The Importance of Understanding Military Culture

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The Importance of Understanding Military Culture

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Social workers can make a significant contribution to military service members and their families, but first it is essential that the worldview, the mindset, and the historical perspective of life in the military are understood. Unless we understand how the unique characteristics of the military impact the service members and their families, we cannot work effectively with them. In addition, unless we understand their language, their structure, why they join, their commitment to the mission, and the role of honor and sacrifice in military service, we will not be able to adequately intervene and offer care to these families.

KEYWORDS military culture, worldview, deployment, dependents, change of station, honor, sacrifice

All of us in the helping professions have a passion for helping others find solutions to the issues that are causing them concern, as well as helping to make their lives more productive. In order for that to happen when working with military personnel and their families, we first must pay attention to the culture of the military. Social workers can make a significant contribution to military service members and their families, but first it is essential that the worldview, the mindset, and the historical perspective of life in the military are understood. Social workers, just like other helping professionals, already pay attention to the cultural diversity of the people they are working with. The unique culture of the military is, indeed, a diverse group of people in American society that must be understood as uniquely different from the
civilian world. “All experiences originate from a particular cultural context; the [social worker] must be attentive to this context and the role that cultural identity plays in a client’s life” (Dass-Brailsford, 2007, p. 78). As Reger, Etherage, Reger, and Gahm (2008) state, “to the extent that a culture includes a language, a code of manners, norms of behavior, belief systems, dress, and rituals, it is clear that the Army represents a unique cultural group” (p. 22). While the article written by these authors focuses on the Army, each of the military services have components that are both unique to that service, as well as common across the military.

David Fenell (2008) points out that while there are “cultural, religious and ethnic diversity within the military, the military is a culture in its own right” (p. 8). It is, therefore, the responsibility of ethical practitioners to be well versed in the three multicultural competencies (Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992) which include (a) becoming aware of our own behavior, values, biases, preconceived notions, and personal limitations; (b) understanding the worldview of our culturally different clients without negative judgment; and (c) actively developing and practicing appropriate, relevant and sensitive strategies in working with our culturally diverse clients (Hall, 2008).

While this article will not attempt to cover all three multicultural competencies, it is essential to consider the second competency of understanding the unique worldview and culture of the military in order for social workers to work to the best of their ability with this culturally diverse population. Some of the challenges in working with military members and families include an understanding of the acronyms, the rank and grade system, the beliefs and assumptions—both spoken and unspoken—held by most who chose this lifestyle, the fears, goals, and complications of living with long and frequent absences of one parent (or two in some cases) as well as the required frequent moves, and the more subtle lifestyle changes that military families must endure and, in most cases, survive with amazing resiliency and success. It is also important to sometimes be aware of what is not being said, and understand the restricted nature of the military with its many boundaries, rules, regulations and habits. It may also be necessary to acknowledge that some members of the military may actually feel trapped, particularly those who are from multi-generational military career families (Hall, 2008).

**REASONS THEY JOIN**

One place to begin is to consider why people join the military. Wertsch (1991) identified four key reasons why young people in our society make that life changing decision. These are (a) family tradition, (b) benefits, (c) identification with the warrior mentality, and (d) an escape. While it would
be impossible to identify every reason that young people join the military, some aspects of these four seem to consistently be present in making this decision.

Family Tradition

When asked why a young woman chose to join and then make the military a career (Hall, 2008), she said she came from a military family so she understood the culture and she explained that she was rather anxious about the possibility of living in the civilian world. Having spent most of her life living on military installations, going to schools either near or on the installation, she realized as an adult that she knew nothing about living outside of the military. As she experienced the civilian world through friends and college, she found it was an uncomfortable, insecure world, with too many choices and too much freedom. Young people who grew up in the military often share that they later joined the military because it was more comfortable than civilian life. An Air Force veteran stated “I think it is important to note that many families have numerous members who have served our country proudly and have provided them the emotional support to complete their tasks” (Wakefield, 2007, p. 23).

Benefits

Henderson (2006) suggests that financial concerns almost always contribute to a decision to join the military. She points out that those who join for the amount of money they will receive from the military “tend to come from places that lack other economic opportunities” (p. 22). The military is often also seen as an option for young people who do not have clear future plans and see the military both as a transition and a place of service, until they decide what they want to do with their lives. These young people may not yet see themselves as college material, but they are aware that working for minimum wage is not what they want out of life.

