University of Massachusetts Amherst

From the Selected Works of Dr. Jennifer H. Lundquist

2009

Military and Relationships

Jennifer H. Lundquist, *University of Massachusetts - Amherst*
Daniel Burland

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/jennifer_lundquist/21/

may be that humans emit messages with more mixed signals than do other animals. Humans, can, however, learn what signals work to cue their animals about their intentions. Dog owners, for example, who want to play with their dogs can do so without any words. Rather than explicitly saying, "Rover, now we are going to play," the human will hunch over, move rapidly, grab the dog's toy, and instantly the dog knows that this is play behavior—good, implicit metacommunication is occurring between the two of them. An engaging television program, *The Dog Whisperer*, illustrates how interspecies' implicit metacommunication occurs. Caesar Milan, the dog whisperer, specializes in retraining dogs that have gotten out of control. Using no words, he can instantly metacommunicate with a dog. For example, to get a dog to stop jumping on humans, he simply quickly grabs the dog on the neck and lets go. The dog apparently interprets this as a "bite" and, as if an adult dog were training her, stops jumping on the human.

Metacommunication of both types, explicit and implicit, are skills that can be learned. Children learn both by observation and through explicit instruction. For example, a father may teach his son to look someone in the eye when speaking, rather than looking sideways, to signal sincerity and respect. For children, and all of us, once someone learns some metacommunication repertoires, he or she can implicitly show their intentions for a conversation or explicitly say what those intentions are. This allows the receiver into the world of the sender, and opens dialogue about what the receiver interpreted. For instance, if one metacommunicates and describes what is going on in a conversation ("I note that every time I say something about your team, you interrupt me"), it can serve as a springboard to clarify communication patterns.

There may be important cultural differences in the recognition and use of metacommunication because humans learn how to use or not use metacommunication. Some cultures teach and practice it on levels not seen in Eurocentric cultures. For instance, the Maori indigenous culture in New Zealand has the *Haka*—a dramatic approach to strangers that entails a threatening posture and loud vocal sounds. More research could uncover forms of metacommunication used across the world. It would be useful to find examples of when

metacommunication enhances communication exchanges and relationships. Learning the skills of both explicit and implicit forms of metacommunication helps individuals expand their communication repertoires. It may be, as trained mediators and counselors know, improving both explicit metacommunication ("talk about talk") and being more sensitive to the implicit cues are both important and useful skills. Such skill improvements are useful in many contexts, from personal relationships to situations where persuasion is the key to success, such as in a sales situation.

William W. Wilmot

See also Accuracy in Communication; Deception and Lying; Equivocation; Initiation of Relationships; Nonverbal Communication, Status Differences; Personal Relationships, Defining Characteristics

Further Readings

- Bochner, A. P., & Krueger, D. L. (1979). Interpersonal communication theory and research: An overview of inscrutable epistemologies and muddled concepts. In D. Nimmo (Ed.), *Communication Yearbook 3* (pp. 197–211). New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books and the International Communication Association.
- Watzlawick, P., Beavin, J., & Jackson, D. D. (1967). *The pragmatics of communication*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Wilmot, W. W. (1995). *Relational communication*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

MILITARY AND RELATIONSHIPS

In practical terms, the military family must be divided into at least two major groups, according to the military's institutionalized pattern of stratification. There are officers; an educated, managerial class; and enlisted personnel, a class of workers whose normal duties include the performance of manual labor, or, in the case of higher-ranking enlisted soldiers, the immediate supervision of lower-ranked enlistees. By design, there is little mobility between officer and enlisted classes, but there are gradations within each. There are then at least four main categories of military family, according to the rank of the serving soldier: junior

enlisted (new recruits), senior enlisted (soldiers promoted out of the ranks to administrative and ceremonial positions), junior officers (recent college graduates now tasked with small group leadership), and senior officers (the highest ranked service members). Within each category are subdivisions by the usual demographic markers such as race, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic origin, marital status, and number of children (if any). This portrait is further complicated by changes to the military institution itself across time. In the 20th century alone, the U.S. military experienced periods of build-up as well as periods of personnel drawdowns, both popular and unpopular wars, segregation and subsequent desegregation (1948), periods of conscription (World War I, World War II, and 1948 to 1973), and several anomalous events, including a military participation rate of 12 percent during World War II, unmatched in U.S. history, before or since. Thus, there is no single "military family," just as there is no monolithic "civilian family."

