Article 8

Counseling Military Families

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The topic of Counseling Military Families is far too complex to examine in a short paper; therefore, I have presented here four major ideas that will be touched on during the presentation in Hawaii. Those issues are the importance of (a) seeing the military as a unique segment of society and paying attention to the multicultural competencies needed; (b) understanding of the characteristics of the military society as a warrior society; (c) understanding the reasons service members join the military; and (d) understanding the concept of honor and sacrifice, particularly when working with men in the military.

The Military from a Multicultural Perspective

As counselors, we first must become aware of our own boundaries, biases and prejudices regarding the clientele we serve and then discover the unique issues, concerns and strengths that they bring to our counseling offices. The unique culture of the military can be foreign to many civilian counselors, but we know "all experiences originate from a particular cultural context [so] the counselor must be attentive to this context and the role that cultural identity plays in a client's life" (Dass-Brailsford, 2007, p. 78).

In working with military clients, we might have unexplored beliefs or biases from World War II or Vietnam, and we might need

to consider whether our political or religious beliefs have biased our view of the military. Questions to consider are: (a) What is our personal experience with the military, and how has that influenced our beliefs? (b) What do we need to know about military service members and their families? (c) Do our political views impact our beliefs about the military? (d) Can we be compassionate for those who have made a commitment to the military? (e) Do we understand the concept of honor, a sense of mission, or a belief in sacrificing for others? (f) Can we work with people who have a heightened sense of duty and responsibility for life and death issues, or who may be emotionally and/or physically harmed by both watching others being killed and sometimes being responsible for those deaths? (g) Do we believe some of the common stereotypes including, but not limited to, that military members believe that war is the answer to all conflict; that people join the military because they have no other options; that those in the military have a need for control; or that the institutional military believes in U.S. world domination?

The Warrior Society

A second characteristic of a culturally competent counselor is to understand the worldview of the populations we work with, which in this case means we need to gain knowledge about the military in order to effectively work with military families. Mary Wertsch (1991) shares the following six characteristics of the warrior society.

The first characteristic is that this society is maintained by a rigid authoritarian structure that often extends into the structure of the home. While the concept of the authoritarian military family is frequently referred to, it is important, however, to understand that authoritarianism is not the only model of military family life. However, within the authoritarian families, some of the common characteristics are parents who can not tolerate questions or disagreements, frequent violations of privacy, and forbidding children to engage in activities that suggest individuation.

Keith and Whitaker (1984) wrote that the military family lives in a community in which "no one dies from old age, only violently,

perhaps leading to an illusion of eternal youth and vigor and that the whole family belongs to the military" (p. 156). These authors contend that this permeability of the family boundaries can cause problems in families that are organized like miniature armies. While the authoritarian structure may work, at least when children are in elementary school, the children, particularly adolescents, often rebel because they see kids in other families with very different family structures. The children may respect the military parent, but often it is a charade played out only when the parent is present.

The warrior society is also characterized by extreme mobility resulting in isolation and alienation from both civilian communities and the extended family. Moves can be much more frequent than the typical three year tour and the irony is that every time the family moves, it is called a Permanent Change of Station. This isolation creates a sense of temporariness, so the focus is inward to the military world, rather than outward to the local community. For those families who spend time abroad, the isolation can seem overwhelming as housing areas are usually walled off from the outside culture, leading to "an oddly isolated life, one in which it is possible to delude oneself that one is still on American soil" (Wertsch, 1991, p. 330).

The third characteristic is that within the warrior society, there are the two subcultures of the officer and enlisted ranks, each with very different lifestyles. The rank structure affects families and creates a distance, not just between the military and the civilian world, but amongst the military itself. As Wertsch says, the military has its reasons to make these distinctions and perhaps would be dysfunctional without them, but it seems that "the only equality among officers and enlisted is in dying on the battlefield" (1991, p. 288).

