

Culturally Competent Social Work Practice with Veterans: An Overview of the U.S. Military

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Despite social work's longstanding history of serving veterans, few resources support culturally competent practice with this population. If social workers are to serve veterans effectively and efficiently, a basic understanding of the U.S. military is essential. This article presents a basic overview of U.S. military including its structure and history, the propensity to enlist in the armed forces, culture, and training methods and objectives. With an understanding of these aspects of military service and continued effort to learn about their client's military experience, social workers will be prepared to provide culturally competent services consistent with the profession's values and ethics.

KEYWORDS *Veteran, homelessness, cultural competence*

INTRODUCTION

Despite a longstanding and intimate relationship between social workers and veterans, the profession has been criticized for the lack of veteran-specific practitioner resources. The literature has been characterized as providing little practical guidance while universities and professional organizations failed to develop and incorporate the curriculum, information, and tools needed to prepare social workers to serve this special population. Recently, however, the “deficit in guidance and paucity of research” (Savitsky, Illingworth, & Dulaney, 2009, p. 327) seems to be resolving with additional resources becoming available through social work journals (Yarvis, 2011; Coll, Weiss, & Yarvis, 2011; Hall, 2011), the development of advanced practice standards

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for military social workers (Council on Social Work Education, 2010), as well as academic course and degree specializations focusing on military social work (Zoroya, 2009). With 22.7 million veterans in the general population (United States Department of Veterans Affairs, 2010) and the likely return to civilian life by many Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) personnel, there is no question that veterans will remain a significant social work client group for some time. It is imperative that social workers have the resources necessary to efficiently and effectively serve this population.

As new materials and resources have been developed for social workers serving veteran clients, a common theme has been the importance of military cultural competence (Hall, 2011; Coll et al., 2011). Underpinning this call is the acknowledgment that military culture is complex and not well understood by civilians and continues to impact veterans after discharge (Wilson, 2008; Soeters, Poponete, & Page, 2006; Ricks, 1997). Burke (2004) articulates it well, noting that “members of the military, whether on duty or off, combatants or non-combatants, active-duty or retired, share an identity fashioned by an always distinctive, frequently compelling, and occasionally bizarre military culture” (p. 12). This sensitivity to military cultural competence is well founded and consistent with the National Association of Social Worker’s (NASW, 2001) expansion of cultural diversity to include social institutions. It demands that social workers possess specific knowledge regarding the “thoughts, communications, actions, customs, beliefs, values, and institutions” (NASW, p. 9) germane to military service and how they may impact individuals during and after military service. In the end, military cultural competence is firmly rooted in the ideal of *starting where the client is* and requires a desire to understand and embrace difference while also viewing military service as a source of strengths that can support increased functioning.

This article presents information gathered in anticipation of a Department of Veterans Affairs–funded research project with veterans experiencing homelessness. Prior to data collection, efforts were made to develop military cultural competence to inform the development of the study’s interview schedule and assist in engaging with veteran participants. While not essential for testing the study hypotheses, the emphasis of the NASW on developing “specialized knowledge and understanding about the history, traditions, values . . . of major client groups” motivated this effort. Admittedly, this article shares the topical area of military cultural competence with other recently published articles; however, given the broad and complex nature of what can be considered military culture, additional perspectives on this issue are worthwhile and necessary. This article presents a structural and historical overview of the U.S. military, the propensity to enlist in the armed forces, military culture, and training methods and outcomes. It concludes with a discussion of implications for social work practice.

OVERVIEW OF THE UNITED STATES MILITARY

The five military branches of the U.S. military are the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Coast Guard. With the exception of the Coast Guard, which is administered by the Department of Homeland Security, the branches of the military are contained within the Department of Defense. The Department of Defense is a cabinet-level section of the federal executive branch established after World War II (Borklund, 1991). Its stated mission is to “provide the military forces needed to deter war and protect the security of our country” (United States Department of Defense, 2005), and its function is to coordinate the nation’s land, sea, and air assets under the direction of the Secretary of Defense who advises the President on military matters (Trask, 1994).

