Well-Being of Single-Parent Military Families

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Faculty/Presenter Disclosure

- **Faculty:** Alla Skomorovsky

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  - N/A – nothing to disclose
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Mitigating Potential Bias

- N/A
Background

- Single-parent military families face the same challenges as single-parent civilian families, including increased time pressures, challenges coordinating work with family schedules and commitments, and financial pressure (Blanchard, 2012).
- Single-parent military families also experience unique stressors associated with the demands of military life, such as family separations due to deployments, risk of injury to, or death of, the military member, unusual work hours, and repeated postings that separate the family from supportive friends and relatives (Booth & Lederer, 2012; Daigle, 2013).
- The limited number of past studies are U.S.-based and have shown that single-parent military families have lower satisfaction with military life and poorer psychological well-being (e.g., Bowen, Orthner, Zimmerman, & Meehan, 1992).
- Minimal research in Canada has examined the well-being of single-parent military families.
- “The Impact of Military Life on Single-Parent Military Families: Well-Being and Resilience” study was conducted to examine the well-being of single-parent CAF families.
Methodology

- Focus groups with 65 single military parents (dependants <19 years old)
- Locations: Ottawa, Halifax, Montréal, and Borden.
  - 30 male and 27 female; 11 never married, 50 divorced, and 3 widowed*.
- All single military parents were sent an email invitation.
- Moderator Guide:
  - Attitudes and beliefs about being a single parent in the military (e.g., raising children in a military environment, work and family conflict);
  - Stress and individual characteristics (e.g., coping strategies, social support);
  - Child well-being (e.g., behaviour problems, and emotional symptoms) and quality of child-parent relationships; and
  - Military life style stressors (e.g., deployment-related, relocation-related questions) and how they affected child well-being.
- Collaboration with Mount Saint Vincent University (Dr. Deborah Norris)
- MAXQDA software was used to thematically analyze the qualitative data.

* Out of those who reported their descriptive information
Results: Parenting in the Military

- The reality sometimes diverged from what personnel had expected.
  - Parents did not receive as much support from the military as they had hoped.

  I thought juggling parenthood and a career would be easier than what I now realize is a difficult work–life balance. Parenting is by far the harder of the two.

  It is harder than I thought because I never thought I would be a single parent.

- Positive Aspects of Parenting in the Military:
  
  The military, by its definition, provides an environment with more structure and discipline than regular [non-military] life. The military is also built on a system of values and ethics that I find very desirable for any children, at least to learn.

  There are lots of positives like the financial stability.

- However, most single parents reported having unique challenges and psychological distress related to being a single parent in the military.
Results: Stress among Single Military Parents

- Most parents reported having high stress levels.
- Main sources: deployment, relocation, childcare (e.g., waitlists, hours of operation that do not match work hours at Military Family Resource Centre (MFRC) daycare centres), child well-being, work–family conflict, and stigma (of being a single parent).

  We are an operational unit, we are 24/7. Daycare is a huge issue. Daycare is not open 24/7. If I end up on shift work, how do I take care of my son?

  The stress is huge. If you are in a demanding or stressful job, like the one I am in now, the balance of work and family becomes hard. Work is definitely winning out on the balance between the two now.

  It was survival. And one of the things I couldn’t always do was ask for help, because that would be like thinking there is something wrong. And thinking that there’s something wrong I felt would weaken me and not help me go forward.
Results: Main Stressors of Parenting in the Military

Relocation

- Impact on custody arrangements (including the loss of an access or custody for the military parent).

  *My career manager wants to post me outside the National Capital Region (NCR), and if that happens, I lose custody of my son.*

  *Due to the custody arrangement, my ex won’t let me move the children.*

- Strong impact on child and parent well-being.

  *It is a hard adjustment. Do they weather the change? Yes, they do, but the transition is hard and as a single parent dealing with these woes is a little harder. You only have you to rely on.*

  *The stress is high. Children lost their friends and didn’t have the opportunity to build new relationships. Everything my kids know for last few years is changing places, changing schools, doctors, teachers—and they are scared. Every move puts me on the highest gear; this means that I have even less time for kids on a daily basis. Children complain, cry; they also ask me frequently why they cannot have a normal life and friends like everybody else.*
Results: Main Stressors of Parenting in the Military

Deployment

- One of the most significant stressors.
  
  A single parent cannot plan a deployment without stress.
  It is very difficult to find reliable care when you’re going to be completely absent.
  There is this assumption that we all have a dear old mom who will jump in and look after the grandchildren.

- Some noted a positive effect on children: it increased maturity and independence in some children.

- Overall, however, deployment had a negative effect on child-parent relationships.
  
  My kids have asked at least a dozen times whether I love sailing or the submarine more than I love them. That’s a terrible, terrible question.
  
  He had questions and he didn’t understand why I left. I couldn’t explain to him like an adult then. The relationship didn’t get better, that’s for sure.
  
