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# The Future of Reserves: In Search of a Social Research Agenda for Implementing the Total Workforce Model<sup>1</sup>

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**Dr Brad West**

## **Abstract**

A clear objective of the Australian Defence Force Total Workforce Model is to address cultural barriers that exist between permanent and reserve units in the Australian Army and to facilitate the combining of military and civilian careers. This article highlights ways in which social research into the distinctive military identity and service experience of reservists can facilitate this strategic direction. By drawing on existing international research on reservists the article provides the contours of a research agenda in the area. The article highlights the strategic value of the proposed research by pointing to the potential of unintended consequences of the Total Workforce Model in relation to recruitment, retention and professional stigma. The importance of research into employers' attitudes towards reservist service is stressed as a way to more broadly comprehend civil-military relations and to inform policies around veteran employability.

## Introduction

Building on research previously published in this journal that has pointed to the need for greater comprehension of the motivations for service amongst reservists<sup>2</sup> and taking a lead from the funding of a Future Reserves Research Program in the United Kingdom,<sup>3</sup> in this article I attempt to outline a possible social research agenda on reservists around the implementation of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) Total Workforce Model (TWM). It is not the purpose of this article to go into a comprehensive overview of the TWM as this task has previously been undertaken.<sup>4</sup> However, it is widely agreed that the essential aim of the strategy is to build Defence workforce capability by providing permanent or regular members of the ADF with greater flexibility to their service and reservists with more opportunities to serve. The general rationale is the belief that by moving away from the binary distinction between regulars and reservists the TWM will at once enhance retention rates in Defence while also addressing the need to attract recruits with different skill sets from traditional military personnel, ones that relate to the new era of post-heroic warfare.<sup>5</sup> If taken to its full extent the essential philosophy of the TWM is to disestablish the very notion of reservists, with ADF personnel simply being considered in relation to their current full-time or part-time service status.

The TWM from one perspective is nothing particularly revolutionary as it reflects broader shifts in civilian employment management practice orientated to flexibility<sup>6</sup> and in some ways is only a variant of restructuring strategies in Western defence forces over several decades.<sup>7</sup> The strategy on the surface also does not seem to be overly disruptive as it is widely evidenced that reservists express a desire to contribute more substantially and attain greater recognition within Defence.<sup>8</sup> The article does not dispute this finding but highlights the dangers in assuming that this necessarily equates to reservists having similar motivations and orientations to their service. As outlined below, without a research program in the area to appreciate the distinctive nature of reservist service and the ways reserves are seen by other Defence personnel and by those in the civilian community more broadly, there is a danger that the TWM could have unintended negative consequences on the recruitment, retention, cohesion and civil-military relations. In particular, I argue the need for Australian research into the intrinsic motivations for reservist service, the difficulty reservists face in simultaneously maintaining civilian and military identities, including how

reservist service is understood by family members and employers, and the extent and nature of perceptions of reservists by others in the armed forces.

## **Reservists, volunteer ethos and institutional orientations**

One of the foundational studies in the area of military reserves was the 1990 report “The Sociology of the Army Reserves” by the leading American military sociologist Charles Moskos. Moskos highlighted the need for reservists to be considered “more than just an organisational variation of active components”.<sup>9</sup> While there has been some significant social research undertaken in the area of reserves since Moskos’ original engagement, social research of the military remains overwhelmingly focussed on regular personnel despite the increased operational deployment of reserves. As such, there continues to be a general lack of comprehension of the distinctive identities between reservists and regulars.

An important starting point for a research agenda on Australian reservists is to expand upon existing pilot and small scale qualitative studies on their motivations for enlistment.<sup>10</sup> A consistent finding in international studies on reservists is that generally they are motivated by a strong volunteer ethos, something that conflicts with perceptions of many within the military’s hierarchy who arguably tend to view reservist service in a transactional way that focuses on the benefits of remuneration and professional development. Further research is required to empirically document the extent and distribution of this characteristic of reservists, as a strong volunteer ethos amongst reservists has the potential to be eroded by the TWM with consequences for recruitment and retention.

Moskos’ famous distinction between institutional versus occupational motivations and forms of military organisation is useful to think about in this regard.<sup>11</sup> Using this typology we can comprehend that a strong volunteer orientation amongst reservists aligns them with institutional motivations such as duty and honour. In contrast the permanent regulars can be understood in relation to occupational factors with them interpreting their service in relation to a career and professionalism. In reality both reservists and regulars identify with a combination of both institutional and occupational factors. By the TWM framing all service in

occupational ways, however, for example through an emphasis on career advancement and individual benefits related to service, there is a danger that the basis or rationale for reservist service will be undermined.