There are slightly more than 2.3 million uniformed service personnel in the U.S. armed forces, and personnel are classified as *active-duty* or *reservist*. Active-duty members serve full-time, while part-time reservists serve a minimum number of days per year. Reservists can also be called up to augment the active-duty military, something frequently done, as 37% of the military personnel deployed in support of OIF and OEF were from National Guard or reservist units (United States Department of Defense, 2010). As noted in Table 1, the Army is the largest branch by far, accounting for almost half of all military service personnel. The Air Force is the next-largest with slightly more than one-half million total members. The Navy and Marine Corps consist of approximately three-quarters of a million members, while the Coast Guard is the smallest branch with 5% of the total personnel strength of the U.S. armed forces.

Elements of the armed forces predate the establishment of the nation itself, and each branch serves a vital function within the larger military. As recruits join a service branch, they are, in effect, joining a new family with a distinct history of traditions, triumphs, tragedies, and rivalries. For social workers, a basic understanding of the historical background of the military and how the branches differ will provide important additional knowledge

TABLE 1 Branch Strength and Total Strength

Branch	Active duty	Reservist	Branch total
Army	570,719	358,200 (Guard) 205,000 (Reserve)	1,133,919
Navy	328,227	65,500	393,727
Air Force	335,038	106,700 (Guard) 69,500 (Reserve)	511,238
Marines	201,466	39,000	240,466
Coast Guard	42,389	10,000	52,389
Total strength	1,477,839	853,900	2,331,739

necessary for serving veterans. The Army is the oldest branch and was authorized by the Second Continental Congress in 1775. Its mission is to provide "... prompt, sustained land dominance across the full range of military operations" (United States Army, n.d.a, para. 5). The Navy followed the same year and is charged "to maintain, train, and equip combat ready Naval forces capable of winning wars, deterring aggression and maintaining freedom of the seas" (United States Navy, n.d.a, para. 1). The Marine Corps was also created in 1775, providing a flexible expeditionary force "liable to do duty in the forts and garrisons of the United States, on the seacoast, or any other duty on shore as the President, at his discretion, shall direct" (United States Marine Corps, n.d.a, para. 2). The origins of the Coast Guard date back to the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service and the U.S. Life-Saving Service, respectively established in 1790 and 1848. The multiple missions of this branch are to protect the "maritime economy and the environment, defend our maritime borders, and save those in peril" (United States Coast Guard, 2010, para. 1). The youngest branch of the military is the United States Air Force created on September 18, 1947. Previously, it existed as a component of the U.S. Army within the Signal Corps, was later designated as the Army Air Service, evolved into the Army Air Corps and, as a separate military branch, was known as the Army Air Force (MacIsaac, 1994).

Military Culture

Burke (2004) discusses that "military culture is made and made for a purpose. Any cultural practices that cannot be justified as directly or indirectly serving the mission of service and protection cannot be tolerated" (p. 23). However, within each military branch is a distinct subculture built around a distinct branch mission, history, traditions, values, vocabulary, and practices. By nature of its size and mission, the Army tends to believe that it is the service branch that ultimately *wins* wars (Newell, 1994), whereas the Navy purports itself to be the nation's "first line of defense" (Palmer, 1994, p. 380). As the youngest branch, the Air Force is considered to be more receptive to new ideas and technologies, believes air power alone can win armed conflicts, and is the most independent of all the services (Newell, 1994). The Coast Guard takes pride in its blending of military, humanitarian, and civilian law-enforcement duties requiring it be prepared to respond to a variety of scenarios including life saving, environmental emergencies, and illegal drug interdiction (United States Coast Guard, n.d.a). Of all of the branches, the Marine Corps are considered "distinct even within the separate world of the U.S. military" (Ricks, 1997, p. 19). More than any other branch, the Marine Corps embraces the warrior identity with a basic training experience lasting 3 weeks longer than any other service, an emphasis on combat training, mottos of "the few, the proud" and "every Marine a rifleman," and highly ornamental uniforms (Burke, 2004).

