

Tell us what you really think!

A new way to measure public opinion

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Thirty years ago, this journal published an article describing the findings of a 1980 public opinion poll on community attitudes to the Defence Force.¹ This was one of only a few polls that have addressed public perceptions of the military in Australia, yet the ADF still believes it enjoys a high level of public support.² However, this belief is based more on anecdote than comprehensive research and, in fact, we do not really know what the public thinks.

In the meantime, ADF cultural policy is being written on assumptions of social expectations—and waves of veterans are transitioning back into the community without any real idea of how that community regards them. It is a disservice to both serving members and veterans to give them so little understanding of public sentiment, so we need to do more. The trouble is, opinion polls and town hall meetings do not provide much information that is meaningful or revealing of the civil-military relationship, so a different kind of measurement is needed.

This article contends that qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews with small, targeted audiences would generate more specific findings, which could directly influence ADF policy and enrich the civil-military understanding.

The data

There are several existing data sets of public opinion on Defence issues but their scope includes topics which range from the Australian-US alliance to defence expenditure. The data sets are also limited to attitude-based prioritisations of importance, and do not reveal any significant level of engagement with ADF members.

By missing this crucial information, we cannot determine how much ADF members themselves contribute to the public image of 'Defence'. Community attitudes also tend to be measured, by both Defence and the media, around events which polarise responses to either ardour



(ANZAC day) or horror (scandals). Little of this information is useful for determining the nature of the relationship between the ADF and the public.

Most of the data comes from polls conducted over the last 40 years. During this time, the Department of Defence and others have periodically attempted to survey national attitudes towards Defence and defence-related policy. However, the various polls have had different purposes, with their questions accordingly reflecting their differing objectives.

The 1980 Advertising Service's poll

A survey in 1980 was commissioned by the Australian Government Advertising Service, on behalf of the Department of Defence, to investigate community attitudes primarily for recruitment purposes.³ This study came at a time when post-Vietnam demobilisation and social mobilisation had left the Defence Force hollow, and bereft of a strategic role. The research was commissioned to identify strategies that would boost recruitment and provide a new image for the ADF.

The study employed both qualitative and quantitative methods, aiming to identify community assumptions and determine national benchmarks. The qualitative phase, in which over 3200 'influencers' were interviewed, included peers, parents, potential recruiting target groups, recruiters, employment officers and school career advisors. However, while this was a useful cross-section of those likely to influence potential recruits, most displayed a significant lack of knowledge of the ADF, with researchers commenting that ADF members themselves were an overlooked source of information.⁴

The 2000 Defence Review Report survey

The 2000 Defence Review Report, 'Australian perspectives on defence', marked a change in preparation for strategic policy by releasing a discussion paper and following it with a community consultation process.⁵ The Howard Government heralded this as a significant shift in how defence and security policy would be made in Australia, alluding to post-Cold War instability in the region and renewed public interest in defence issues.

The consultation team, chaired by Andrew Peacock, held 28 public meetings in cities and regional centres, attracting over 2000 people. It also held a number of private meetings with government, private sector and interest groups; and received 1100 submissions. Seven themes emerged from the process, only two of which related specifically to the ADF, namely 'personnel' and 'Reserves'.

Despite the Howard Government's ambitious promotion of its 'new way' of policy development, the meetings faced some organised protest and were criticised, among other things, as being too brief and ambitious, gender- and age-biased, driven by departmental agendas, and generating little or no dialogue.⁶ The survey methodology was also criticised as being ineffective, leading to questions about whether government consultation with the community is more concerned with the fact that it consults, rather than what it consults about.