In addition to the benefits of a steady income and a transition period, the military has been called the “great equalizer” for many in our society. A high percentage of lower income youth have correctly seen the military as a road to upward mobility, education, respect, and prestige that they perceive would be impossible if they remained in the civilian world (Hall, 2008). The military has indeed set a standard for the integration of ethnic groups and gender as it remains a relatively safe world for the families of lower income service members and their families (Schouten, 2004). Wertsch (1991) shared that many of the African-American military brats she interviewed experienced racism for the first time as adults in civilian communities and often “grew up acutely conscious of the contrast between their safe, secure
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Identity of the Warrior

On a more psychological level, many who join the military feel a need to “merge their identity with that of the warrior” (Wertsch, 1991, p. 17). The structure, the expectations, the rules, even the penalties and overriding identity as a “warrior” are reassuring while, at the same time, providing service members with security, identity, and a sense of purpose. Those whose personality and needs fit with the military culture often find themselves making the military a career. A San Diego therapist (Hall, 2008) noted that the profile of the service member who made the military a career during the time of the draft is often similar to those who now volunteer, as the military offers a re-enforcement of a belief system and a personal identity.

Previous work on the topic of war (Nash, 2007) has explored the “psychology of war as a test of manhood and a rite of initiation among males in many cultures” (p. 17) so it is not uncommon for young men to merge their identity with that of a warrior by being a part of something meaningful. Gegax and Thomas (2005) suggest that while military sons tend to talk about duty, when asked why they followed their fathers to war, their more personal motivations may have more to do with passing the test of manhood. Throughout the history of warfare, combat is often seen as a test, and certainly in some cultures the test, of manhood. “There is no better way to win a father’s respect than to defy death just the way he did. Indeed, the effort to surpass one’s father or brother’s bravery has gotten more than a few men killed” (p. 26).

An Escape

The military also satisfies a need for some young people to escape from painful life experiences, “a need for dependence . . . [drawing them] to the predictable, sheltered life . . . that they did not have growing up” (Wertsch, 1991, p. 17). Ridenour (1984) believes that military service becomes the extended family that was not experienced growing up. Sometimes young married couples come into the military “as an escape from their respective families [only to] unconsciously run toward becoming part of a third extended family system” (p. 4). However, as Wertsch (1991) points out, “joining the military in order to put one’s self in the care of a good surrogate parent is hardly the sort of thing one is likely to advertise; in fact, it is a secret so deep-seated that those who act upon it . . . guard the secret carefully” (p. 17). This attempt to flee from childhood or family problems at home, however, often does not solve most problems; sometimes the
violence, gang mentality, or addiction issues are simply brought with them into the military (Hall, 2008).

**CHARACTERISTICS OF OUR MILITARY CULTURE**

Most of the unique facets of military life that were described almost three decades ago remain true for military families today, including (a) frequent separations and reunions; (b) regular household relocations; (c) living life under the umbrella of the “mission must come first” dictum; (d) the need for families to adapt to rigidity, regimentation and conformity; (e) early retirement from a career in comparison to civilian counterparts; (f) rumors of loss during a mission; (g) detachment from the mainstream of nonmilitary life; (h) the security of a system that exists to meet the families’ needs; (i) work that usually involves travel and adventure; (j) the social effects of rank on the family; and (k) the lack of control over pay, promotion, and other benefits (Ridenour, 1984). While “it is evident . . . that large segments of our society deal with one or more of these aforementioned concerns and stresses . . . there may be no other major group that confronts so many or all of them” (Ridenour, 1984, p. 3) at any given time.

Mary Wertsch (1991) defined this military society as a “Fortress” to differentiate it from the democratic society of most U.S. citizens. “The great paradox of the military is that its members, the self-appointed front-line guardians of our cherished American democratic values, do not live in democracy themselves” (Wertsch, 1991, p. 15). A number of characteristics of the Fortress that Wertsch discovered in her many interviews with adults who had grown up as military dependent children are shared here. Having spent almost a decade working as a school counselor with military dependent children and youth, the author can attest to the validity of these characteristics.

**Authoritarian Structure**

The first characteristic is that the military world is maintained by a rigid authoritarian structure. The family must learn how to adapt its natural growth and development to the rigidity, regimentation, and conformity that is required within the military system, as these characteristics often extend from the world of the service member into the structure of the home. It is important to point out, however, that while 80% of the military brats Wertsch (1991) interviewed described their families as authoritarian, “there are warriors who thrive in the authoritarian work environment without becoming authoritarian at home” (p. 25) so it is important to understand that authoritarianism is not the only model of military family life. However, in those families where authoritarian parenting is present, some of the following characteristics often exist: (a) There are clear rules, often with narrow boundaries, for
behavior and speech; (b) there is little tolerance for questioning of authority or disagreements; (c) there are often frequent inappropriate violations of privacy; and (d) often children are discouraged from engaging in activities or behavior that hint at individuation (Hall, 2008).