Generally, military culture differs from the larger society in the United States as it is paternalistic, maintains a strict hierarchy, and generally involves “long career pipelines and lock step paths” (Lawrence, 2006, p. 219; Burke, 2004). Compared to the civilian business sector, the military is characterized by a collectivist approach, encouraging interdependency, group orientation, and group cohesion. While individual acts are honored with medals and other commendations, the military tends to place less overall value on individual achievement (Soeters et al., 2006). Highly criticized qualities of military culture include misogyny and homophobia. Although serving successfully since the Revolutionary War, the integration of females into the armed forces has been hampered by fears that cohesiveness among males would be undermined, females would be vulnerable to sexual harassment, and they would be unable to perform required physical tasks and not tolerate the stress of combat. Experience, however, indicates servicewomen are no more vulnerable to stress than servicemen and are able to complete physical tasks required of them (Pierce, 1996). Unfortunately, women are subject to gender-based bias, stereotypes, and harassment as the “. . . traditionally male environments and the predominance of male supervisors . . . are conducive to increased sexual aggression towards women” (Pierce, p. 107). Speaking to the alarming incidence of sexual harassment and sexual violence in the military, a 2004 survey indicated 52% of women experienced sexual harassment while serving and, while most knew the process for reporting harassment, 10% did not feel that reporting it would do any good while 42% feared they would suffer adverse consequences (Zeigler & Gunderson, 2005).

Although changing with the repeal of *Don't Ask, Don't Tell*, the military has also been strongly criticized for banning homosexuals from serving openly. Driving this policy were concerns that displays of homosexuality would undermine unit bonds and effectiveness and that privacy could not be provided if homosexuals were admitted into the military (Herek & Belkin, 2006). Research, however, questioned these rationales, as task accomplishment and familiarity had more of a positive influence on cohesion than social similarity, and excessive social similarity negatively impacted effectiveness and bonding through “excessive socializing, groupthink, insubordination, and mutiny” (Herek & Belkin, 2006, p. 126). It was also noted that the opportunity for privacy violations has become increasingly rare as communal shower and restroom facilities have become less common in the military. Ultimately, it is important to note that the attitudes of heterosexual servicemen and women may not have been as biased against homosexuality as was previously thought. Among junior enlisted men and officers, the belief that gays be allowed to openly serve in the military has increased in recent years, indicating the obstacle to integration was not the attitudes of servicemen and women but of military tradition (Herek & Belkin, 2006).

Who Enlists in the Armed Forces?

Prior to June 1973, the military maintained a small cadre of peacetime professional soldiers and would rely heavily on conscription to fill ranks when needed. This generally resulted in a military that was considered socially representative (Janowitz, 1975). During the 1960s, President Richard M. Nixon ended conscription and created a standing all-volunteer force (Moskos, 1973). Since then, a number of the factors influencing individuals to enlist have been identified. They include a desire for self-confidence and self-respect, a desire to gain a new perspective on life, pragmatic considerations including financial incentives, job-training, and educational benefits, a desire to serve including the protection of family and community, and the desire to escape environmental and economic conditions (Lawrence & Legree, 1996; Eighmey, 2006; Woodruff, Kelty, & Segal, 2006). Ultimately, much of the propensity to enlist can be understood using social selection theory (Sedofsky, 2000) as financial incentives, benefits, and the proposition of steady employment target economically disadvantaged groups. However, individuals also choose to join the military based on a congruence between military life and individual characteristics. As the military stresses patriotism, nationalism, conservatism, and traditionalism (Bachman, Segal, Freedman-Doan, & O'Malley, 2000), individuals above average in these characteristics may self-select for military service.