The 2004 Australian Strategic Policy Institute's report

The rise in public awareness of defence issues following deployments to East Timor and the Middle East was subsequently seen in a 2004 report published by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI). This report traced changes in public opinion over the previous 25 years but, as the author cautioned:

[P]ublic opinion on defence and national security doesn't dictate or lead what governments decide, at least in the way that public attitudes about health and education, for example, help to shape policy. Nevertheless, [it] established boundaries beyond which a government ventures only at its peril.⁷

The beneficiary of public opinion polls was, of course, the Australian Government. However, in the public meetings conducted for this report during 2003 and 2004, there were clear messages for Army that are still familiar today, namely that:

[T]he Army is too small ... that commercial outsourcing of ADF support elements had gone too far ... and that the ADF was losing links with the broader community.⁸

The 2009 Australian National University's poll

In 2009, a report titled 'Public opinion towards defence and foreign affairs' presented the results of an Australian National University poll, prepared to provide information for the 2009 Defence White Paper.⁹ A sample of 1200 people was surveyed in telephone interviews, although only two of 17 questions related to civic participation in the ADF, namely:

- If you had a son or daughter who was planning to enter the defence forces, would you support that decision, or would you suggest a different occupation?
- Have you or a close relative ever served in the ADF in any capacity?¹⁰

The other questions related to wider strategic issues including terrorism and the war in Afghanistan, which are matters of defence-related policy but provide no guidance on society's views of the ADF. By having defence policy as a constant companion, surveys involving questions about the ADF are almost always contaminated with cross-disciplinary equivocation, which can not only be ineffectual to our understanding of the civil-military relationship but harmful.

More recent developments

Subsequent attempts to present Australian public opinion of the ADF, despite alluding to its necessity, fail to consider it in sufficient depth. In 2014, Charles Miller contributed a chapter titled 'Public attitudes to defence' in an edited volume on *Australia's defence: towards a new era*.¹¹ Miller noted that not a lot of public discussion resulted from Thomas Millar's 1965 edict that '[we should] not be frightened to have a public discussion on defence'.¹² Miller goes on to present results from polls on five defence-related issues, one of which was public attitudes towards the ADF. However, what follows are comparisons between developed nations of public confidence in their respective militaries, which is more about, 'How much do you like us?' rather than 'Who do you think we are, and what is it that you think we do?'

The data from this period gives only a brief glimpse into public attitudes to the ADF and its members, and is more useful as a

quasi-longitudinal study of political preferences. What it does not give us is topical and relevant information which describes the social classification or value assigned to ADF members by those not in the ADF.

A recent study has come closer to achieving this. The 2015 report, 'Guarding against uncertainty', commissioned by the Department of Defence, was prepared to inform the 2016 Defence White Paper and was the second large-scale attempt to use qualitative methodology to present national public opinion on defence issues.¹³ Responses were gathered from consultative meetings with 500 individuals across Australia and from matters raised in 260 submissions. Using unstructured interviews and thematic analysis, the findings yielded information about five general topics. However, the scope was again broad and did little more than produce many potential but unpursued leads.

In summary, opinion polls, whether gathered through longitudinal or cross-sectional design, are typically fraught with ambivalence. Polls present answers to precise questions but the nature of the individual may mean he or she does not possess a fixed view on an issue, and may present an immature or ambiguous sentiment.¹⁴

Such studies have not been very useful to a sociological understanding of civil-military relations and would be more valuable if they were designed around one topic, targeted a specific sector of the community, and tested both military and civilian responses to the same questions. This kind of design would enable the process of information-gathering to be carried out with depth and focus, and until individual topics are exhausted.

Influences

Before exploring new ways of measuring public opinion, it is useful to identify the main influences on public perception, and describe how they enhance or distort the image of the ADF.

Australia maintains certain myths around the 'history' and 'sacrifice' of the ADF and its members, which are most evident during commemoration and national celebrations.¹⁵ Stories and images dominate the way activities of the ADF are presented to the public. These stories form



an abbreviated social narrative, which is then adopted back into the ADF.

But the ADF too, cultivates its own share of the mythology, and this contributes greatly to internal notions of collective identity. Stories of the history and tradition of individual units are handed down from leaders to subordinates and maintained (sometimes out of context) by unit members. The two narratives are not always compatible, and so a dichotomy endures.

Some myths have been borrowed and rewritten into a chapter of the Australian narrative. This is no more clearly seen than in certain stories of public hostility towards American veterans of the Vietnam War, which were transferred to Australian historical accounts.¹⁶ In a society where those veterans are still living, this transference exacerbates the phenomenon of 'false memory', which can shape collective identity. The influence of military mythology on public opinion is generally distorting because it creates a contradiction between what is understood and what is presented. That the serving member perceives a contradiction between what is taught and what is experienced serves only to compound this distortion.

