

Clinical Practice with the Military Family: Understanding and Intervening Theory of Change Paper

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Abstract

Why are the male spouses of deployed female military personnel often ignored? Upon review of most recent research and collection of testimonials of classmates, who were spouses of deployed military personnel, the three main reasons are: They are outnumbered, they are a unique population, and due to gender and social stereotypes, asking/receiving “help” may not be considered an option. When one typically thinks of a deployed member of the military, he/she will usually think of a man. This is simply due to social conditioning. That is why it is important to have a discussion about traditional gender roles, how these roles are currently changing, and gender role reversal. Male military spouses are an important population that needs to be recognized and understood. Even though they only make up a very small portion of spouses in the military, that does not mean they should be forgotten. The majority of the research done on military spouses has only had female participants. With the lack of participation in research, male military spouses are facing what may be lasting problems.

Introduction

Although there still needs to be work done, the twenty-first century is bringing in some positive social change. We are especially witnessing this when it comes to women’s rights and changes in social trends. These four social trends include: women’s participation in the workforce, women working to keep the family unit together/avoiding divorce, trying to find healthy ways to co-parent that involve finding ways to include fathers, and an increased culturally diverse population. These four changing social trends are very important to pay attention to because we will not only see the effects on the entire household dynamic, but we will also see the effects this has on child bearing/rearing. But this trend is not restricted to civilian life style. This phenomenon is co-occurring in the Military/Veteran realm as well. In order to have a fruitful discussion on this topic we need some historical, cultural, and social context because they shape both popular and scholarly perception of children, families and parenting. This is the reason why we must explore current family relationships in light of current events.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, history reveals that men with the role of being a father in the U.S. left their farms and moved into the industrious cities. This was due to an economic situation, which ironically later dictated male social/gender roles of being the “breadwinner” and “bringing home the bacon.” Because the men chose to go off and follow the money, this often left the wife (“other spouse”), home alone to parent the children. Not only was she a now single parent, but she was also the domestic, the tutor, the designated driver, the shopkeeper, etc. LaRossa (1997) confirms that in by doing this that the men have left the responsibility of child rearing largely on the mothers, therefore establishing this social construction within the twentieth century of the father being the “breadwinner.” Scholars were faced with a bias during this century, since they constantly witnessed the mothers being the primary caretakers, thus reinforcing the myth that father-child relationships have very little impact on childhood development.

This brings us to today, where we currently see women out of the house and in public spaces. Women are currently challenging the expected roles of cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the children. In the past, they were not allowed to vote because males were seen as the sole provider. This left women feeling hopeless, powerless, and as lesser to man. As time moved forward, society accepted that women should have a larger role than what other people and societal rules had thought for many years. Women, willing to take a stand against the oppressive nature of society and their culture, would go on strikes and marches to prove that they should have equal rights. Like other races before and after them, women too faced discrimination and were forced to raise their voice.

This mirrors historically with the military population because for over three thousand years women have played many roles from: ancient warrior woman to current combat woman. Women would often aid men during war time rather than serve alongside them. Women would typically be nurses, aides, cooks, seamstresses, menders, secretaries, and/or hold other desk/office positions. Their services, all though not recognized fully in history, were very important and helped keep society moving forward. But with times changing and societal beliefs changing, women and men have started becoming equals.

Why are we always ignored?

When you think of the military spouse, who do you often think of? Most commonly, one would think of the male going off while the female stays behind. This would be the stereotypical response because men were the ones who originally served in the military and in war over all. We as humans are still conditioned to think this way even though social strives to change is upon us, historical context backs this notion up as well. This brings us to the main issue that will be explored: while the women are serving, what about the male spouse? The three main reasons why the military male spouses are always ignored are because they are simply outnumbered, they are a unique population, and due to gender and social stereotypes, asking/receiving “help” may not be considered an option.

Demographics

Before looking into the research about male military spouses, the demographics must be listed to understand the topic. According to the 2014 Demographic Report on the Military, the military population was 3.5 million members. This number includes Active Duty military, the Ready Reserve, and civilian personnel. The number of service members serving active duty in the military branches was 1,326,273 with 831,992 making up the reserve and guard. Of the 1.3 million service members serving, 15.1% of the population was female and in the reserve and guard, 18.8%. Compared to the 2004 Demographic Report on the Military, women made up 14.9% of active duty personnel and 17.3% of reserve and guard. Even with this small increase, women have become integral to the military and have taken on many roles that were originally for men. But with this increase in women, and expected further increase in the future, that implies the growth of families and male military spouses. There are 1,802,615 family members to service members. Of that population, 665,619 are spouses. The male military spouse makes up only 7.5% of the military spouse population, with the biggest population in the Air force (10.6%). One final statistic to look at is that there are dual-military marriages, which equals to 6.4%. It should be noted that the 2014 Demographic Report, there was no distinction of heterosexual marriages and homosexual marriages.

