refers to the U.K. government policy which sets a limit to the total amount of benefits a person is entitled to claim. https://www.gov.uk/benefit-cap
4. The Armed Forces Champions are staff working within the U.K. DWP with a specific remit to raise awareness of the needs of veterans and their families who come into contact with their services.

5. The outputs from the SSSL study have been recognized by the DWP as contributing to the expanded provision offered to veterans in 2021.
6. Job Center Plus is the main public facing employment support service, operated by the DWP in locations across the United Kingdom.

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