The point of the proposed research is not to test whether or not reservists have purely altruistic motives in relation to their service but to identify how they differ from regulars around which social research has tended to focus. For example Bury in his study of U.S. Army logistics units found that cohesion amongst reserve units tended to be more based on interpersonal rather than professional bonds, from which with several operational implications flow.<sup>12</sup> Indeed part of the traditional institutional character of Australian reservists is acknowledged within the TWM itself with the development of a civilian skills database for reservists, an initiative that in part was a response to a tendency amongst various reservists to have a clear distinction between their civilian and military occupational roles. Research into the extent of such divisions and the motivations to separate military and civilian roles would be a significant line of inquiry in better comprehending the reservists' motivations for enlistment and factors surrounding retention.

Research on the nature and extent of a volunteer ethos and institutional factors related to reservist service not only involve investigations into attitudes of Defence personnel themselves but also their family members as their own sacrifices need to be accounted for in regards to recruitment and retention<sup>13</sup> For example, we know from previous research that time away from the home and the burden of caring responsibilities being shifted to other members of the family are significant factors contributing to attrition amongst reservists. However, much less is known about how family members such as spouses think about the sacrifices they endure and whether this aligns or differs from the institutional and occupational factors that reservists themselves cite in regard to their service. As will be explored later in the article, a similar research frame needs to account for employer allowances.

## Conflict between reservists and regular military personnel

In blurring the line between regulars and reservists the TWM will likely have implications for the relations between reservist and regular military personnel. As a variety of scholars both in Australia and in other Western nations have observed, regulars often strongly define themselves in opposition to the reservist mode of serving.<sup>14</sup> As Cromptvoets<sup>15</sup> argues from her in-depth interviews with Australian reservists as part of an examination of the future support service needs of reservist veterans, the individual viewpoint of regulars about reservists is reinforced by the ADF that “creates an environment that systematically and structurally marginalises reserves” through systems of entitlements that are designed to privilege regulars as well as overtly through practices of discrimination and bullying of reservists. While the ADF as part of the implementation of the TWM is restructuring many of these administration and support systems that contribute to the marginalisation of reservists, the traditional cultural identification of being a regular and seeing this in contrast to that of a reservist member is likely to be more difficult to overcome.

Simply moving away from a notion of reservist to several categories of full-time and part-time military personnel in the TWM, is unlikely to address singlehandedly the stigma associated with those who overwhelmingly serve in the military part-time. Certainly, it is true that the way that reservists are labelled significantly contributes to their cultural and institutional identity. As Shulz has highlighted, discourses about reservists has tended to distinguish them from regulars and reinforce the idea that reservists are ‘second stringers’ to real military personnel.<sup>16</sup> However, as Lomsky-Feder et al. have highlighted it is the identity ambiguity of moving constantly between civilian and military lives that is at the heart of regulars treating reservists with ambivalence and suspicion.<sup>17</sup> As such this basis of professional conflict and assigning of stigma can simply be transferred to the TWM with the division being between part-time and full-time members of the armed forces. This is particularly likely if the TWM becomes perceived as resulting in the demise of organisational resourcing and disruption to widely accepted benefit arrangements and remuneration systems.

Central to preventing the possibility of such professional conflict is research on how to best manage regulars and reservists to allow for optimal

capability, possibly studying how different interactional factors either result in a reinforcing or breaking down of the stereotypes and stigma associated with reservists. In making these points I note that currently there is a great level of diversity in relation to the reserves/regulars relationship across the services. It is the Army that I am primarily accounting for in this instance as it accounts for the vast majority of Australian reserves. It is also the service that has a traditionally low level of transfer between regulars and active reserves, an ongoing issue that has failed to be adequately addressed by having regulars automatically designated as members of the standby reserves upon discharge.<sup>18</sup> Research into the experience of those who do transition from being regulars to active reserves will provide significant insight into the contrasting military cultures. It can also possibly provide new significant comprehension of transition. Currently we know little about how veterans who maintain connections with the armed forces through the active reserves differ psychologically in relation to their resilience for handling the difficulties involved in military-civilian transition.