Stereotypes

From this data, one can see that this is a very small population. That is probably the reason for the scarce research. The research tends to just focus on the military wives rather than the military husbands. Military male spouses are less prepared than the military female spouses come deployment day. This is most often the case because military wives are a larger population than military husbands. The military wives have already paved the way for this, where the military male spouses are lagging behind. The female military spouse has already established her social connections and created a safety net, while the male spouses are still fumbling around with this. This may tie into the earlier discussion of gender roles. Stereotypically, society sees women as being feminine, not aggressive, dependent, easily influenced, submissive, passive, home-oriented, emotional, etc. Society stereotypically sees men as masculine, aggressive, independent, not easily influenced, dominant, active, worldly, not emotional, etc.

Sadly children learn this at a very young age from their parents and family, their religion, and their culture, as well as the outside world, including television, magazines, and other media. This can potentially manifest itself into sexism where one's belief about gender can manifest into unequal and unfair treatment because of a person's gender. Four stereotypes that we repetitively see are: Personality traits- ex. Women are typically supposed to be seen as weak, passive, invisible, quiet, submissive; while men are supposed to be seen as strong, assertive, visible, loud/aggressive, and dominant. Domestic behaviors- ex. Cleaning, cooking, and child caring are often considered to be best done by a woman; while household repairs are often considered to be best done by a man.

Occupations- ex. Most firefighters, soldiers, doctors, engineers, cops, etc. are often seen to be held by men, while women are often seen as nurses, secretaries, social workers, caregivers/caretakers, etc. Physical appearance- ex. men are expected to be tall, broad shouldered, and have a nice physique; while women are expected to be small, dainty, fragile, and graceful. It is important to note here that female military combatants flip these stereotypes on its head by forcing one to have this open dialogue about the concept of role reversal. This is a very important discussion to have especially when discussing military culture; since it is typically seen as male dominant. Even with women serving the military for many years, the culture still manifests as masculine and does not allow for any other kind of personality.

Because of the masculine culture expected from service members, how does this role reversal affect families? We are starting to see more in the civilian world this emphasis on what is fatherhood where before this was never openly discussed or even focused on. Rather there was this myth of the "deadbeat dad" or the expectation that the father would just leave. People are starting to understand that even though they may want a roadmap to parenting, there is not one right way to be a parent, it is an experimental process. If you have siblings you will appreciate this line: "the first one is just an experiment, until we finally get it right with the last one."

Testimonials and Research

Even with the lack of research, that does not mean there is a lack of voice from those that identify as male military spouses. Through various testimonials, we realized that military spouses were expressing similar concerns about the shift in family dynamics, lack of resources, and lack of support systems. The role reversal was a problem for both female and male military spouses; but especially more so for the male military spouses. The males seemed to have a tough time accepting the fact that their female partners were now considered the "breadwinners." They also struggled with adjusting to the domestic lifestyle. Again, this goes back to the fact that males have been conditioned to be the "breadwinner." This then makes men feel emasculated; therefore leading to an increased divorce rate ("Archive for the 'male military spouse' Tag," 2017). Resources were not visibly available to the male spouses; which creates this vicious cycle of males feeling ashamed that they have to ask for help. Due to this, male spouses seem to lack having support systems, which is dangerous because it increases the likelihood of suicide.

The research continues to express the importance that spouses have a high need for the care provided to include families and spouses pointed out that individual care could make or break their experience. One example was when a female spouse went to a therapist, the therapist told her that she should divorce her husband, the service member. This caused extreme distress in the spouse because while she was having some difficulties, that did not mean she was interested in divorcing the husband. The therapist lacked the understanding of the difficulties of military life and assumed the best course of action for her client (the spouse).

There was also a lack of access to quality care by the military for spouses and families. Veteran spouses pointed out the need for transition from military to civilian life (Bora and Fina, 2016). Resiliency and effective coping skills help spouses handle the changes and other military related life stressors. But sometimes the spouse can struggle with their identity. As a military spouse, they are referred to the significant other, instead of an individual person (Eubanks, 2013). Usage of pre-deployment readiness programs and those that are able to communicate frequently allow for better reintegration. Those that are not prepared or if the service member comes home with a physical injury or psychological problem can cause the spouse to develop mental health problems (Bommarito, Sherman, Rudi, Mikal, & Borden, 2016). One study developed a new kind of treatment meant to help spouses that struggled with self-identity and the ability to cope with the aspects of military life.

Home Front Strong (HFS) is an 8 week group that promotes individual resiliency and improving psychological functions by identifying and changing negative thoughts specific to military life and deployment (Kees, Nerenberg, Bachrach, & Sommer, 2015). This treatment plan, developed using already established interventions was found to be have effective results when treating spouses. Developing an intervention that addresses cognitive patterns so as to provide strategies to help military spouses through deployment transition allows for a more positive and understanding reintegration back into civilian life.

