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

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Literature Review

- Two key issues related to difficulties in transitioning between military and civilian cultures: **Psychological Resilience** and **Sense of Belonging**.
 - Psychological Resilience – “bouncing back”/“returning to form” (Army)
 - Sense of Belonging – specifically, the lack of ability to connect with valued groups
- Hundreds of DoD-led or civilian-led resources are available. Of these, about 50 were investigated and noted as being reported by users as beneficial.
- Rates of depression, addiction, homelessness, incarceration and suicide among service members are still on the rise. It appears service members have either not encountered the resources or considered it too great of a risk to their military career to seek assistance.

See Appendix A for list of organizations

Research Focus

- We hypothesized that military service members who had been deployed in operations overseas, and had transitioned successfully to civilian life after such deployment, would be able to articulate the resources that service members might need in order to successfully transition.
- We focused on the skills required to successfully transition between the culture of the US Military and the culture of American civilian life. We hoped to learn what resources service members would consider using when seeking help, support or psychological assistance.
- For specific details we focused on the Reserves as a group that must make the transition frequently and regularly.

Participants

- 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. Participants gave informed consent and were provided with details of a private local counselor in case of distress during or after the study.
- 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 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.

See Appendix B for questions from interviews

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 a routine is probably the greatest dynamic...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 gets going, your memories of that event are going to be vivid. For me 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 go back and forth between cultures all the time, but the difference with the military is that you’re in 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 transition [and] people treat you completely differently and you’re unable to rationalize why”
 Condensed: “We talked about how weird we felt 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 feels surreal and can be unhealthy.”
 “You’re trained as alpha males 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:

“The support group that really makes the difference is 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 ‘cause he’s hot too 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 ask you 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 two cultures. This concept of a hybrid culture suggests that a **Sense of Belonging** can be held while not necessarily demanding differentiating identities as either military or 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 psychological distress. While the military have attempted to provide “home comfort” amenities at overseas bases, the pairing of such amenities with battle activities, sounds, and smells, may induce an association in the civilian contexts. That is, we are concerned for those who experienced trauma and learned associations between the “home comforts” and their traumatic experiences. Further investigation is needed.
- 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. Involving 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 their faith beliefs. A more diverse study is needed to consider the impact of religion (or a lack thereof) and ethnicity on resilience in the Military Reserves.
- Screening for PTSD may have been insufficient testing for determining psychological health. If advice from service members is to be considered in research, thorough screening and testing would be required.
- Further qualitative study and quantitative study on soldiers’ personal coping mechanisms, such as compartmentalization or rationalizing, may be beneficial for improving training programs

See Appendix C for outline of Researchers’ planned study to be conducted in Spring 2014

References

See Appendix D