For many this authoritarian parenting structure works, at least when children are young or if children attend schools on military installations. However, when families live “on the economy” (in a civilian community), the children, particularly once they reach adolescence, often rebel against this authoritarian parenting style because they associate with kids from very different family structures (Hall, 2008). Within the military community this can be both comforting and suffocating at the same time. It becomes a culture that is very inward focused, with a consistent hierarchical structure. The children sometimes blame the military for all their problems, as they see no escape and realize that even their extended family cannot step in to help. “They have a sense of betrayal by the military because they do not have the right to make the choices they see other young people making, but they realize their parents are not in a position to make many personal choices either” (Hall, 2008, p. 47).

Isolation and Alienation

The necessity for extreme mobility results in military families becoming characterized by isolation and alienation from both the civilian world and the military family’s extended family. Part of this isolation is magnified by the language, often spoken in acronyms and other idiosyncratic terms. Someone “who does not understand . . . a word or phrase is faced with a dilemma. She must balance the risk of missing important clinical information with the cost of asking for clarification” (Reger et al., 2008, p. 25). This vocabulary is a significant part of the military culture and if the words and phrases are not understood could have significant implications for assessment, intervention, and care. One of the implications is that the military family may not be available for long term care; “therefore, pragmatic reasons often force therapists to conceptualize treatment in brief terms” (Reger et al., 2008, p. 28). In addition, work with families could be interrupted for numerous military enforced reasons, suggesting that social workers need to pay attention to issues of continuity of care.

Another obvious example of isolation is that the average tour of duty is three years, but, in many cases, moves are much more frequent; for some as often as every year. There are many students in the Department of Defense middle and high schools in Germany where who had never visited their extended families’ homes in the states or lived anywhere near their “home of record.” The irony is that every time the family moves, it is called a PCS, or Permanent Change of Station; permanent, that is, until the next move (Hall, 2008).
This isolation is often experienced as if life is temporary, with children and families not able or willing to make commitments to friends or communities, and always wondering about the next place, the next community, the next school. For those families who spend time living abroad, the isolation can seem overwhelming as most housing areas in foreign countries are walled off from the outside culture. The world of the military can become “an oddly isolated life, one in which it is possible to delude oneself that one is still on American soil” (Wertsch, 1991, p. 330). While there are those families who value the experience of living in a foreign country by learning the language and taking part in the culture, there are also those who are more anxious about this experience and may spend their entire tour of duty within the walls of the military installation.

Even when military dependent children attend public schools in the United States, they almost always “know” they are different from the other students. Wertsch states that it is “next to impossible to grow up in the warrior society without absorbing the notion that civilians are very different and sometimes incomprehensible” (Wertsch, 1991, p. 315). Gegax and Thomas (2005) share that this isolation of the military from the rest of society can be readily understood because the United States is, in fact, divided between the vast majority who do not have military service experience and the tiny minority who do.

Class System

Nowhere in America is the dichotomy so omnipresent as on a military base; nowhere do the classes live and work in such close proximity; nowhere is every social interaction so freighted with class significance. . . . The thousands of people on a military base live together, have the same employer, dedicate their lives to the same purpose—yet they cannot, must not, socialize outside their class. (Wertsch, 1991, p. 285)

The military has two distinct subcultures, the world of the officer and that of the enlisted, each with very different lifestyles. The non-commissioned officers (non-coms or NCOs), who are usually the top five grades within the enlisted rank, seem sometimes caught in the middle.

