"The Best Years of Our Lives": Military Service and Family Relationships – A Life Course Perspective

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Our title makes reference to the classic 1946 film, a dramatization of veteran families, life course, and historical moment. It demonstrates a persistent tendency of popular culture to view veteran readjustment as a social problem, and to view veterans and their families as a vulnerable population. The historical moment of the film is the massive demobilization that followed World War Two. It focuses on the return of three different veterans to the same hometown. Family ties, old or new, ultimately save them from various self-destructive tendencies, such as self-pity, escapism, and hopelessness.

The pairing of this problem (homecoming) with its "natural" solution (family) was prefigured in Sociology. Willard W. Waller's *The Veteran Comes Back* (1944) was a contemporary best seller, and it warned that if veterans are not carefully reintegrated into society, they might become a threat to it. Waller's advocacy emphasized the reintegration of the veteran into the stabilizing institution of the family. The *Best Years of Our Lives* is a faithful echo of Waller, claiming for its own not only the immediacy of "common sense" but also the authority of science. Waller believed that no effort should be spared in reintegrating the veteran back into the stable and stabilizing institution of family. Our intent is to understand not only this process of homecoming but the possibly more current and relevant issue of how the military family as a whole is "reintegrated“ back into society.

We use the phrase "Veteran Family" to refer to any family that includes at least one member who has served in the armed forces. We readily acknowledge the diversity of
ethnicities, orientations, socioeconomic backgrounds, and family structures encompassed by the word "family." We also acknowledge the immense breadth of experiences that all count as "service in the military." Further, we realize the fundamental differences among families formed before, during, or after the qualifying member's military service. We thus concede from the outset that there is no such thing as a "Veteran Family," just as there can be no monolithic "Military Family" nor "Civilian Family."

Yet there are consistent and significant trends among veteran families, even despite their enormous diversity, that signal the importance of designating the veteran family as a subfield of study in its own right. Despite the small body of literature on families associated with the military, our analysis of the extant field uncovers several preliminary themes that we will detail in greater depth later in this chapter. We conclude that the projected long-term impact of military service on families is generally positive, particularly for ethnic families who might otherwise have had less access to socioeconomic opportunity. We further note that any such advantage of military service for families may operate more strongly for children than for spouses. This has varied depending on era, nature of service, and degree of familial exposure to service, of course, but can generally be said to be true. The one major exception to this truth is the more rare case of combat exposure. Combat veterans experience significantly negative impacts on long-term wellbeing that reverberates through the family life course.

A review of the literature makes it clear that, in terms of familial impacts, there are two primary types of military families: those that "do time" in the military alongside the soldier and thus are embedded in the institutional context, and those that form afterward, experiencing the military vicariously through the veteran family member. Our review points to the importance of the veteran family as filtered through the experience of children, who, as actors in the early
developmental stages of their life course may be the most likely to embody the long term influence of the military industrial apparatus. But, ultimately, our chapter raises more questions than can be currently answered about Veteran Families, pointing to a largely unexplored field of life course sociology that has many insights to offer.

While one of the chief tasks of this paper is to analyze the work that has been done so far in this area, this paper is not a traditional literature review. A traditional approach might consist of two parts: a survey and analysis of the extant literature as well as suggestions for further study. The nature of the concept "Veteran Family," its vastness and fluidity, combined with the fact that relatively few scholars have chosen to specialize in the study of this substantive field puts a limit on the utility of such a traditional approach. In a word, there is a regrettable mismatch between resources and task that has resulted in the field not being covered in any way approaching its entirety. It is a substantive field that exists at the intersection of Military Sociology, a famously understaffed specialty within Sociology, and Sociology of the Family, a sub-field so large and influential within the discipline that it determines in large part what Sociology means in the public imagination. "Sociology of the Family," by whatever name, is a staple course offering of most Sociology Departments. In contrast, "Military Sociology" is clearly only a specialty course. It is a lopsided Venn diagram that connects the two, and there are relatively few scholars who have chosen to make a career in the narrow connective space that joins a niche specialty to its larger counterpart. Moreover, among scholars of the military family, fewer still specialize in the Veteran Family.