The next characteristic is that this society has a great deal of parent absence and, more recently, often exists with both parents absent. Parents are often unavailable for the big moments in their children's lives: the prom, the big football game, the drama production, or graduation. Martin and McClure (2000) state that the conditions of military family life, "including long and often unpredictable duty hours, relatively low pay and limited benefits, frequent separations, and periodic relocations… remain the major

stressors of military family life" (p.3). Even in peacetime, military parents are continually leaving, returning, leaving again, or working such long hours that their children cannot count on their presence.

The importance of the military mission is the next characteristic and has "historically been perceived as requiring a total commitment to the military…. This is the very essence of the concept of military unit cohesion" (Martin & McClure, 2000, p. 15). This deeply felt sense of mission is, after all, the purpose of the military. For each service member, the commitment is not just about having a better education or training for a job but is, in fact, a felt sense of mission to make the world a safer place. The dedication to the country and fellow soldiers (Fenell & Weinhold, 2003) sometimes creates serious issues for the family. Service members are often required to spend long hours on the job and frequently are part of a tight team, almost a second family. If this military second family is perceived to be more important than the family left at home, serious conflicts can emerge. Wertsch (1991) wrote that the real determining factor in most military families was not their parents but something outside the family that was often unacknowledged, called the military mission; it was this presence that went with them everywhere and, without which, their lives would have no meaning.

Last, the warrior society is a world set apart from the civilian world because of its constant preparation for disaster, i.e., war. Unlike the years following the end of the draft, no one now joins the military believing they are not going into harms way. "Military readiness is like a three-legged stool. The first leg is training, the second equipment. The third leg is the family. If any of these three legs snaps, the stool tips over and America is unprepared to defend herself" (Henderson, 2006, p. 5).

Why Join

Mary Wertsch (1991) also gives us insight into military families by sharing the four main reasons people join the military: family tradition, benefits, identity of the warrior, and an escape. These are the most common, but, of course, not the only reasons

people make this choice. The reason for joining will influence most of the decisions military families make throughout their career.

Family Tradition

An Air Force veteran interviewed by Wakefield (2007) stated that his father retired from the Navy, his brother retired from the Army and his father-in-law retired from the Air Force. Even for women, stories of wanting to follow in their fathers' footsteps exist. Blaise (2006) lays her interest in the military at her father's feet, whose family stories of service began during the Civil War. Even though she kept her dreams of joining the military to herself for years, she never forgot her father's message that it was the duty of all citizens to give something back to their country. The pressure may be stronger in higher ranking officer families as about one-third of the current Army generals in the U.S. military have sons or daughters who have served or are serving in Iraq or Afghanistan (Gegax & Thomas, 2005). "It is not unusual in military families for children to follow their parents into service…. The father-son tradition of inherited sacrifice and honor goes on and on and now includes some mothers and daughters as well" (p. 26).

Benefits

Henderson (2006) suggests that the number one reason young people join the military is money. She points out that people who join the military often come from economically deprived areas of the country. "The military is one option young people have…. Military service offers money for college – money a large segment of the population doesn't have" (Garamone, 2005, ¶ 6). The military is often an option for young people who don't yet know what they want to do with their life and is seen as a transition for those who need time to decide what they want to do for a career. The military has also been called the "great equalizer." Historically, there has been a high percentage of lower income youth who are given a chance for upward mobility, education, respect and prestige that would not have been available to them. The military has even set a standard for the integration of ethnic groups with nondiscriminatory promotion

practices that encourage minorities, who now make up more than one-third of the military.

Identity of the Warrior

On a psychological level, many who join the military feel a need to "merge their identity with that of the warrior" (Wertsch, 1991, p. 17). The structure, the expectations, the rules, even the penalties and overriding identity is reassuring to some, while providing them with security, identity and a sense of purpose. Nash (2007) writes that the "psychology of war [is] a test of manhood and a rite of initiation among males in many cultures" (p.17), so it is not uncommon for young men to want to merge their identity with a perceived ideal of the warrior. Gegax and Thomas (2005) suggest that combat may be a test, and certainly in some cultures *the* test, of manhood. "There is no better way to win a father's respect than to defy death just the way he did. Indeed, the effort to surpass one's father or brother's bravery has gotten more than a few men killed" (p. 26).