## **Employer and civilian attitudes towards military service**

The objectives of the TWM not only rely on administrative and cultural change within the ADF but also rest on civilian employers and workplaces to have a positive recognition of defence service. This relates both to the sanctioning of leave for those simultaneously undertaking both civilian and defence employment but also for defence service to be valued sufficiently by civilian employers that Defence personnel are able to prosper in the civilian employment sector. Despite veteran employability being an established problem and recently being a prominent political one reflected in the establishment of the Prime Minister Veteran Employment Program, I am not aware of any systematic research into civilian employers and their dispositions in recognising defence service. Similarly, we know little about how individuals manage their dual citizen and soldier identities in different workplaces or whether such identities will become more fluid and contingent as the TWM allows for more and more individuals to experience new balances between defence and civilian work.<sup>19</sup>

At the broadest level there is a significant need for a quantitative survey into how members of the general public view men and women differently

as a consequence of military service and combat exposure, testing levels of stigma and symbolic capital that relate to popular narratives about military service. A recent study of United States veterans returning from Iraq suggested that while there is a stigma associated with veterans who had been deployed, this does not necessarily result in discrimination, challenging the idea that the perception of stigma by employers is responsible for the struggles of veterans in the job market.<sup>20</sup> With Australian civil-military relations vastly different to the United States there would be great value in replicating this study domestically.

There is a significant need though to also undertake research more directly on employer attitudes towards the military. Existing studies of veteran employment prospects have been largely longitudinal and quantitative focusing on the effects of the mass mobilisation related to particular wars or the salary penalty veterans endure when moving from the military to the civilian employment. We know little though about how this differs across sectors of the economy and in turn how veteran employability relates to broader economic shifts, for example in relation to the rise of the creative industries and service sector. As well as informing civil-military relations strategy broadly, research in this area could also examine the effectiveness of Defence initiatives such as Boss Lift in bringing about a change in attitudes amongst employers.

Beyond a focus on attitudes towards ADF service, research in relation to employability should also examine the actual differences in work cultures across military and civilian roles. This would examine the process by which contemporary military training and socialisation influences how a person acts and presents themselves to others in civilian contexts. Studies, for example, could examine the difficulty in moving between the military and civilian employment, accounting for the vastly different forms of authority, gender make-up and expressions of individuality in these different contexts.<sup>21</sup> In recognising the embodied influence of military service we can also look at positive cases and the strategies that reservists have used in frequently transitioning between civilian and military environments. This data can help to inform personal development planning that aids military personnel to navigate between military and civilian employment settings.

## Concluding Remarks

In this article I have attempted to emphasise the need for independent social research to be undertaken around cultural factors that are crucial to the successful implementation of the TWM, providing several brief outlines of research that should be pursued. As the ADF advances with implementing the TWM it will be increasingly difficult from within Defence to discuss issues in ways that look to differentiate between regular and reservist issues. However, as I have outlined above, examining the nature of these different military cultures and how they are affected by the TWM is of critical importance to the issue of human performance in the military. Australian universities have recently initiated significant research engagement with the defence sector, however, thus far this has largely focussed on research as it relates to technology. As I have attempted to demonstrate in this article, social research is also significant in strengthening the nation's security and defence capabilities, with the study of the diversity of cultures within the ADF and appreciating the complexity and critical importance of civil military relations as they relate to the TWM arguably the most significant issues to be addressed.

## Endnotes

1. A version of this article was presented in a panel session of reservists and research at the 2017 Generations of War conference hosted by the University of South Australia. The panel was sponsored by the South Australian Branch of the Defence Reserves Association and chaired by Dr Pamela Schulz OAM who also originally encouraged me to develop a research agenda focussing on Defence Reserves. The article is indebted also to the insight provided by the other panel members: Major General Neil Wilson AM RFD (rtd), Brigadier Dr Robert Atkinson AM RFD (rtd), Brigadier Michael Burgess AM ADC, Major Dr Kate Ames, Captain Dr Sharon Mascall-Dare
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## The Author

Dr Brad West is a Senior Lecturer in sociology at the University of South Australia. He is a Faculty Fellow at the Yale Center for Cultural Sociology and has held academic posts at the University of Bristol, Flinders University and Kings College London. His research focuses on the changing dynamics of civil military relations with a particular focus on the commemoration of war and responses to terrorism and natural disasters. He has recently co-edited a special issue of the *Journal of Sociology* on the theme of War, the Military and Civil Society, arguing for a new sociological 'strong program' research agenda.