It is in acknowledgement of both the substantive and institutional peculiarities of the field that we undertake a literature review of a less traditional nature, in two parts. First, we ask what
the field would look like if it were thoroughly covered. In this section, we propose a taxonomy that identifies all the potential areas for study within the subfield of the Veteran Family. How vast is the field? What are its logical parameters? In part two, we ask what the scholarly subfield actually does look like. Where has the scholarly attention been focused so far? Starting from the principle that analysis always points both ways, we ask what the mismatch between the potential area for study of the Veteran Family, on the one hand, and the area that has so far been studied on the other tells us both about the substantive field as well as about the logic and ethical principles that have underpinned our approach to the subject.

The Basic Parameters of the Substantive Field

Temporal Connection

The key variable tested by *The Best Years of Our Lives* is that of the moment of family inception relative to the period of service of the qualifying member of the veteran family: one veteran is married before the war; the next, during; and the third, after. While the film addresses the professional, psychological, and even physical difficulties of homecoming, its emphasis is on family. The film is sophisticated in that it takes into account class differences between veterans, but it is mainly concerned with how the veteran's family is connected to the military through the veteran. The depth of this connection is measured in a way that will be familiar to any sociologist concerned with life course sequencing theory. What, the film asks, did military service replace in the life of the veteran? Is the veteran returning home to children who now scarcely recognize him? Did the veteran spend his marrying years in the service? The veterans are returning from war not just to civilian life but also to family life. The "common sense"
assumption is that military service is a disruption in the lives of service members that negatively affects their family ties.

By definition, all veterans were once uniformed service members; similarly, many veteran families were once military families. What happens to a veteran is influenced by what happened to that veteran when he or she was still in uniform. Did the veteran experience combat? Was he or she deployed? Did he or she sustain wounds? Did these wounds result in permanent damage that requires ongoing medical care? It makes sense to think of veteran families in a similar way, as ex-military families. The military subjects its dependent families to particularly strong pressures, both planned and unplanned. A partial list of such pressures includes defining and regulating the family through the imposition and enforcement of socially conservative family law, protecting and providing for this family through a generous social welfare system that includes such substantial benefits as access to Department of Defense schools, tax-free housing and food subsidies, and free health care, excluding non-normative families entirely both from regulation (apart from prohibiting outright the existence of such families) as well as from the system of benefits offered to married heterosexual couples and their children, and moving families on average every three years (Segal and Segal 2004: 7). Obviously such pressures will shape both family structure as well as family dynamics. After adapting to the intrusive regulation and generous (but contingent) provision of the military, how does a family reintegrate into civilian society after the benefits and regulation suddenly cease? This process of adaptation and subsequent reintegration, however difficult, is to be expected, but an important minority of veteran families will experience trauma on a greater scale. This trauma might consist of the disability or death of the service member, an event that usually entails, among other things, receipt of sustained and contingent benefits from the Department of Defense
or its proxy the Veterans Administration. A veteran family is created in most cases by the
demilitarization of a military family, but this demilitarization is rarely total.

*Variation by Type of Military Service*

Not all military service is alike. Military service varies in the following ways: longevity, class, rank, function, activity, and volition. It is not our intention to perform a survey of the military population here. It has been done expertly elsewhere (Segal and Segal 2004). It is perhaps enough to note in passing that the demands that might be placed upon service members vary immensely according to the qualities of the incoming recruit, the contractual obligation of the recruit, historical moment, and dumb luck. A term of service might be relatively uneventful or characterized by repeated deployments to a war or to various wars. Officers and enlisted perform radically different roles in the same institution, often side-by-side. The military is large enough to need both scout-snipers and dental hygienists. The returning veteran brings their family both harm and benefits accrued during military service, and the contents of this package of good and bad will vary dramatically according to the nature of the service of that veteran.