So, while members of the military and their families usually experience a sense of isolation from their civilian counterparts, this rank structure creates a distance within the military itself. The families are impacted, as well, as the spouses of officers and their children are also expected to maintain their distance from the enlisted spouses and children. Wertsch points out that the military has its reasons to make these distinctions and more than likely it could not exist without them, but it seems that “the only equality among officers and enlisted is in dying on the battlefield” (1991, p. 288).
The United States has made great strides in the past five decades to affirm the importance of and equalize the differences in available services between rank and grade. But it is a universal assumption of all military systems that it is essential for the functioning of the organization to maintain a rigid hierarchical system, based on dominance and subordination. The importance for social workers is that it is also an essential ingredient in a clinical setting. Reger and colleagues (2008) point out that during the initial intake, rank can give us important information, such as stressors, military history of the client/family, length of service, and possibly certain duties and experiences that will impact assessment, intervention, and care. Another consideration pointed out by these authors is that professional care givers, that is, social workers, counselors, and so on will more than likely be viewed by those in the military as “civilian/officer-equivalent/authority” figures. Practitioners may need to be aware that enlisted service members may respond differently than officers, based on this common belief, possibly leading to initial difficulties in establishing the all-important practitioner/client alliance.

While the children of the enlisted and officers go to the same school, they almost always are uncomfortable associating outside of school with children of the other rank. Housing is separated, with single military in one area, enlisted family housing in another, and officers’ quarters in another; each with clear distinctions in appearance, quality, and size (Hall, 2008). In speaking with numerous adult military brats, virtually all will share that, as kids, they could, almost instantaneously, recognize an officer’s kid or an enlisted kid. It is not a distinction to be taken lightly.

Parent Absence

This is a society with a great deal of parent absence and, with the changes in the military of the last two decades, sometimes both parents are absent at the same time. “Parent absence during important events can be crushing for young people; but for these families, nothing new. A parent is often absent for the prom, the big football game, the drama production, or graduation” (Hall, 2008, p. 51). But, more importantly, parents are absent for the routines of daily life: the first step, the first day of school, losing the first tooth, the first date, starting middle school or a special birthday. These are the times that cement relationships and often are missed by at least one parent. For single military parents, it can be even more difficult, as they may not even live with their children on a regular basis.

In understanding the military family system, it is also important that while the absence of parents is stressful, “sometimes this constant coming and going results in either the military parents protecting themselves from the pain of separation or the family forming a kind of cohesive unit that keeps the military parent out” (Hall, 2008, p. 52). The military parent may
distance from the family, either physically by working long hours or spending time away from home, or emotionally through alcohol or other ways of soothing the self. Families, on the other hand, may become so comfortable in their roles without the military parents that when the service members return, they simply put up with the intrusion, knowing that it won’t be long before it ends. If the military parent expects or demands major changes upon returning home, the adjustments are often resented by the non-military parent or children. We must “be aware of the dynamics of military life that can introduce dissension into the relationship. Readjusting to family life, only to be pulled away yet again . . . places enormous stress on all those involved” (Dahn, 2008, p. 56).

Importance of Mission

The conditions and demands of “a total commitment to the military—typically a commitment to one’s unit, the unit’s mission and its members” (Martin & McClure, 2000, p. 15) is the very essence of military unit cohesion. This felt sense of mission is, indeed, the purpose of the military; for each service member, the commitment is not just about having a better education or training for a job but is, in fact, a sense of mission to make the world a better and safer place (Hall, 2008). Houppert (2005) explains that basic training is not designed to bring an adolescent into independence but rather to shift the recruit from dependence on his family to dependence on the team; “the soldier must learn that he can trust no one but his buddies” (p. 84). Gegax and Thomas (2005) point out that as “incongruous as it may seem for the millions whose closest brush with battle is on [TV], Soldiers and Marines on the front line are proud to be there and willing to serve again. The overall effect is to heighten the sense that the military is becoming a proud cult that fewer and fewer outsiders want to join” (p. 26). Fenell (2008) points out that those working with the military need to “recognize several common values shared by military personnel, including: a) always maintaining physical fitness; b) training hard before deployment to reduce casualties; c) never abandoning fellow warriors in combat; d) making sure the mission and the unit always come before the individual; and e) never showing weakness to fellow warriors or to the enemy” (p. 9). While the last two items point directly to this issue of the importance of the mission, the first two also indirectly relate to the imperative of readiness.

This dedication to the country and fellow soldiers (Fenell & Weinhold, 2003) can create difficult times for the family. Service members often see themselves as part of what might be described as a second family. Conflict at home emerges when this second “military family” is perceived to be more important than the family. While it has been shown that military service members who have solid families perform better on the job, it is always a difficult balancing act to be a part of two families who are so integral to the
success of the mission (Fenell & Weinhold, 2003). A therapist interviewed had been a career military officer’s spouse and was also the mother of a career officer (Hall, 2008). She experienced this demand of the military for loyalty, dedication, dependency, and a sense of mission as virtually a form of brainwashing.