An Escape

There are also young people who need to separate from the world they grew up in. In doing so, the military satisfies "a need for dependence…[drawing them] to the predictable, sheltered life… that they did not have growing up" (Wertsch, 1991, p. 17). Military recruitment techniques seem to beckon many into the military to provide solutions to personal problems (Schwabe & Kaslow, 1984) including those who cannot find work, need to leave their parents' home, or have just ended a significant relationship. The military is there to provide "friendly fatherly attention, a ticket to leave town, a job, money and a promise of a new life" (p. 130). However, as so often happens in the civilian world, this attempt to flee from problems does not mean the problems end; so instead of dealing with or facing the effects of childhood violence, gangs, addictions, or abandonment, the problems are brought into the military, just like they are brought into other segments of American society.

Honor and Sacrifice: War and Male Psychology

It is also helpful to discuss the relationship of the military to the male psyche because traditionally the military has been, and continues to be, mostly a male domain. To work with men in the military, a therapist must pay attention to the concept of "honor" that is so central to the psychology of the military. The fact is, the military could not do its job without the strongly held beliefs regarding the importance of honor. Keith and Whitaker (1984) believe that a therapist who "belittles or disregards this side of the man will have problems helping the family…. The military family does not come to the clinic to learn how to become a civilian family, but rather it needs help to live inside the military system" (p. 150).

Nash (2007) compares warriors to athletics and states that the genius of great athletes "lies in the ability to perform as if there is no distance or weight or danger" to overcome, and the genius of the warrior is to "fight as if there is no terror, horror, or hardship" (p. 14). He suggests that "helping professionals…must always consider the possibility that they may do more harm than good by asking warriors …to become more aware of their own stressors and stress reaction" (p. 15). One of the major tenants of war is generating combat stress in the enemy. In order to inflict suffering on an adversary, the warrior must not identify with that adversary or feel remorse for their suffering. What appears as callousness cannot be turned on and off easily so it "may be asking too much…to acknowledge their own or their comrades' vulnerability… at the same time they are exploiting their adversary's vulnerability to almost the same stressors" (Nash, p. 14).

In understanding male psychology, we also must consider the concept of shame. "The use of shame is one of a number of societal factors that contribute to the toughening-up process…. The use of shame to control boys is pervasive…" (Mejia, 2005, p. 32). Mejia points out that healthy coping strategies for dealing with shame are suppressed in boys' socialization, so it is not surprising that those who are socialized from a shame-based perspective find themselves a natural fit for the military. This is the making of an ideal warrior,

who, while serving in the military, can act on his learned tendencies under the code of honor and sacrifice for the greater good. Gilligan (1996) writes that the "most dangerous men on earth are those who are afraid that they are wimps. Wars have been started for less" (p. 66). This, of course, does not mean that every military male fits this description, but there is a tradition in the military that would point to this as the true description of a warrior.

The passion for honor and conformity may, however, be at odds with the accepted practices of therapy that include openness and a critical examination of a client's assumptions about life. Wives and children have traditionally been seen by the military as support services for the military mission instead of people who have their own needs, values, and life missions. As the institutional military has made necessary accommodations for the family in the last three decades, it is becoming more "family friendly" and families are experiencing less stigma against seeking help. At the same time, we need to remain cognizant of the fact that the military cannot do its job without the commitment and dedication to honor and sacrifice.

Summary

Only a skeleton of four important concepts about the military are shared in this paper. Those who work with military families will find there is a great more detail and depth needed to fully understand these concepts. Further, issues regarding effective interventions and a framework for understanding and working with the ever-present issues of transitions, grief and loss in the military should be examined.

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