Military Training Methods

The purpose of the military is to “engage in conflict and the resources it deploys are essentially human” (Hockey, 2002, p. 149). It accomplishes this mission by creating a group of servicemen and women who “overcome the fear of and aversion to killing that is bred in the bones as a civilian” (Sherman, 2005, p. 75). According to Burke (2004), the best way to understand how the military transforms civilians into service personnel is to begin with basic training or boot camp:

Boot camp transforms recruits from jocks and nerds, boys from the 'hood and women from the suburbs, into knockoffs of model soldiers by stripping them of their clothes, shaving off their hair, forbidding them their accustomed freedoms, and instilling military discipline in them as second nature. (p. 13)

All services conduct some type of boot camp experience although they differ considerably. Coast Guard, Navy, and Air Force basic training experiences are 8 weeks long while the Army and Marine's last 9 and 12 weeks, respectively. For all branches, boot camp involves the processes of conditioning, training, and indoctrination. It begins with the recruits being administratively

processed, medically evaluated, physically assessed, and introduced to basic military protocols and procedures. Recruits are de-individualized as they are issued anonymous uniforms; refer to themselves in the third person, and are discouraged from exchanging personal information with one another (Burke, 2004; Ricks, 1997). They are also introduced to the history and tradition of their service, synchronize their movements with others during drills, and transform their body through intense and demanding physical conditioning (Hockey, 2002).

As basic training continues, recruits acquire skills required by their service. Because of the direct combat roles they serve, the Marine Corps and Army place more emphasis on marksmanship, hand-to-hand combat techniques, exposure to chemical weapons, and living in the field (United States Marine Corps, n.d.b; United States Army, n.d.b). For all branches, an important aspect of basic training are the rites-of-passage that mark the end of boot camp or basic training. They generally include final academic examinations and assessments of personal fitness and the skills taught during basic training. More challenging rites can be found in the Air Force, Marine Corps, and the Army; however, all experiences include elements of sleep and food deprivation, long-distance marches, problem-solving and team-building exercises, and mock combat exercises. The names given to these events including Crucible, Victory Forge, Battle Stations, and Warrior Week reinforce the significance of these culminating events (Garamone, 2004).

Military Training Outcomes

The ultimate goal of the military's training regimen is the *transformation* of the recruit. Basic training contributes to this goal by providing an environment where recruits are pushed past their perceived physical and psychological limitations, develop a new sense of self-confidence and efficacy, and create a military identity that supplants civilian orientations. An essential component of this process is the rigorous conditioning of the body and the development of physical capital (Thomas, Adler, Wittels, Enne, & Johannes, 2004). As discussed by Higate (2000a), "efficient cardiovascular systems, strength, agility, and overall tolerance to hardship represent the particular attributes towards which military basic training and continuation training are oriented" (p. 101). This conditioning, combined with ongoing skills development, ensures that if and when contact with an *enemy* occurs, soldiers react with maximum speed and utilize embedded skills efficiently (Hockey, 2002).

The instillation of physical and mental discipline is an essential aspect of transforming recruits into competent service personnel. By focusing on discipline, the military seeks to ensure behavior is predictable and that

uncoordinated or individual action will not threaten organizational objectives (Hockey, 2002). Ultimately, the military views recruits as coming from a society that is “disintegrating” (Ricks, 1997, p. 37), and the purpose of basic training is to eradicate this influence. Consequently, the movement, conduct, appearance, and speech of recruits are controlled while they develop the internal discipline to tolerate the harsh environments, physical discomfort, psychological stress, and fear inherent in military service (Burke, 2004; Brit, Stetz, & Bliese, 2004; Sherman, 2005).

