

## Impact case study (REF3)

<b>Institution:</b> Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU)		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> UOA28		
<b>Title of case study:</b> 'Dry Your Eyes, Princess': gender variance in the British Armed Forces		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2014-2018		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Dr Emma Vickers	Senior Lecturer, History	January 2013-ongoing
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2015-2019		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b></p> <p>Vickers has undertaken the first and only known research project on trans veterans in the world. The project sought to understand how gender variance was understood by the Armed Forces after 1945 and the ways in which veterans conceptualised the relationship between their service and their gender identity. This was addressed through Vickers' oral history research with trans veterans and by her work with the photographer Stephen King on the photography project that accompanied the research. [CS1, CS2, CS5] The latter had an unprecedented impact on the general public and the trans community in the UK (currently estimated at 600,000) with regard to consciousness-raising, and on curatorial and artistic practice. Vickers' research [UR3, UR4] has also had a foundational impact on the emerging sub-field of trans history and on the methodology of oral historians in relation to trauma and co-creation.</p>		
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b></p> <p>Historically, diversity has been problematized by the Armed Forces. Before 1999, the discovery (or declaration) of same-sex activity or a lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans identity was punishable under military law, often by immediate discharge. In 1999, the European Court of Human Rights lifted the ban on lesbian, gay and bisexual people serving in the British Armed Forces following a challenge by four former personnel. Trans people did not figure in the lifting of the ban. Vickers' research has illuminated the historically divergent relationship between military law and its application in relation to sexual and gender diversity, and has explored institutional and personal understandings of LGBTQ service. [UR1, UR2] For example, before 2005, and the introduction of a Defence Instruction Notice that formalised understandings and treatment of trans personnel across all three services, senior staff responded inconsistently to individuals who presented as trans, which resulted in a great deal of variation in how they experienced service life. [UR4] Many of Vickers' interviewees who had retired more recently, spoke positively about their experiences of service. Others, many of whom had served in the 1980s and 1990s, only felt able to live openly once they had left their particular service. Vickers discovered that significant portions of their interviews focused on coping strategies that allowed them to either suppress or access their authentic selves; everything from the concealment and periodic destruction of feminine clothing to the discovery and use of the internet as a means of locating the wider community. Some interviewees were dismissed from service on account of gender identity. Due to the conflation of gender identity and same-sex attraction, these dismissals were frequently badged as homosexuality [UR4] and for some, led to life-long feelings of trauma and resentment [UR3, UR4].</p> <p>The project started in 2014 when Vickers began interviewing trans veterans. She interviewed twenty female veterans from across the British Army, Air Force and Royal Navy between 2014 and 2015. During the interview phase, Vickers was contacted by Stephen King, who expressed</p>		

an interest in working collaboratively on a project to capture the experiences of her interviewees through portraiture. They worked together on a successful bid to the Arts Council in 2015 and this phase of the project ran until 2016. [CS2] During this time, Vickers began research on co-creation, with a specific focus on her work with King. [UR4] This particular aspect of the research explored how photography and oral testimony might be utilised in a public history setting. It reflected on the lasting impact of the photography exhibitions in Liverpool and Belfast in relation to raising awareness of trans veterans and moreover, on how the project had influenced both the artistic practice of King and the curatorial approach of the Museum of Liverpool (hereafter MoL). During this time, Vickers also finalised her research on unexpected trauma in oral interviewing, work that drew extensively on her interviews with LGBTQ veterans. [UR3] This particular piece reflected on recall of unexpected trauma and how practitioners of oral testimony might utilise techniques drawn from psychotherapy to inform their practice. It has already made a significant impact in the field of oral history. [UR3]

### 3. References to the research

**All references have been through a rigorous peer-review process.**

**UR1.** E. Vickers, *Queen and Country: same sex desire in the British Armed Forces, 1939-1945* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).

**UR2.** E. Jackson and E. Vickers, 'Sanctuary of sissy? Male cross dressing as entertainment in the British Armed Forces, 1939-1945' in C.M.Peniston-Bird and E.Vickers (eds) *Lessons of War: Gender and the Second World War* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

**UR3.** E. Vickers, 'Unexpected trauma in oral interviewing', the *Oral History Review*, vol. 46 (2019) 134-141.

**UR4.** Vickers, "'Dry Your Eyes, Princess": oral testimony and photography: a case study', *Oral History Journal*, vol. 48, no 1 (Spring 2020)

### 4. Details of the impact

#### **Raising awareness of trans veterans in the British Armed Forces**

Upon completion of the oral interviews, King worked with the interviewees in the co-production of their portraits. On 12 November 2015, the images were displayed at the Red Barn Gallery in Belfast as part of the queer arts festival Outburst. During the eight-day run of the exhibition, the portraits were mounted around the central gallery space and visitors could choose whether to view them in isolation, or access a short information sheet that summarised the experiences of each participant and gave the viewer the central piece of testimony that related to their image. Following the Belfast exhibition, the images were exhibited at the MoL from 14 December 2015 for 45 days as part of the Homotopia queer arts festival.

