A Qualitative Assessment of Military Kids: Instabilities & Constants

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Introduction
- There are approximately 1.2 million children who have at least one parent in the military (Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, 2013).
- Children of military personnel spend an average of 1/5 to 1/6 of their lives with at least one parent deployed (Mustillo, Wadsworth, & Lester, 2015).
- Timing of parental deployment during child development seems to be the best indicator of how the child will cope and adapt long term, with later deployments having a greater impact (Mustillo, Wadsworth, & Lester, 2015).

Method
- We conducted 21 semi-structured qualitative interviews.
- Participants were asked a variety of questions focused on three central constructs regarding their military experience: Affective, Behavioral, and Cognitive Differences.
- Interviews were then transcribed and open coding procedures were applied.
- Researchers here only report themes that were related by most participants.
- The codes fell into three larger categories. This presentation focuses on one of the themes: Instabilities and Constants in the lives of military Children.

Participant Demographics
- Children of military personnel in four branches: Air Force, Army, Navy and Marine Corps.
- Criterion included:
  - Parents were deployed at least once for over two months
  - Parents had to be active duty for at least 10 years during the child’s lifetime.
  - Students were volunteers from a private university in Ohio.
  - The average age of the participants was approximately 20 years old.
  - The average number of moves during the parent’s military career was six.
  - The average time spent living in a single place during the parent’s active duty military career was a little over five years.
  - Several participants stated that their time at college (4-years) was the longest that they had ever lived in one place.

Results
- Childhood Instability
  Military Kids expressed having a hard time connecting with people who had a stable upbringing. They could not imagine experiences such as living in the same place their whole life, having friends from childhood, and not traveling all the time. They have come to expect continual changes, because that is the only life that they have ever known.
  "I can’t imagine growing up in one place and living in the same house for my entire life!"
  "... oftentimes I feel like I don’t have a home because we’re moving so much.”
  "I don’t put roots down as deep...because if you have too deep of roots when you pull them up it just hurts."

- Adaptability
  The military kids believed that they had learned how to be flexible, adaptable and cooperative. Due to short-notice deployments, international moves, and unexpected changes, adaptability had reportedly become a mindset and a way of life for these military kids. Many of the study’s participants shared how they have seen this adaptability carry over into their adult lives.
  "I’m 4,000 miles away from home and I’m okay with it."
  "... a toughness to be like, ‘Okay I’m ready for this!’ or ‘I can do this.’"
  "I feel like I’m a lot more flexible than I would be."

- Constants
  Although there were many instabilities and situations that the children had to adapt to, they also mentioned several communities that remained a constant regardless of location or circumstance.
  - Family
    Many of the participants stressed that, despite the instability of their childhood, they always knew that they could count on their family to be there for them. One major theme was that the moves and deployments caused their families to come together to work as a unit.
    "Your family is the one thing that really stays constant through it all."
    "Moving a lot, we were looking for something that was stable, and family is."

Results (cont’d)
- Constants (cont’)
  - Family (cont.)
    "When you move around so much your really good friends have to be your family because they’re the only ones who are staying around the whole time."
  - Military Community
    Participants also discussed that they felt connected with the military community as a whole. They felt that only other military kids could really understand them and relate to their struggles. They expressed that being connected within the military community was important so that they could be supported by people with similar experiences.
    "[The base school had] a better sense of belonging because you were with your people."
    "I think you just kind of lean towards them [military kids] because they know you and you know them… they know what it’s like, you know what’s it’s like…"

Implications
- Military Kids
  - Although the moves are often inconvenient and unpleasant, help military kids use their situations to develop, both personally and corporately as a family.
- Military Families
  - Help military kids to become connected with other military families. It is important for them to find friends who understand what they are going through. Having a family in a similar situation can provide a natural support system.
- Military Authorities
  - Provide opportunities for families to connect within the military community. Creating a fun and inviting events may encourage participation and also help form lasting bonds.

References

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