Volition as a characteristic of military service is worthy of special mention. Not all soldiers are volunteers. Sometimes this is quite obvious: in the 20th Century, conscription was in effect during World Wars I and II as well as from 1948--1973. On the other hand, selective implementation, exemptions granted, outright fraud, "volunteering" in anticipation of being drafted, and even genuine volunteers characterized this supposedly simple "blanket" policy. Arguably, the role of volition in filling the ranks of the military has become more rather than less complicated since the end of "universal" conscription. In the course of the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, we have witnessed the mobilization of reserves, the implementation of both targeted as well as more generalized "stop-loss" policies, involuntary Individual Ready Reserve
(IRR) recalls, and holds on retirements. Certainly new enlistees agreed to be subject to these emergency policies; this agreement is a standard part of a service contract. Yet it is undeniable that veterans recalled to duty after already having served a complete term of active duty service probably return for this additional term with less willingness than they initially brought to the military. The high rate of IRR no-shows attests to this fact. The importance of volition for the Veteran Family is that it is paramount to the frequency, duration, and often the meaning of the separation of the service member from his or her family.

To emphasize this point, we begin by calling attention to the fact that the standing military of the United States has never been enough by itself to wage prolonged, major war and under such circumstances, it makes claims on the civilian or near-civilian population. It is augmented by conscription, involuntary retention or recall of active duty soldiers, activation of the Guard or Reserves, or some combination of these three means. It is well known that the military expanded by the use of conscription during the Vietnam War, leaving the Reserves and the Guard stateside. In this way, the military was able to make fullest use of its historically preferred demographic: young males. The military reached these men early in their life stage, usually before marriage, and, as a result, the post-war divorce rate among Vietnam veterans is lower than among their older (and thus more likely to be married) World War II counterparts (Pavalko and Elder 1990). Conscription was, of course, used extensively during World War II as well, but the high military participation rate of this conflict required of the military that it draft from an older, less desirable, segment of the civilian population. The military is currently making great use of its Guard and reserve components, and it remains to be seen how this extensive use will affect the families of these reservists, who are, on average, older than their active duty counterparts and accordingly more heavily invested in an ongoing civilian life
course. The military is designed to accommodate deployments not as interruptions but as career milestones; however, the civilian world can be unforgiving of an unplanned and open-ended career interruption (this topic of the impact of military service on normative life course sequencing is treated in much greater detail in the chapter by Ryan Kelty and David R. Segal).

How is the optimal life course of education, entry into the labor force, and subsequent marriage (Call and Teachman, 1991, Hogan 1978) disrupted for these part-time soldiers and their families when “one weekend a month” becomes an 18-month deployment?

Variation by Demographic Profile

Families, whether civilian, military, or veteran, vary by race, class, ethnicity, geographical origin, marital status, and orientation. In all areas of life, outcomes correlate significantly though not perfectly with demographic traits. The study of Veteran Families is in large part the study of outcomes, so it follows that our academic interest in diversity is abiding. We do not find it necessary to survey the diversity of the military here, mostly because it has received thorough treatment in chapters two, three and four of this volume. Yet there are two salient points to be made in the context of military families. First, the military is not a cross-section of society. It is overwhelmingly male. Nor are race, regional origin, and class proportionally represented relative to the civilian population. Moreover, the nature of this mismatch has not been constant over time. Desegregation (1948) and the end of conscription (1973) are among the main policy changes that have affected the demographics of the military radically. Simply put, the military used to be much whiter and much more male, and not so long ago either.

The three heroes of The Best Years of Our Lives are all straight, white males. The directors and writers of the film presumably wanted to show "average" soldiers (though from a
variety of class backgrounds). Before 1948, the average soldier was straight, white, and male by law. The military was separated into "colored" (African American) and unmarked units. Women service members also served by law in a distinct, second-class, auxiliary military. It might be argued that the white male soldier remains the "normal" soldier today (for example, Kirby et al. 2000 or Gifford 2005), not by law but perhaps by habitus. The fact remains, however, that the institution of official segregation has been dismantled and that the demographics of the military have altered accordingly. This occasionally puts us in a difficult position. For the most part, early life course research is focused on "normal soldiers" (i.e. White, male). This is not racism or, more accurately, it is a reflection of racism before the fact, since it was inescapably true that normal soldiers were White and male, according to the customs of the time and by law, as noted above. In addition, sociologists who carried out secondary analysis were often confronted by the invisibility of demographically "marked" service members in available datasets. The historical comparison that a commitment to continuity demands is complicated by the fact that a "normal" soldier and his or her family of today is ever more dissimilar demographically from a "normal" soldier and his or her family of 1945.

