Resilience in the Hybrid Culture of the Military Reserve: A Case Study

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Resilience in the Hybrid Culture of the Military Reserves
A case study of 3-generations of a military family
Natasha Kreft and Luke Tse, Ph.D.

Participants

Participants were individually interviewed by the lead researcher in their homes. In each case their wives were present for the duration of the interview but did not contribute to the discussions. The interviews followed a standard set of questions and involved discussion of the following topics:
- Deployment experience
- Satisfaction/Dissatisfaction as Military Service Member
- Perceived differences between Military and Civilian cultures
- How to successfully transition between Military culture and Civilian culture
- General observations about Military culture – Personal coping mechanisms, and so forth

Participants were later interviewed collectively by both researchers. The interview, led by the co-author, involved discussion prompts followed by the participants’ sharing of their experiences and perceptions of issues that military service members faced.

Research Focus

• The lead researcher is acquainted with a military family where three males, each in a different generation, have served in Military Operations abroad.

• The participants are all Caucasian males, over the age of 18, not currently on orders for Active Duty, living in South Western Ohio and of the Christian religion.

• Participants were asked to complete an anonymous screening for Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, all three presented no symptoms of PTSD.

• The eldest participant (P1) is approximately 80 years old and is a Retired Veteran. He served for approximately 22 years as an engineer in the US Air Force on Active Duty. He served in operations in Vietnam and Guam.

• The second eldest participant (P2) is approximately 60 years old, and is currently in the Reserves. He has served for over 20 years as a pilot in the US Air Force as a Reservist. He served in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

• The youngest participant (P3) is approximately 30 years old, and is a Retired Veteran. He served for 2 years as a Reservist in the US Marine Corps. He served in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Method

Participants were led through a discussion of their experiences and thoughts on the impact that military culture had on their lives and the challenges they faced during their transition.

Results

Life-contexts and Coping strategies when transitioning from military:

“I had a good family that supported me and that was a lot to be thankful for.”

Getting back into the greatest change you can imagine; spending time with my wife and being able to talk about (the experience).”

“Having a stable, uneventful life before and returning to somewhat of a stable uneventful life afterwards, and having good relationships with family and my unit.”

Paraphrasing a long description by P3: One thing that's helped me a lot is understanding how the brain works: being able to understand when adrenaline goes up, your memories of that event are going to be vivid. For me it's being able to self-narrate, compartmentalize and rationalize what was going on, helped me accept the memories for what they were and made me okay with that.

Dramatic Differences between military and civilian life:

“I think this is the same in all the cultures, the one difference is that you're more stressful and dangerous situations, even in training, and it is entirely up to you to manage it and cope.”

“You go from being a 'bullet catcher'...to somebody who has more control over your own life...for myself it was much preferred to be independent.”

Psychological Dissonance between being a soldier and a civilian:

“You're trained and people treat you completely differently and you're unable to rationalize why”

Condensed: “We talked about how weird it was being in a situation where you're on combat patrol, engaging the enemy for six hours, then come back and shoot the breeze with the girlfriend and drinking Starbucks or eating Burger King. I feel surreal and I can't be unhealthy.”

“You're trained as alpha male and told to be the example, but then they turn and say 'oh but if you have difficulties we'll get you help' and it's clear you will be treated as though you are fragile. It's pretty tough but I can understand why more guys are resorting to suicide.”

“There's a hand-off from civilian to military, then after military it's a toss-off...the guys that make it are the ones who develop skills [beyond military training].”

“People that were switched to 100% did not do well because that was their complete and total identity.”

Reluctance in Accepting Public Praise and Support:

“[During training and operations] the guys that really make the decision, because of the people who have done stints together.”

“When you're in a physically demanding environment [with fellow soldiers], you don't turn to the next guy and complain 'he's a bit too hot and doesn't want to hear about it. So you have this feeling 'why am I special?' I'm not going to complain and feel bad or say that I'm having difficulties because the other guys are having difficulties too...And you feel guilty about saying anything about your struggles.”

Paraphrased: When people want to celebrate you and you ask them to stand to be acknowledged, it’s hard for anyone else to understand but we don't really want to and “I can't think of anyone who welcomes that attention, even the wounded” and “I'm not a hero...I'm part of a team.”

Conclusions

• The Reserves can be considered to be a hybrid culture as its population must move back-and-forth between military and civilian. We believe that during the Basic Military Training phase, skills in compartmentalizing and rationalizing should be developed. Such training may promote Psychological Resilience, especially among Reservists, but potentially for all military service members. Further investigation is needed.

• One area of concern was an apparent risk of classical conditioning for dramatic differences between military and civilian culture.

• Greater collaboration is needed between military and civilian health professionals to provide training to entry-level Reservists as members of a hybrid culture. Such collaboration would be essential for Reservists to excel in both the military culture and the civilian culture. Invoking Veteran Reservists in such training may be particularly beneficial.

Limitations & Future Studies

• This case study comprised a small group of only three participants, which provided a restricted perspective on the hybrid culture and is highly susceptible to bias. A survey is needed to determine if the Reserves should be considered a hybrid culture and, if so, to determine the dynamics of such a culture.

• Participants were all Caucasian and self-professing Christians, and they attributed much of their success in transition to faith and are highly susceptible to bias. A survey is needed to determine if the Reserves should be considered a hybrid culture and, if so, to determine the dynamics of such a culture.

• Further qualitative study and quantitative study on soldiers’ personal coping mechanisms, such as compartmentalization or rationalizing, may be beneficial for improving training programs.

References

See Appendix C for outline of 7 references planned study to be conducted in Spring 2014.