Mary Wertsch (1991) wrote that the real determining factor in most military families was that all-powerful presence that was often unacknowledged by the family called the Military Mission; she went on to explain that it was this presence that went with them everywhere, and without which their lives would have no meaning. “From the viewpoint of the military’s extended family style and demands, the mission takes precedence, and therefore, often the service member’s relationship with his peers is found to take precedence over [the relationship] between himself and his spouse, children, or parents” (Ridenour, 1984, p. 7).

Preparation for Disaster

Civilians often seem to blithely overlook a central truth military people can never afford to forget: that at any moment they may be called upon to give their lives—or lose a loved one—to serve the ends of government. Even if it never comes to that, they sacrifice a great deal in the course of doing a job that most civilians on some level understand is necessary to the country as a whole. (Wertsch, 1991, p. 316)

If we look back at Fenell’s list of shared values of military personnel, the first two regarding maintaining physical fitness and training hard before deployment speaks to this characteristic of Preparation for Disaster. Unlike most civilian occupations, with certainly a few exceptions such as the police and firefighters, the military is a world set apart from the civilian world because of its constant preparation for disaster. This constant preparation for disaster also places a great deal of pressure and stress on the military family. “Military readiness is like a three-legged stool. The first leg is training, the second equipment. The third leg is the family. If any of these three legs snaps, the stool tips over and America is unprepared to defend herself” (Henderson, 2006, p. 5). While the military cannot exist without this constant preparation, it means the family is also living under the constant threat of disaster (i.e., the potential for death or injury to the military parent).

PSYCHOLOGICAL RESULTS OF LIVING IN THE FORTRESS

The aforementioned general characteristics of the military culture often lead to the three psychological traits that Mary Wertsch (1991) identified when interviewing a large number of adult military brats. These traits include:
1. Secrecy, the importance of keeping what goes on at work separate from home, as well as making sure that what goes on at home stays home. The dictate is also a present in many military job categories often producing a level of psychological shutting off even between spouses, as well as between parents and children.

2. Stoicism, or the importance of keeping up the appearance of stability and the ability to handle whatever stress the family encounters. Having to live under this constant preparation for change, whether it be disaster, just another deployment, or a PCS, means that if these fears and other feelings were expressed, families would have to acknowledge constant emotional turmoil. As the National Military Family Association (NMFA) stated recently, “complete elimination of stress, especially for a military family member, is an impossible task” (NMFA, n.d.-a, ¶ 1) and while military families are resilient and able to successfully manage multiple stressors, “sometimes it can take additional help to relieve the underlying feeling that life is coming at you too fast and becoming too complicated” (NMFA, n.d.-a, ¶ 3). Often this help is unavailable to families unless they take the risk to ask for it.

3. Denial, or the need to keep all the feelings, fears, and even other “normal” developmental stresses of the family under wraps. While in a relatively few number of families this includes domestic violence, child abuse or other “reportable” offenses, what it does mean for most families is that the expression of feelings is not encouraged, fears are not shared, and the need to ask for help or request assistance goes unnoticed. The National Military Family Association states that “teens especially carry a burden of care that they are reluctant to share with the non-deployed parent. . . as they are often encumbered by the feeling of trying to keep the family going, along with anger over changes in their schedules, increased responsibility, and fear for their deployed parent” (NMFA, n.d.-b, ¶ 2).

Secrecy, stoicnism, and denial are, in fact, crucial for success of the warrior, success of the mission, and ultimately success of the military (Hall, 2008). At the same time, these traits often determine whether military members, and sometimes their families, seek treatment. “To the extent that seeking psychological treatment is defined as ‘weakness,’ soldiers may be slow to pursue services” (Reger et al., 2008, p. 27). Often this reluctance delays treatment, resulting in many being pushed beyond tolerable stress levels. Addressing these beliefs during intake may lower the chance of military members minimizing symptoms, and thereby benefiting from a professional’s ability to normalize their beliefs about fears, stigma, and future treatment (Reger et al., 2008).

These three traits of secrecy, stoicism, and denial also suggest that many military families may, on a regular basis, be experiencing Type II Trauma (Grief and Trauma, n.d.) or the type of trauma that results from
constant fear, the constant planning for disaster, and the constant readiness for change. These restrictions from grieving may mean that military families are not allowed the growth that can come from the expression and “work” done in grieving the experience of loss. “When the culture encourages secrecy, stoicism and denial and discourages or even punishes the expression of fears and grief, families and service members are often faced with the same kind of consequences we see in clients who suffer from constant levels of Type II trauma” (Hall, 2008, p. 58).