The ADF's relationship with the media has dominated the period of Middle Eastern operations and domestic incidents over the last decade. The main criticism from the media concerns the way the ADF regulates reporting by 'managing' broadcasters and messaging. Kevin Foster writes about articulation of national identity and surmises that the paradox of ADF public relations is the impossibility of balancing operational security, reputational management and brand promotion, contending that:

While fulfilling their mission, their principal responsibility was not to the Afghans or the International Security Assistance Force, but to the history of the organisation they served. They had to be seen to be serving in the great traditions of their Anzac forebears.¹⁷

Controlling messaging from overseas deployments is not the only regulatory activity perceived by the media. Problems have also occurred when the ADF has tried to control messages in times of scandal. This further isolates ADF members from their civilian support base because public defence and condemnation can

be equally meaningless when damage control strategies are perceived as being orchestrated by political figures.¹⁸ The ADF's strategic communication practices have the potential to be one of the greatest influences on public opinion but, ironically, often have a negative effect, due sometimes to perversion but sometimes to silence.

The point at which the tight control of strategic communication messages is relinquished is when an ADF member separates from military service. Ex-service organisations now dominate the media's presentation of the military-to-civilian transition process, and act as facilitators for presenting the transition struggles of contemporary veterans. The image which has emerged, however, is often one of 'veteran entitlement', which is again a distortion—and can only have a degrading effect on relations with the public.¹⁹

However, this is not just a local problem. Kings College London and market research organisation Ipsos MORI conducted a comparative survey in 2015 on public opinion of 'the military' across five countries, including Australia.²⁰ The survey explored themes of military members as 'hero/victim/villain' and found that many respondents had a conflicting image of military members, regarding them as both hero and victim at the same time.

In championing the cause of the veteran, ex-service organisations have inadvertently contributed to the separation of serving and ex-serving communities. This has possibly pushed the serving community further away from the public eye, and replaced it with an image that is somewhat incomplete and ambiguous.

A new way to measure public opinion

From this description of the main influencers, it is likely that the Australian community has a distorted view of the ADF, which is contributed to by many stakeholders, including government, the media and the ADF itself. It is also apparent that the information available on public attitudes to ADF members is too broad and too shallow.

In referring earlier to the community consultancy activities of 2000 and 2015, it was suggested

that such studies would be more useful if they were designed around one topic, targeted a specific sector of the community, and tested both military and civilian responses to the same questions. This is the logic behind a more productive methodology.

To find out what people think, we need to start with a qualitative approach. Qualitative research lends itself to a social reality that is constructed and dynamic (reflecting Australian society). It needs to emphasise how people interpret their world through their words and behaviour (suited to interviews); and should be inductive, that is, by generating theories, rather than testing existing theories (suited to finding out 'what' rather than 'how much').²¹

Where population samples have been used to map changes over time, as is the case with policy-based opinion polls, they have generally employed a quantitative strategy (that is, they have measured something like percentages) and used repeated cross-sections of population samples, rather than true longitudinal designs which would retest the same sample.

To gather data at a single point in time (that is, what is everybody thinking in 2017), we could use a cross-sectional design with variables of observations and cases. This usually looks like a quantitative method but—when we substitute unstructured interviewing for the observations, and social sectors for the cases, and record a large amount of unstructured data—it becomes a qualitative method within a cross-sectional design. This is a more appropriate method for finding out what sectors of the community think today.

It would be tempting to criticise this kind of research as being a mere 'chat' between like-minded people to confirm our own assumptions. But this can be prevented by the validity of the research. Several criteria can be employed to measure, for instance, the credibility of the data; evidence of over-generalisation (or its transferability to other cases); how much the data is dependent on circumstantial factors; and to what extent it can be confirmed by other research.²²

The preoccupation with detailed description in qualitative research gives context for the social understanding and behaviour we observe.²³ This practice is borrowed from anthropology,

and acknowledges that people act within a social environment which has its own protocols and traditions. The opinions and actions of an individual, therefore, cannot be fully understood without a knowledge of these protocols and traditions. In the case of what the public thinks of the ADF, the context may include things such as family background, power relationships, access to media, degree of social separation, cultural background and degree of influence.