Types of Lasting Effects of Military Service on Families

"We take care of our own," and "The needs of the Army [or Navy, etc.]": service members come to expect one or the other of these terms to be used by leadership whenever major policy decisions are announced and explained to the rank-and-file. Like many banal-sounding military clichés, they are in fact both rich in meaning as well as powerful in effect. They represent two powerful life-transforming logics in the life of the service member, subsequent veteran, and family of that veteran. The military does take "care of its own,"
providing medical care, life insurance, steady pay, housing, food, and regular promotion to its constituency. Some (but not all) veteran families continue to be "taken care of" by the military even after the qualifying member of the service has been discharged. These benefits include VA loans, the GI Bill, retirement pensions, vocational rehabilitation, disability pensions, medical care for service-related chronic health problems, and survivor's benefits. Similarly, "the needs of the Army" can weigh heavily on a family long after the formal term of service of the qualifying member has come to an end. Disability, mutilation, long-term health problems caused by exposure to radiation, carcinogenic chemicals, and experimental vaccines, post-traumatic stress disorder, and the "military tax" can all shape and even dominate the family structure, spousal obligations and life of a veteran.

"We take care of our own" and "The needs of the Army" thus represent positive and negative effects of military service on families, respectively; they are together the binary logic of the military "total institution": the one ends only where the other begins. It is certain that not all families experience the best of what the military has to offer. It is equally certain that not all families experience the worst effects of war and military service. The benefits received and harm endured by a military family during its term of service shape the subsequent reality of this family in the civilian world. A military family that is greatly harmed in the course of service (for example, through the death or disability of a family member) is likely to remain connected to the military (as the military comforts and compensates the aggrieved family). This family is thus less likely to reintegrate fully into civilian society. On the other hand, a military family that experiences an uneventful term of service is empowered to make a clean break with its military past.
The preceding discussion suggests that the study of Veteran Families might differ in a fundamental way from that of Military Families in two ways. First, there is a larger temporal perspective built into the study of the former: Veteran Families as such have potentially existed through multiple periods of a service member's life, and through major changes. Second, the military by necessity acts forcefully in shaping, controlling, and (some might add) protecting its constituent families. As a result, all Military Families are deeply affected by the fact of being military. In contrast, not all Veteran Families are affected by the fact of having once been connected to the military (in particular those that form following military service). On the one hand, some families emerge from the military relatively unscathed, and the military past of the family might survive only as a fond memory. On the other, some families suffer greatly for having been connected to the military, no matter how distantly, and thereafter remain subject in part to its controls by virtue of being obliged to engage with its powerful long term presence, vis-à-vis a demanding compensatory apparatus or through emotional or physical lasting effects. The study of Veteran Families is in large part the study of how and why families remain connected to the military experience after the service member’s formal separation.

The State of the Field and Future Research Directions

The literature on military and family focuses almost exclusively on current families in the military, not on veteran families. The existing veteran life course literature, on the other hand, is focused on the individual. The outcomes studied in both of these bodies of research, however, carry implications for veteran families even if they are not necessarily addressed by the authors. In the foregoing section we review relevant themes from these two separate literatures and assess
what, if applied to veteran families, they might predict for long-term family outcomes. We also point to the areas where more research is needed.