Service members serve the needs of a demanding and unusual institution. On the one hand, the families of service members pass through phases familiar to any sociologist of the family: mate selection, marriage, parenting, competing career demands, divorce, internal conflict and perhaps even violence within the family, and retirement planning. On the other hand, these phases are shaped by the unique features of the military institution, among the most intrusive of which are the following: (a) Members of the military are subject to an additional set of laws known as the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ). These laws are stringent and socially conservative. For example, adultery and homosexuality are both criminal acts according to UCMJ. In practice, the laws of UCMJ pertaining to family dynamics are selectively enforced. For example, the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy is an attempt to regularize selective enforcement of the legal prohibition on homosexuality. Although only the service member is subject to UCMJ, his or her entire family is often forced to conform to its mandates by extension. (b) Service members are required to be available to the military at all times, and for whatever duty, however inconvenient, unpleasant, or hazardous. The family must adapt to this reality, which often translates into prolonged separations, frequent relocations,

disruptions to the career of the spouse not serving in the military, school system irregularity for the children, the risk of death or disability to the main provider of the family, and general uncertainty about the future. On a more positive note, the military provides its members and their families with a social welfare net unparalleled in the civilian sector, except perhaps in some religious orders. This safety net consists of such substantial benefits as job security, housing and food subsidies, free medical care, educational benefits, low-cost life insurance, and subsidized retirement plans. Given these distinctive features of military life, it is not surprising that the demographics and trends of military families sometimes differ dramatically from those that characterize their civilian counterparts. This entry describes military families, their benefits, and the challenges they face in contemporary U.S. society.

Characteristics of the Military Family

Marriage

The military provides significant support for single-earner families. Military compensation is to some extent need-based. Although the base salary for enlisted soldiers is low, soldiers with families to support are allocated tax-free housing awards. The amount of the award is based on the zip code in which the soldier is stationed, thus reflecting the actual cost of living in a given area. Similarly, service members with families are provided with allowances for food, and are entitled to free medical care and subsidized childcare. The military also pays service members a moving allowance when relocation is ordered. Again, this amount is based entirely on need: the formula is based on the weight of the family's possessions and the number of miles to be traveled. A by-product of this need-based system of compensation is that the married soldier receives pay in partially prebudgeted form, with money set aside for housing and groceries separately. In this same spirit, senior enlisted personnel are expected to ensure that junior enlisted soldiers provide for their families. For example, sergeants often help new recruits find affordable off-post housing. This house hunting is often carried out in uniform, during the course of a normal day of duty, and often by order of a still-higher

ranked enlisted soldier. Two qualifications should be made here: (1) This family-protective policy is a recent innovation. The military was a conscript force from 1948 to 1973, during which time the normal soldier, in demographic terms, was a young, unattached male serving only for a short time. Family-friendly policy in the military has improved continuously since the advent of the all-volunteer force in 1973, often in response to crises in housing or education. (2) The family-friendly policies of the military are based on a narrow definition of family. No material provisions are made for same-sex couples or heterosexual cohabitators. These policies are thus favorable only to heterosexual married couples and implicitly assume a traditional breadwinner-homemaker model.

The reinforcement of the traditional family model extends beyond financial compensation. Some of the hardships inherent to military life are detrimental to the career of the nonmilitary spouse. Many military posts are located in otherwise remote areas where there may be a lack of employment opportunities. Frequent relocations may prevent the spouse from cultivating the social network and institutional affiliation essential to many high-paying or prestigious jobs. Lastly, the frequent and prolonged absences of the military spouse require that the nonmilitary spouse be prepared at all times to take full responsibility for childcare, a demand incompatible with a high-pressure career. The nonmilitary spouse is effectively assigned a supporting role, an assignment that, according to the little research done in this area, some male spouses find particularly difficult. Perhaps not coincidentally, male service members are more likely to be married than are female service members. In 2002, 42 percent of enlisted women and half of all women officers were married, whereas half of all enlisted men and 71 percent of male officers were married. A contributing factor to this disparity is that men are more likely than women to serve for prolonged periods, and the likelihood of being married increases with seniority. In contrast with the dual-working civilian family norm, the gendered breadwinner-homemaker family model is more common in the military because of such institutional structures. An important exception is the joint-military family (roughly 1 in 10 military marriages), and these marriages are far less likely to have children. The

military's structural conditions and lack of support for cohabitation thus lead to high marriage rates at younger than average ages, even though mate selection is impeded (for men) because of the gender imbalance in the military and strict rules that prohibit romantic relations between service members of different ranks.