The other habit of qualitative research which makes it applicable is its emphasis on limiting structure. The structured manner of previous public consultation risks constraining responses to either/or answers, resulting in a scaled degree of agreement on policy-based themes. Furthermore, by suggesting answers to participants, the researcher risks altering participants' social reality by imposing a frame of reference which may lead the interpreter to a false conclusion.²⁴

The effectiveness of the qualitative, interpretive method is in the analysis of the data. Such a large amount of information needs to yield some significant, usable findings or the whole process is a waste of time. 'Grounded theory' is one way of generating theory (or concepts) from data. An important element of grounded theory is that it is iterative, that is, it occurs concurrently with data collection, with the two processes informing each other.²⁵

An example is the technique of 'coding'. When reading the transcripts of interviews with a target group, certain phrases may emerge as prevalent. These could be, for example, 'assertive', 'confidence', 'easy to work with' or 'unpredictable'. These could form the concept of 'behavioural characteristics'. Other phrases concerning 'bullying', 'sexual harassment', 'gender empowerment' or 'coercion' could reveal a concept of 'perceptions of work conditions'. As the concepts emerge, the researcher can identify conceptual gaps and collect more data with different target audiences.

The concepts could be further organised into categories. For example, 'behavioural characteristics' and 'perceptions of work conditions' could be categorised into 'occupational suitability'. What would emerge is a list of categories, some of which may correlate, such as 'occupational suitability' and 'knowledge of what

ADF does'. These correlations may lead to initial hypotheses about 'what the public thinks', and then to theoretical frameworks on the social phenomenon that is the civil-military relationship.

Another way of processing the data is through 'phenomenology'. This philosophical approach is concerned with the subjective human experience as expressed through the participants' emotions, feelings and perceptions.²⁶ In this approach, the researcher aims to understand how the participants interpret their world and attributes meaning to it by how things 'appear' to them, rather than how things 'are'. Due to the approach's focus on the interpretation of emotions and perceptions, it is often found in psychological and other clinical studies.

The key to this logic is narrowing the topic sufficiently that only a specific target group of people

are qualified to provide the answer. This calls for purposive (or selective) sampling, whereby the participants are selected according to their characteristics and the objectives of the research.²⁷ Proportion is less important than expertise in this case, however, variations such as gender, age and ethnic background may have to be considered in analysing data. For some topics, cluster samples may prove to be most beneficial.

This process would be most effective when applied to a number of different target groups in the same timeframe. These groups would largely correspond to sectors of society, and the approach must be proactive (that is, conducted in their workplace) rather than by recruitment.²⁸ A possible design for targeted research is proposed in Table 1.

Table 1: Targeted research design for qualitative study

Sector/group	Topic	Optional determination (not revealed to participant)	Example research questions
Workplace supervisors	Management of Reservists	Asset or liability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where does the manager get info about what Reserve service entails? • What workplace problems need to be addressed when a Reserve member is away? • How have the member's work skills changed?
School teachers	Children of ADF members	Influences and effects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does the child describe the parent's job? • Is there a perceived difference between male and female service parents? • How is the absence of a parent manifest in the child? • To what extent does the child express a desire to join the ADF?
Careers counsellors	ADF careers	Knowledge of ADF career structure and opportunity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where does the careers counsellor get info about ADF careers? • Are there currently serving members available to the careers counsellor? • How well are entry standards understood by the careers counsellor?



