What Helps Military Families During Deployment? Perspectives From Service Providers and Military Members

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Introduction

• Military deployment can be stressful and sometimes a life changing event (MacDermid Wadsworth, 2010)
• Dearth of research about resources that help military families effectively cope with deployment cycle
• Little is known about whether military family support providers and military families share similar views about the helpfulness of resources during the deployment cycle
• Differences and similarities in views might have implications for the client-provider relationship
Family Strengths Perspective

- Characterized by appreciation and affection, commitment, positive communication, having an enjoyable time together, shared spiritual well-being, and the ability to effectively handle stress and crisis.
- Families are supported by the added strengths found in other systems—informal and formal support (DeFrain & Asay, 2007).
- Service providers have to make a special effort to view clients through a strengths lens (Saleebey, 1996).
- Clients have the most knowledge of their ability to adapt to adverse life events and experiences (Early & GlenMaye, 2000).
Study Expectations

• There will be differences and similarities in service provider groups’ and military member groups’ perspective on what helps military families during the cycle of deployment
• Military members will be more knowledgeable than service providers about military family strengths
• Service provider groups will place more emphasis on the helpfulness of formal supports than informal supports
• Military member groups will place more emphasis on the helpfulness of informal supports than formal supports
Actor-Observer Asymmetry in Attribution

• The tendency for observers to explain other people’s (actors) behavior based on actors’ internal traits and ignore the influence of situational factors, while actors place greater emphasis on the influences of situational forces, and under attribute their problems to dispositional traits (Malle, 2006; Jones & Nisbett, 1971)

• Observers tend to attribute actors’ behaviors solely on personal characteristics even when they are aware of difficult extraneous circumstances actors faced (Jones & Nisbett, 1971)
Study Expectations

• When there are differences, consistent with the actor-observer symmetry in attribution:
  – Service provider groups may place greater emphasis on the helpfulness of stable personal dispositions of military family members than situational factors
  – Military member groups may place greater emphasis on the role of situational factors than personal dispositions in helping military families during the cycle of deployment.
Methods

- US military installations in 16 international and U.S. based locations
- 27 Focus groups
  - lasted 3 - 4 hours
  - 19 with providers and 18 with military members
- \( N = 257 \) (105 military members & 152 service providers)
  - Sessions included civilian and dual-military spouses
  - Some providers had dual roles of military member and service provider
- Military members: Army (19%), Air Force (20%), Marine Corps (38%), and Navy (20%)
- E2 to E5 pay grade

Photo: (Military.com, 2013)
Data Analysis

Round 1
• Separate data analysis for military member and service provider groups
• Open coding - assignment of codes based on content of individual statements
• Continuous refinement and addition of codes as new topics emerged
• Study data came from the “Support and Coping” main theme

Round 2
• Categorizing data from the sub-theme “What helps with deployment and reunion?”
• Coding based on concepts and theory:
  – Family strengths, informal and formal supports, personal dispositions, and situational factors
• Comparison of coding among 3 coders
Family Strengths

- Contrary to expectations service provider and military member groups were both very knowledgeable about military family strengths

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Similar Views</th>
<th>Service Provider Groups Only</th>
<th>Military Member Groups Only</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intimate relationships supported by solid friendships, admiration of each other and appreciation for their relationship</td>
<td>Ability to have a shared family vision and function as a “cohesive unit”</td>
<td>Preparing for deployment, such as organizing logistic records before the service member separates for deployment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Formal Supports vs Informal Supports - Service Provider Groups

- As expected service provider groups placed greater emphasis on the helpfulness of formal supports than informal supports

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informal Supports</th>
<th>Formal Supports</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Supportive military and civilian communities, and strong relationships with families in the deploying unit</td>
<td>Military leaders provided access to recreation facilities and frequent communication with family</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
 informal Supports vs Formal Supports – Military Member Groups

- Contrary to our expectations military member groups placed greater emphasis on the helpfulness of formal supports than informal support.

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<td>Strong supportive relationships with service members and families in the deploying unit and military community</td>
<td>Commanders helped service members, especially to get mail and have access to frequent communication with family during deployment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Personal vs Situational Factors – Service Provider Groups

- Consistent with the actor-observer asymmetry service provider groups placed greater emphasis on the helpfulness of personal factors than situational factors.

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<th>Personal Factors</th>
<th>Situational Factors</th>
</tr>
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<td>Individuals who participate in employment or volunteering cope better with deployment than others</td>
<td>Communication was described as both beneficial and detrimental</td>
</tr>
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Personal vs Situational Factors – Military Member Group

- Contrary to the actor-observer asymmetry, military member groups placed greater emphasis on the helpfulness of personal factors than situational factors.

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<td>Individuals with positive attitudes/views about the deployment experience coped better with deployment</td>
<td>Service members tailored their emotions and thoughts to the deployment cycle:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I’m going to be a Marine first and then later I’m going to be me.” Nessa</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion

• Service member groups appeared to focus on activities families performed in preparation for deployment and reunion (e.g., rearranging household tasks prior to the reunion), while service provider groups’ emphasized family activities and characteristics employed during the stressors (e.g., staying informed about each other during reunion)

• Both groups discussed the helpfulness of formal supports more than informal supports
  – Access to communication was the most heavily discussed topic of conversation among both groups
Discussion

• Both groups discussed the helpfulness of personal factors more than the helpfulness of situational factors.
• Service providers’ thought process was consistent with the actor-observer asymmetry in attribution.
• Service members’ thoughts were not consistent with actor-observer asymmetry, but were more consistent with the self-serving bias in attribution (Malle, 2006).
• Self-serving bias describes a situation where actors attribute their successes to personal characteristics, while attribute failures to situational factors (Malle, 2006).


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