Children and Parenting

Service members tend to have children earlier in the life course in comparison with civilians. Many recruits marry and have children before the end of their first term of enlistment. Because of lack of seniority in the military, their pay is low, which is compounded by the fact that they have little experience with budgeting at this point in their lives. As a result, even though they receive some important financial subsidies from the military, they often experience financial difficulties.

Military personnel are usually required to relocate every few years, often to assignments abroad. This policy has both negative and positive consequences for the children of military families (who often refer to themselves as "military brats"). Military children benefit from well-funded Department of Defense schools and living abroad provides the opportunity for second-language acquisition. On the other hand, this distinctive lifestyle can have negative effects on a child's development. Frequent relocations, for example, interrupt the social and educational developmental process for some military children.

Domestic Problems

"The family," Richard Gelles and Murray Strauss wrote, "[is] our most violent institution with the exception of the military in time of war." As noted earlier, many institutional, legal, and economic forces in the military isolate the nonmilitary spouse and ensure her (in most cases) dependence on the service member. Further, the military is an institution where young men (in most cases) are taught to solve problems through aggression and violence. The military invests heavily in domestic violence-prevention programs. Its counterpart to the civilian Child Protective Services is particularly well funded. Families also have much less of a right to privacy than their civilian counterparts, which

facilitates aggressive intervention by social services as well as by superior officers. It is, however, unknown whether the military's additional safeguards against domestic violence compensate for the additional risk factors inherent to military life. Although some studies conclude that domestic abuse is more widespread in the military than in the civilian sector, other studies have come to the opposite conclusion.

Divorce

The divorce rate in the United States increases after war. After World War II, there was a dramatic and unprecedented surge in the divorce rate. By 1950, the rate had subsided to levels approximately equal to that of the immediate prewar period. The rate of divorce after World War II was not equaled again until the 1970s and the advent of widespread female employment and no-fault divorce. Does service in the military increase likelihood of divorce? It is difficult to compare military and civilian divorce rates for several reasons. Approximately a third of new enlistees fail to complete their first term of service, and of those who do, most do not reenlist for a second term. Thus, junior enlisted personnel may separate from the service (just) before divorcing. Nevertheless, some (inconclusive) evidence suggests that the rate of divorce might be lower in the military than in the civilian sector. After all, the military provides legal, social, and economic support for marriage in a way unmatched in the civilian sector. In addition, no conclusive evidence supports the hypothesis that frequent deployments adversely affect marital outcomes, although deployments involving combat are linked to a higher likelihood of divorce.

In sum, available evidence suggests that the experience of combat generally has a negative impact on military families; however, the military attempts to counteract this with policies that both promote and protect the family. Most military service takes place during times of peace, so families appear to benefit overall from such compensatory policies.

Fictive Kinship in the Military

There are concepts of family operative in the military that do not meet the U.S. Census criteria for

"family" (individuals related by birth, marriage, or adoption). Some family ties are illegal or unrecognized. As noted earlier, cohabitators in the military receive no support or recognition, and same-sex couples are in violation of military law. On the other hand, there exist institutionally supported family-type relationships between otherwise unrelated soldiers. Just as families are power systems with more or less clearly defined roles, so is the military, with many of the same consequences, both good and bad. Military sociologists have carefully studied the role of male bonding as it relates to combat motivation. The consensus among military sociologists after World War II was that soldiers fought not for ideology but, rather, for their buddies. Military authority, taking the lessons of sociology to heart, has now in effect mandated brotherhood among soldiers at the level of the small unit. This is particularly prevalent in combat units where female soldiers are excluded. This mandate is carried out through the creation of "buddy teams" and through sustained and intense rhetoric. Similarly, the commander of a unit often uses the language of a distant and authoritarian father. The concept of family is thus overlaid on the rigid hierarchy of military life.

Daniel Burland and Jennifer Hikes Lundquist

See also Fictive Kinship; Job Stress, Relationship Effects; Work-Family Conflict; Work-Family Spillover; Workplace Relationships

Further Readings

- Ender, M. G. (2002). *Military brats and other global nomads: Growing up in organization families*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Gelles, R. J., & Straus, M. A. (1985). *Intimate violence*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Hunter, E. J. (1982). *Families under the flag: A review of military family literature*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- MacLean, A., & Elder, G. H., Jr. (2007). Military service in the life course. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 33, 175-196.
- Martin, J. A., Rosen, L. N., & Sparacino, L. R. (2000). *The military family: A practice guide for human service providers*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Segal, D. R., & Segal, M. W. (2004). *America's military population*. Population Bulletin 59: 4. Washington, DC: Population Reference Bureau.