An additional outcome of military training and culture is the stoicism characterizing many members of the armed forces. Sherman (2005) notes the language of stoicism is embedded in the training and culture of the military as recruits and servicemen are encouraged to “suck it up” (p. IX) and “tough it out” (p. X) as they encounter challenges of recruit training and service. Higate (2003) discusses that indications of physical or emotional inadequacy are met with derision while displays of aggression, endurance, and loyalty to peers are valued and rewarded. Given this reinforcement, veterans may adopt an ideology toward challenges based on ideals of self-sufficiency, independence, and the ignorance of physical “warning signs” (Higate, 2000a, p. 105). Additionally, veterans may adopt a mindset where “emotional disclosure or suggesting that one is in need is actively discouraged” (Higate, 2000b, p. 333). From Hockey’s (2002) perspective, servicemen develop the ability to dissociate themselves from their body and cease to feel pain or hunger during rigorous training experiences. Delving deeper, military training seeks to develop warriors who are “tough, unflappable, and steady, even in the face of life-threatening danger or terror” (Sherman, 2005, p. 101). However, this stoicism represents a double-edged sword as it “. . . promises a kind of invulnerability it cannot ultimately deliver . . .” (Sherman, 2005, p. X). For some individuals, leaving the military can result in an “identity crisis” (Higate, 2003, p. 102) where individuals who were not able to re-socialize appear to equate their discharge with being emasculated (Higate, 2003).

Ultimately, the development of a “strong and stable identity” (Grogan & Thomas, 2006, p. 52) appears to be the prime goal of military training. This allows service personnel to cope with the isolation, ambiguity, danger, powerlessness, boredom, and intense workload characterizing military operations (Bartone, 2006). By developing confident personnel who are competent decision makers, physically disciplined, situationally aware, aggressive, and able to tolerate physical hardship (Yi, 2004; Franke & Heineken, 2001), the military seeks to create servicemen and women able to accomplish organizational missions regardless of circumstances. Critical to this success, the development of this strong and stable identity ensures that members of the military who are expected to sacrifice “time and energy in peacetime” will sacrifice “life and limb in combat” (Ulmer, 2005, p. 18).

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Social workers encounter veterans in any number of public or private practice settings, and effectively serving them demands military cultural competency. The foundation of this competency is a general understanding of the larger military, its basic history, and the complimentary roles played by the different branches. Obviously, military service is a personal experience and, as veterans will have divergent service experiences, their opinions regarding military service could vary widely. However, entering into a new helping relationship with a basic understanding of the military can help the worker develop rapport with the client, which will then facilitate a more individualized understanding of their service history and other relevant areas. During the author's experiences conducting interviews with veterans experiencing homelessness, this beginning level of cultural competency seemed to convey the author's respect for the veteran's military service. On one occasion, the author wished a veteran who served in the Marine Corps "Happy Birthday" as it was the anniversary of the founding of the Corps. The individual smiled at the gesture and seemed at ease during the interview.

Another essential aspect of military cultural competency is an understanding of military training methods and the individual-level outcomes of this training. The military intentionally seeks to transform civilian men and women into disciplined, mission-oriented, and aggressive personnel. By design, these characteristics support the military mission and, in some cases, may have helped the client survive very difficult situations. However, some of these characteristics may transfer awkwardly to civilian life and could be viewed as inhibiting functioning and/or the helping relationship. An example of this might be the stoic nature that leads some veterans to avoid emotional disclosure or admit needing assistance. Obviously, the extent to which military training methods impact individuals will differ considerably, but the challenge for the social worker is to remember these characteristics are the specified and highly desired outcome of a refined and sophisticated training regimen, were reinforced during the service career, and may be inexorably linked to a military identity—one with which the veteran may continue to be strongly aligned. Consequently, social workers should use a strengths-based approach (Saleeby, 2008), to understand and interpret military-oriented characteristics and creatively engage them in a manner supporting increased functioning. An important aspect of this process is to specifically explore how military-oriented attitudes or behaviors may be positively or less-than-positively impacting their level of functioning. Strictly viewing these characteristics as deficits and framing them as dysfunctional may only alienate the client and engender distrust within the relationship. In the end, it is likely that veterans experience ambivalence regarding military culture and service experience, and some military-oriented traits may be

viewed as problematic in civilian life. However, it is important for the veteran and the social worker to explore and interpret these issues in a manner that respects the veteran's sense of affiliation with and attachment to the military.

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