  I’m not sure how a deployment or being away for a lengthy period of time could make a relationship better. Spending quality time with a child involves actually being in the same location.
Results: The Use of Coping to Mitigate Stress

- Parents used a variety of coping strategies to deal with their stress.
  - Common proactive coping strategies included taking time for themselves or engaging in hobbies, exercising, socializing, compartmentalizing, seeking out professional help (e.g., medical community), and having a positive attitude or perspective.
    - *I used to bicycle year round. It cleared my head.*
    - *Actively maintaining deep friendships.*
    - *I have utilized mental health services at different postings as well. It was the only way I got through it.*
    - *You have to accept that you are going to be in a lot of stressful situations, and you can only control what you can control.*
  - Reactive coping included strategies, such as withdrawal, avoidance, or dismissal.
Results: Formal Social Support to Mitigate Stress

- Parents noted two key sources of formal support: MFRCs and the chain of command (CoC).
- Many parents found MFRCs to be a valuable source of support.
- Some parents complained about MFRCs (e.g., inconsistencies between locations, lack of information, distance):

  I think MFRCs change from place to place. Some of them are good and some of them are not very good. Some of them cater to only younger children, six and below. If your kid is older than six, you are out of luck.

  I tried once and was told that as a single parent there was no help for me. I wasn’t entitled to it because I didn’t have a spouse. I was a member myself; therefore, there was nothing that they could do to help.

  I didn’t know what was all here. How do you access that? If I hadn’t gone to the seminars, I wouldn’t know about all those resources.

  Not everything is well advertised; you need to go and ask.
Results: Formal Social Support to Mitigate Stress

- CoC support plays a critical role for CAF single parents.
  - CoC, particularly direct supervisors, are vital in determining whether parents have a positive or negative experience while balancing work and family as a single parent in the CAF.

  *It is all dependent on the CoC and the support they are willing to provide to the members. The CoC has a lot of leeway they can provide to members, and depending on what they are willing to do for the member determines the environment.*

- When parents felt supported by the supervisor, they felt their overall stress levels decreased, and they believed they were more effective at work.

  *I ended up with a new supervisor who has been through it and was more results based. It removed a lot of the stress. It empowered me to allow me to get the job done.*

  *It depends on the boss. If there was an actual policy in place, it would be a lot more helpful than hoping you have a good boss. Because one unit I was in had an amazing boss who, anytime the kids were sick, I was given time. Then I go to another unit and when they are sick or the bus is cancelled the response is, “You’re expected to be here between these hours. If you want time off, you have to take leave.”*
Results: Informal Social Support to Mitigate Stress

- Informal support networks (e.g., family members, friends, co-workers) are crucial for managing stress related to work-family conflict.
- Positive impact during deployments and relocations.

  Parents remark that in many cases they rely on and are more comfortable leaving their children in the care of someone they know, such as a family member, than a hired nanny.

  *I was posted to Ottawa where my family is and that really helped me out.*

  *I have no family in the same province and my parents and grandparents have passed away. In my previous posting, I was fortunate enough to have connected with a neighbour that made it possible for me to have an option when emergencies arose.*

  *It is more difficult because I don’t have family around. If I could be posted in Quebec City we could live with my mom and their environment would remain (somewhat) the same when I am on deployment.*
Results: Summary

- Although military environment is difficult for single parenting and has multiple unique stressors (e.g., separations due to deployments, multiple relocations, and irregular work hours), parents believed that it is still possible to balance work and family life to some extent, if protective factors are present.

- The level of stress was highly dependent on the type of support provided by the CoC/direct supervisor as well as the usage/availability of MFRC services; the coping strategies used by the single parents and the types of informal support available were also critical in the well-being of single-parent military families.
Study Limitations

- Qualitative nature of the study:
  - Does not allow for examining the relationships between variables (e.g., the impact of military stressors on the parent or child well-being).
  - The presence of the researcher and other single military parents in the room might have introduced a report bias – certain issues may not be revealed due to personal discomfort and/or fear that the anonymity will not be maintained.

- Generalizability of the results:
  - Small sample size and limited number of locations examined, the results cannot be generalized to the whole CAF and should be replicated.
  - Study design might have introduced a pre-selection bias (e.g., single military parents who experience either very little or very high levels of stress decided not to take part in the study).
Recommendations and Future Research

- Informing parents about effective coping strategies buffering against psychological well-being problems (taking time for oneself, engaging in hobbies, socializing with others, compartmentalizing, seeking informal or professional support, and having a positive outlook).
  - E.g., socializing with friends is an effective way to find informal social support and to reduce stress among single parents.
- Taking into account the significance of formal support systems and the positive impact of supportive, accommodating, and understanding CoCs on the well-being of military parents.
- Increasing awareness on the policy stating single parents’ eligibility (especially as many did not know about their eligibility for MFRC services) and on the availability of these services across Canada.
- Considering the personal circumstances when posting single parents, when possible.
  - Providing advanced notice for deployment and relocation, given the greater complexity related to finding childcare and longer time needed to prepare.
Recommendations and Future Research

- Conducting quantitative research to further examine the impact of military life on single-parent military families.
  - Examining the protective roles of certain individual characteristics (e.g., use of effective coping strategies, social support, and secure attachment) in the path between military-life stressors (e.g., deployment, relocation) and child and/or single parent well-being.
Conclusion

- Single-parent military families experience unique stressors associated with the demands of military life.

- This research will allow the military organization to help military families to maintain and even enhance resiliency in the face of the stressors associated with military life.

- Although this research provides an overview of the impact of military life on single-parent military families, this is only a first step toward a full understanding of their well-being and unique needs. The organization should continue to develop the expert knowledge necessary to care for these vulnerable military families and to accommodate their needs to improve their well-being.