HONOR AND SACRIFICE AND THE MALE MILITARY PSYCHE

These dynamics of secrecy, stoicism, and denial also can help us understand the important concepts of honor and sacrifice in the military. It is difficult to understand the importance of the concepts of military honor and sacrifice without relating it to the male psyche and the traditional stereotypes of the military as a male domain. While we know that more and more women are entering the military, the culture of the military has historically been a very “male” culture. From the perspective of a therapist in San Diego who has worked with military service members for three decades (Butler, 2006), this issue could easily be overlooked, or at least not understood, particularly by professional females working with male service members. Because the military is still predominately male, and most social workers are predominately female, Dr. Butler’s insights are invaluable.

It is also these concepts of honor and sacrifice that helps us understand the inherent stigma that is so predominant in the military. “Military personnel are expected to ‘soldier up’ and get through the rough times on their own” (Dahn, 2008, p. 56) because they have been warned that seeking professional help “could be detrimental to career advancement or seen as a sign of weakness by their chain of command” (Dahn, 2008, p. 56).

To work with men in the military, it is important to give due attention to the concept of “honor” that is so central to the psychology of the military, and so central to male psychology. John Gilligan (1996), the author of an essential book on the topic of violence, points out that there is a marked difference between men and women in studying the culture of honor. The reality is that the military probably could not do its job without the strongly held beliefs of service members regarding the importance of honor.

Through leadership, training, and unit cohesion, stress reactions are managed and honor is maintained; “searching for ways to become more comfortable or safe in war can be not only a distraction from the real business at hand, but also a serious hazard to success and even survival” (Nash, 2007, p. 15).
Relationships at Home

One of the obstacles that the concept of honor presents in therapy is the possibility that military men, because of their military commitments, believe they should be “given a pass when it comes to relationship issues with family and children” (Hall, 2008, p. 63) leading to a form of neglect at home. In a metaphorical way, the career military male marries his military service and the male–female marriage becomes an extramarital affair (Keith & Whitaker, 1984).

A female therapist, who was also a wife of a former military officer, talked about family get-togethers when the officer husbands returned from deployment. She shared that invariably the military members wanted to spend the time together instead of with the families. While these were difficult times for her and the children, she began to understand that the time her husband spent with the other officers was the only time he believed that those around him would understand the memories that were constant in this mind. She also realized this was the only way the military husbands could cope with the tremendous shame for what they believed they had done, and for what they had witnessed (Hall, 2008). One way of reframing this for families, especially spouses, is to point out, as Lyons (2007) suggests, that a reluctance to divulge horrible details may very likely be due to the importance of the home relationships, rather than an indication of the contrary.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Social workers practice in a variety of settings from private practice to medical clinics, schools, veteran’s hospitals, community agencies, and many, many more. As noted in the introduction, having an understanding of the culture of our military clients, families, and children is the best place to begin. Not unlike other culturally diverse groups, the military has standards, a jargon of its own, and beliefs that must be incorporated into the practice of those in the helping professions. Some of the characteristics of this culture, such as frequent moves, deployment and training schedules of the service member, and the psychological issues of secrecy, stoicism and denial add a layer of difficulty and possibly confusion for professionals who may see the world from a place of openness, fairness, and egalitarianism. Virtually all reported best practices when working with the military suggest that coming from a strength-based approach, usually incorporating a more cognitive modality is more effective than a longer-term approach with a strong focus on feelings and emotions. Service members and their families need to get things done and move on which is how the expertise of social workers can be so valuable. While longer term distress, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), have to be a part of assessment, treatment,
and referral, building on the family and the service members’ strengths by helping them to resolve issues through cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), Solution-Focused, or Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) modalities often are the most effective approaches. However, from whatever approach and in whatever setting, social workers will encounter military families; therefore, having an understanding of their culture and what has shown to be most helpful is essential.

SUMMARY

Acknowledging and understanding the many unique characteristics of the military is essential before attempting to intervene and work with this diverse culture. Unless we understand how these characteristics impact the military family and lead to the need for stoicism, secrecy, and denial, we cannot work effectively with the military service members or with their families. In addition, unless we understand their language, their structure, why they join, their commitment to the mission, and the role of honor and sacrifice in military service, we will not be able to adequately intervene and offer care to these families. This care must come from within the military framework and be consistent with the worldview of their culture.

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