The issue with the research is that it is scarce and it does not separate the female spouses from the male spouses; therefore allowing one to question the validity of the research when studying male spouses. There needs to be more valid research for the military male spouses, even with the small population. One article that explored the uncharted territory of parenting and marriage within the military (Jacobs, 2014). This article pointed out that there are programs that already exist within the military for military families. Such places listed were the ACS (Army Community Service) and MyCAA (Military Spouse Career Advancement Accounts). These programs serve as a means to help with finances, support, and even furthering education. Yet the ACS, while providing, services to family only just opened in 2010. This opening came with several key changes in eligibility and dollar amounts.

Solution

Many different treatment methods and support systems have been developed to help military spouses. But with the focus mainly on female military spouses, the focus now should be on helping the men. One step that can be taken is educating civilians on what life is like for spouses of service members. The research shows that lack of support can play a big role in how spouses are able to handle the stressors of their lives. As with the spouse that had a therapist tell her to divorce her husband, that lack of understanding was harmful to the spouse. If the therapist had been more understanding and knowledgeable, she would not have made such a remark. Spouses do receive help, even if they have a bad experience initially. But when it comes to men, they should not feel as if they cannot receive help. Help should be given no matter what gender or societal roles say.

Another step is for civilians to help remedy the problem of isolation through psycho education by helping elevate the problem of emasculation by educating and informing male military spouses about their worth in our nation's security efforts. Simply, civilians need to learn about military culture; rather than polarizing both worlds we need to find and accept the fact that we live in this one world where we have to bridge the gap by finding a way to co-exist. Society can then elevate the issue by helping male military spouses connected with one another and assure that they are not alone in this military family lifestyle by aiding male spouses to find their niches, passions, and/or life's desires; which then in turn should reverse the divorce rate. According to Military.com, enlisted female soldiers continue to experience the highest rate of divorce - 9.4 percent. In the Army, the female enlisted divorce rate is more than triple that of enlisted males.

Role of the Social Worker

The perfect social worker would be "Someone to reach out to us. In a foreign country, things get lonely. When family (moms, dads, relatives, friends) is everything and you are not around that, it feels isolated. It would have been nice to have someone get my husband more involved in recreational activities for our daughter. We decided to take her out of daycare at that time to save money and so that he can take care of her. The daycare was the only time we would see other people and children. Other than that we would have the occasional command family picnic, but that's about it. A social worker could initiate involvement between command support and families. For example, sending out invitations to social groups, or picnics, etc. This would make those that are dependents at home with their children feel less isolated." Other tasks a social worker could take on include leading family readiness programs, education webinars, social support through groups and peers, and to advocate for spouses and families.

A major role a social worker can take to help this population is by participating in policy advocacy. This can be done on many different levels, federal, community, and individual. The type of policy changes and advocacy in general that can be made should aiding military spouses on all levels. This can be done on a micro level; making sure they are taken care of and have access to care. On a macro level, making sure the spouse's family has access to the care they need. Another way is by making sure service members and veterans are aware of their rights. Too many times information that is given is passed over quickly and without room to be understood fully. There are many ways this can be done with one being looking at the bureaucracy that makes up the military and the V.A.

Many stories have come out in the past depicting problems faced by veterans when it came to accessing healthcare. The goal should be providing service members and families with the benefits, services, and resources that already exist; Stop overloading the service members and veterans in a short amount of time and then giving them long periods of wait time; this feeds into the addiction narrative within the veteran population/military culture; Having an Open Conversation to present Issues; and lastly, Knowing it's OK to challenge the Status Quo.

Conclusion

Male military spouses are an important population that needs to be recognized and understood. Even though they only make up a very small portion of spouses in the military, that does not mean they should be forgotten or ignored. Majority of the research done on military spouses have only had female participants. With the lack of recognition in research, concerns that are being faced by male military spouses have now gone ignored and may cause lasting problems that could have been helped if the research had been done. For future studies, more research needs to be done to include the male population and if problems are uncovered, then establishing ways to help.

With more women joining the military and the repeal of the Don't Ask Don't Tell policy, there will be an increase in male spouses and with that, a possible increase in problems that have been identified with female spouses. Furthering the research and providing education to both military and civilian populations can allow for acceptance and understanding in that gender roles are not the norm. Women can take on roles that were originally only allowed for men, such as the "breadwinner" and men can take on roles such as the stay at home parent. With women increasingly joining the military, there will be more civilian husbands and changes in gender roles. But this change is not something to be resented, but accepted as society continues to change and be redefined by people of both genders as they take on new roles.

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