Sector/group	Topic	Optional determination (not revealed to participant)	Example research questions
18-23 age group	Peer attitudes	Perception of military subculture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do the participants have any contact with friends who have joined the ADF? • How much do they learn about the ADF from friends? • How do they perceive civil/military 'differences' in ADF members? • Is the career perceived in terms of positive or negative effects?
18-23 age group	ADF members as partners	Degree of preference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How likely are they to meet ADF members socially? • What preconceptions do they have in terms of approachability? • How stable/unstable is a relationship with an ADF member perceived to be? <p>What differences do male/female ADF members present as potential partners?</p>
Parents	Gender issues	Perception of difference in son/daughter experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Would they support either child joining ADF? • What are the benefits for either gender? • What are the perceived disadvantages/obstacles for either gender? <p>How are the different genders represented to prospective recruits and their families?</p>
Parents	Single Service knowledge	Perception of difference in three Service environments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which Service is preferable and why? • Which Service do they know most/least about? • What characteristics of each Service suit gender preference?
Media	Strategic communication	Dominant message themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which elements of ADF are easiest/hardest to extract info? • How much difference is perceived between dominant messages and observations? • How much difference is perceived between strategic and field-sourced messages? • To what extent has embedding enabled access?
Extended families	Separation	Consequences of physical separation of members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How long have families been separated from ADF members? • Have members ever been posted to family location? • How many visits per year occur on average when member is posted? • What positive/negative differences are perceived in member on reunification? • What positive/negative effects have been perceived in family members since posting?

Sector/group	Topic	Optional determination (not revealed to participant)	Example research questions
Law enforcement	Risky behaviour	Perception of civilian/military behavioural difference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are ADF members revealed to law-enforcement personnel? • What unlawful or high-risk behaviours are observed in ADF members vs civilians? • What unlawful or high-risk behaviours are observed in veterans vs civilians?
Tertiary Institutions	Transferable skills	Enhanced or diminished capacity to learn	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent do ADF members/veterans self-identify? • What characteristics have enhanced/diminished learning capacity? • What differences are perceived in how ADF members approach learning? • What group dynamic effects present in classes with ADF members or veterans?
Workplace peers and supervisors	Obstacles to transition	Behaviours and characteristics of veterans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are differences in behaviour observed between veterans and non-veterans?? • Which behaviours are perceived to be beneficial/detrimental? • To what extent can veteran behaviour be modified? • How do group dynamics change with veterans in the workspace? • Are there roles that suit/do not suit veterans?
HR managers	Employability of veterans	Asset or liability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where do HR managers gain their knowledge of ADF roles and skills? • How much transferability is the responsibility of the ADF/veteran/employer? • What characteristics are perceived as assets/liabilities? • Are there some industries/work settings/roles that suit/do not suit veterans? • To what extent should veterans be given priority employment over civilians?



Outcomes

The whole point of qualitative, targeted research on public attitudes is to find answers to specific questions which still remain after opinion polls have been exhausted, that is, 'Who do you think we are, and what is it that you think we do?'. These questions include those concerned with ADF cultural policy and transition of veterans back into the community. Importantly, it will recalibrate the ADF's perceptions of itself by identifying areas of misunderstanding in the community, and areas of lack of knowledge about the ADF.

The findings could inform ADF policy expeditiously by, on one hand, saving ADF efforts in policy areas that have been misinterpreted and, on the other, investing more effort into an area of real community concern. These realignments could shape policy in strategic communications, recruitment, transition, cultural renewal, personnel management, housing and career management. Finally, the findings could drive ADF strategic engagement strategy by allowing ADF messages and practices to be tailored to the influential groups within the sectors studied.

Conclusions

This article started with an opinion poll conducted nearly 40 years ago. Since then, although the pursuit of public opinion has been sporadic, some conclusions can be drawn. First, the data from polls over the last 15 years gives only a brief glimpse into public attitudes towards the ADF and—largely because it has been considered as a subset of broader defence policy—provides little contribution to a sociological understanding of public perceptions of the military. Moreover, opinion polls are traditionally fraught with the complication of ambivalence, and present sentiments which appear immature or ambiguous.

Second, the predominant influencers of public opinion—the maintenance of myth, the ADF's relationship with the media, and the presence of ex-service organisations—have contributed to a distorted view of the ADF by the Australian community. In particular, they have created contradictions between what is understood and what is presented, cultivating a sense of detachment and supporting a separation between the serving and ex-serving communities.

Third, a more productive approach to gathering public opinion would be through qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews with small, targeted audiences corresponding with sectors of the community. Repeated cross-sectional designs processed using thematic analysis would lead to meaningful hypotheses about 'what the public thinks', and then to theoretical frameworks on the social phenomenon that is the civil-military relationship. Such findings have the potential to realign the ADF's cultural perceptions, inform policy development and shape community engagement.

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Notes

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