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The Perspective of College Seniors in ROTC on Becoming a Commissioned Officer

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Literature Review

- Military personnel returning from deployment are continuing to be diagnosed with PTSD, depression, or other disorders, at up to 30%, with up to 50% of returning personnel affected with alcohol abuse and increased aggression (Hoge et al., 2006).
- A case study conducted in 2013 by Kreft and Tse on Reservist culture, indicated that early training (BMT) involves individuals having to negate their civilian persona and develop a military persona. Concern was raised that a failure to balance these two personas may result in psychological distress.
- The unique culture of the military, has **historically been perceived as discouraging members from seeking help** from mental health professionals.
- This same military culture provides, within itself, some of the means to develop resiliency and coping strategies such as **community, identity, shared mission and values** (Easterbrooks, Ginsburg, & Lerner, 2013).
- Research to date has focused on post-deployment populations, with **very little research into the effect of Field Training or Basic Military Training on individuals resiliency and coping strategies for military experiences**. However Kreft and Tse (2013) called for further investigation into the entry points of military careers, such as ROTC and Basic Military Training.

Research Focus

- Following the aforementioned case study by Kreft and Tse, we hypothesized that individuals who have completed entry training, such as ROTC Cadets who are commissioning and are facing a transition into Active Duty military life, may be able to give an informed perspective of the military persona.
- Having a better understanding of such perspective compared with service members who step down from Active Duty or retire, may allow researchers to identify key points in the training phases, which could establish psychological dissonance which, if paired with trauma, could potentially develop into significant psychological distresses.
- Cadets may also be able to highlight training that prevents such dissonance.

Participants

- The lead researcher was connected with the local Air Force ROTC Commander and Army ROTC Commander, who each granted permission for interviews Cedarville University ROTC Cadets who are Seniors by credit.
- The Commanders notified their Cadets and Instructors, informing them that this study was approved by them, and that participation was voluntary.
- An email was sent out by the lead faculty sponsor to qualifying Cadets asking them to participate in a voluntary interview. **45 Cadets were contacted**.
- **19 Cadets responded that they were willing to be interviewed**, and the lead researcher arranged for face-to-face meetings with each Cadet.
- The participants were all Caucasians and over the age of 18. Both male and female cadets were interviewed. All academic majors were included.
- All, but one, participants had completed their Field Training Summer Boot Camp. All participants were ROTC Cadets with no official military rank.
- All participants are currently living in Southwestern Ohio and of the Christian religion.

Method

Participants were individually interviewed by the two researchers at the university campus in neutral locations. The interviews followed a standard set of questions and involved discussion of the following topics: ~ Family involvement in military ~ Reasons for joining ROTC ~ Plans for future ~ Experiences as an Air Force or Army ROTC Cadet ~ Expectations of commissioned life ~ Perspective on current key military topics (PTSD) ~ General observations about Military culture ~ Personal coping mechanisms, and so forth.

The interviews involved discussion prompts followed by the participants' sharing of their experiences and perceptions. Participants were allowed to share as much or little as they preferred and were not restricted in any way as to how to apply the questions to themselves.

Results

Five themes emerged from the Cadets' perspective of life as a Commissioned Officer. These themes were demonstrated by the majority of the Cadets. In the case of each of the five themes, there were at least 8+ of the 19 cadets who expressed views in line with these:

1. Expect to work alongside, and be associated with high caliber individuals

"I love the camaraderie of [military] and the team work, but it's even that idea of working hard. And then it's all about the mission, the mission drives everything." (P-01)

"There's a lot of **opportunities in the Army that you'd never get to do in the [civilian] medical arena.**" (P-06)

"I feel so blessed to be among **so many good people with such good characteristics.**" (P-10)

2. Balance military persona with individual persona

"If the Air Force does not end up being my career path, I would like to somehow through either engineering or overseas missions, **do something to make a lasting impact.**" (P-13 - summarized)

"I think that one of the biggest things we have to face is **learning how to separate the two experiences of being in combat and being yourself.**" (P-16 – paraphrased)

"Whenever I am at home, I am usually with non-ROTC [people], and **I try to keep my ROTC life and private life separate.**" (P-19)

3. Military training gives specific skills for success

"I've learned a lot about **when to make a decision, how to make a decision, how to intentionally observe situations so you can make better decisions**, and then just how to be confident in who you are, & building that confidence." (P-02)

"The military trains you to **think critically and have a bigger perspective.**" (P-05 – summarized)

"Being disciplined is probably one of the highest skills, but more specifically I think **preparedness for whatever you're going to face. If you're prepared to do it then I think you'll do it well.**" (P-06)

"Team work is a major thing. **The Army always stresses that the Army is not an "I" thing** ...if you can't support the people that you work with then you're not going to get far at all." (P-14)

4. Moral values seem to easily converge with military values

"I think that a lot of **things in military do relate to the Christian life even as far as that we should have our own mission**, and that is to glorify God in everything you do; and that should drive what you're doing." (P-01)

"The **military isn't a religious entity, but I think it has a lot of Christian principles in it that I can apply to my own life.** Just putting others before myself, and working with integrity, and respecting those in charge of me." (P-06)

"**I hope to have done something for Christ. I think that the Air Force has good potential for that**" (P-13)

Results (continued)

5. Specific adjustment challenges will be faced

"If I go into a combat-zone, I will try to **make sure that everything for my family is safe** and sound...while I still do my job and work literally 24-7." (P-02)

"[It will be] a little daunting, but a pleasure to serve. ...the toughest part will be **learning who to trust**...I technically will out rank the Sergeants, but the Sergeants will have, say 18 years of experience." (P-08)

"The first impression is important...once I jump into that role, I have to **give a good first impression and then work at staying consistent** with it." (P-20 – paraphrased)

Conclusions

- The Cadets all expressed excitement about becoming Commissioned Officers and despite challenges that lie ahead, they believe **life as an Officer can be rewarding**
- The Cadets demonstrated that their **personal values and beliefs mesh well with military values** but seemed to recognize that military culture cannot be the only forum for expressing these values.
- Almost all identified **specific skills that the US Military train them in, which are desirable** in Officers, can also be transferred easily to civilian forums.
- At least half of the Cadets appeared to have the ability to **rationalize and compartmentalize** their military experiences when asked about their support systems, social interactions and perspective on PTSD.

Limitations & Future Studies

- All participants were professing Christians, and many acknowledged that their answers would be drastically different from their ROTC counterparts who attend public universities. Future studies should be conducted with an entire Air Force ROTC Wing or Army ROTC Division.
- No personality assessment was administered to determine if personality type had an impact on the Cadets' expectations of Commissioned life. Future studies should obtain consent to conduct personality assessments from the respective ROTC Commanders.
- This study only encapsulates a small group of individuals who join the military. It did not include those who Enlist or become Officers after completing civilian professional training. A more diverse study of service members, and perhaps a pre-test/post-test at BMT or Field Training would allow clearer understanding of the psychological effects of military training.

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