*The feedback from visitors to the exhibitions, events and associated press coverage demonstrates the project's reach and its significance* [CS2, CS3, CS5, CS7]. For example, Homotopia distributed 15,000 brochures across North-West England, Yorkshire, Birmingham, London and Brighton between September and November 2014 that advertised the festival schedule, including the exhibition. In the year leading up to the exhibition there were over 284,000 visits to Homotopia TV and the Homotopia website (January–December 2015). [CS2]. There was £246,520 worth of marketing, advertising and positive news exposure throughout 2015 for the photography project

in a range of publications including *DIVA*, *Attitude*, *The Independent*, *Out There Magazine*, BBC Radio 4 *Woman's Hour*, *The Guardian*, *UK in Latvia*, *USA Today*. [CS2, CS5].

Visitor numbers: MoL, 45 day run: 58,197; Outburst, 8 day run: 1,080. These figures were considered by Outburst and Homotopia/MoL to be substantial.[CS2]

*Feedback from the exhibition at the Red Barn in Belfast demonstrates the visibility that was provoked by the portraits.* Visitor comments included; 'Stunning work. Great to see work of this quality in Outburst'; 'Very powerful images'; 'Great stuff. Left me confused and I had lots of questions. I support trans people but not military. The two together was very challenging to me'; 'I don't know if you were deliberately trying to provoke reaction by showing this in Belfast, but glad you did. Gorgeous photos'; 'Uncomfortable and powerful viewing'; 'Historically fascinating, not something you'd normally see here' [CS3]. In Liverpool, feedback from a public talk at the MoL revealed that the event and the wider exhibition had significantly altered people's perceptions. One audience member commented that they had gained a 'Better understanding of the history around inclusivity in the military, current position and work that still needs to be done to change culture'. [CS6]. The feedback from the event also revealed that it had altered behaviours. 18 people believed that they would support Trans Day of Remembrance (TDOR), join a campaign for trans equality and volunteer for an LGBT charity [CS6]. Additionally, a member of the public emailed Vickers and commented that 'projects like this make a real difference and help to change the world for the better.' [CS7].

### **Sense of belonging for trans veterans and the wider trans community**

It has been estimated by Stonewall that 1 percent of the population in Britain is trans, and moreover, that the veteran population stands at around 2.5 million. *There is clear evidence that the project enabled participants to feel validated and part of a community for the first time.* Participant 1 commented that she was 'proud to have been a small part of such a ground-breaking exhibition' [CS2] Participant 2 noted that she found the exhibition 'inspiring' and that she felt 'proud to be part of such an exhibition'. [CS10] This was also the case for those who viewed the exhibition. One email from a trans veteran, D. Johnson, who was not involved in the project, read '...how pleased and encouraged I am to see the exhibition...Having served... to the rank of lieutenant colonel, and since transitioned, I can empathise with your interviewees. Thank you for enabling such work.' [CS8] The Director of Outburst festival Ruth McCarthy noted the impact of the exhibition on the trans community: 'The trans community in Northern Ireland is still emerging and building the confidence to share stories and experiences in the wider community. The exhibition was a great platform and catalyst for this.' [CS4].

### **Influencing artistic/academic methodologies**

King believed that the project gave him *'the opportunity to develop my artistic practice in new ways - I developed a more collaborative way of creating work with participants.'* King's subsequent projects have drawn explicitly on this new methodology, in particular *Not Home*, his collaboration with the charity Justlife and the novelist Sarah Butler. [CS1] Justlife supports people living in unsupported temporary accommodation in Manchester. Written with the input of Justlife's clients, the novella, *Not Home* sits alongside a companion text, also titled *Not Home*: a series of true-life stories with accompanying portraits.

Vickers published her research on unexpected trauma [UR3] and on co-production and public history [UR4] and both outputs are helping to redefine the methodological approaches of historians. *In particular, Vickers' work has made a ground-breaking contribution to trans history, which is an emergent sub-field of the discipline.*

### **Influencing curatorial practice in museums**

The mainstream museum sector has yet to substantively address sexual and gender diversity. *Both the MoL and the Red Barn Gallery broke new ground in terms of their willingness to exhibit the portraits.* At the MoL, the exhibition reinforced the commitment of National Museums Liverpool to continue their programming of LGBTQ content, as evidenced by subsequent exhibition on LGBTQ life in Liverpool, *Tales from the City* [CS9]. King's portrait of Caroline Paige was acquired by the MoL for their permanent collection and Paige's RAF uniform featured in *Tales from the City*. The director of the museum, Janet Dugdale, believed that 'the real impact [of the exhibition was] the visibility and inclusive practice for often fragile histories to be shared with the public and for our confidence to develop as a museum.' [CS9]. The exhibition also gave Liverpool Central Library and archive the impetus to hold their own exhibition of trans lives in Liverpool (jointly curated by Vickers) in the summer of 2019.

### **5. Sources to corroborate the impact**

**CS1.** Not Home <http://www.stephenkingphotography.co.uk/not-home> ;  
<http://www.stephenkingphotography.co.uk/untitled-custom-page>

**CS2.** Arts Council Report

**CS3.** Online comments from Outburst exhibition

**CS4.** Feedback from Ruth McCarthy

**CS5.** 'Surviving the services: trans military veterans – in pictures' *Guardian* newspaper

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2015/dec/15/surviving-the-services-trans-military-veterans-in-pictures#comments>

Article shared 388 times on Facebook, correct as of 12/02/19

**CS6.** Feedback from panel event at the MoL February 2016

**CS7.** Email from J. Melvin

**CS8.** Email from D. Johnson

**CS9.** Email from Janet Dugdale, Director of Museum of Liverpool & Merseyside Maritime Museum

**CS10.** Email from C. Paige