Temporal Connection and Family Formation

Current military families are more directly impacted by military service in the All Volunteer Force (AVF) than in previous eras. Prior to AVF, the average soldier was young and unattached, serving for a short term, hence the old adage “if the Army wanted you to have a wife it would have issued you one.” Thus, the most common impact on family was indirect, working through the veteran on family members who came into the picture after discharge. Today, the majority of the active duty force is married (MFRC 2000). Marriage is more prevalent and occurs at earlier life stages for military members than for civilian members (Lundquist 2004; Teachman 2007). In addition, half of service members have become parents, a transition which most likely took place during the first term of service (Burland and Lundquist 2009). This is because members are staying in the military longer than in the past and also because military members tend to get married and have children younger than in civilian society (Lundquist 2005). Both early marriage and childbearing are consequential for long-term marital stability and family stress. Families that form early in the life stage have higher rates of internal conflict and eventual dissolution. Understanding whether this relationship holds for veteran families by tracking their stability over time is an important question, since unlike other young civilians who marry or have children early, veterans often have comparatively higher socioeconomic status.

There is also evidence that overall completed family size is larger in the military than the national average (MFRC 2000). In fact, the AVF military population of dependents and spouses is increasingly dwarfing the population of soldiers in the military. As a result, more research is
needed on the processes by which military partners and dependent children are increasingly “doing time in the service” and what this means for their lives in the long term. Research by James Moody begins with the reasonable premise that the social costs of war are borne by a network that begins with the combatant, extends to the combatant’s family, and thence outward to the family’s close connections (2005). How these costs are diffused remains an unanswered question, but what seems certain is that the military family is the best first place to look for any porousness in the border between the military and civilian worlds. To the extent that military and civilian lives are linked, their linkage is most in evidence in the military family as well as, secondarily, in the veteran family. Studies suggest that the timing of the creation of this family-military linkage results in either harm or benefit to individual families in a patterned way. The evidence from the military life course literature which focuses on WWII is that the “redirection” benefit of military service had a greater impact on veterans who served at younger ages, before forming families and starting careers (Elder 1987; Elder et al 1993; Wright 2005). By implication, it may also be that families forming after service are more positively benefited than families that form before or during service. This family formation timing comparison has scarcely been studied and is something that merits further research.

Economic Costs and Benefits by Demographic Profile

As was alluded to in chapter six, one way in which some veteran families may benefit regardless of when their formation occurred is through the potentially elevated educational and earnings potential of former service members. Higher socioeconomic status has enormous implications for family well being, such as marital stability, lower stress, and increased intergenerational wealth and mobility (Edin 2000; Elder et al. 1992; White 1990). Generally, non-combat veterans
who come from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds are advantaged economically by service (MacLean and Elder 2007). This has been referred variously as the "bridging effect" and the "knifing off" effect and will be expanded upon in the next chapter that follows. This was particularly true for WWII-era veterans, and was largely driven by the G.I. Bill, which lifted significant numbers of families into the American middle class for the first time. The bill enabled an entire generation of men to go college for the first time, while also allowing many to purchase homes for the first time (Bound and Turner 2002; Martindale & Poston 1979; MacLean 2005). Benefits to the G.I. Bill for veterans were not strictly economic, but also psychological in nature. Mettler (2002) found that GI bill veterans had significantly increased civic and community involvement. While educational advancement is less uniformly characteristic of Vietnam and AVF eras of service (Teachman 2005, 2007), future earnings potential is still higher for veterans of disadvantaged ethnic and/or socioeconomic backgrounds from these more recent eras (Xie 1992; Angrist 1998; Cohany 1992). Recent research by Meredith A. Kleykamp has determined that those from disadvantaged classes who have college aspirations enlist at a higher than normal rate (2006). This research points out the currency of the perception among a significant segment of the poor that the military is a viable route to educational achievement and subsequent entry into the middle class. And, for African American men who served during Vietnam or AVF, violence and offending rates are lower (Bouffard 2005). This bridging effect of service also seems to translate into a higher likelihood of marrying for some African American veterans (Usdansky et al 2009), indicating that military service promotes family

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1 The evidence for improved future income earnings for men from less marginalized backgrounds is more mixed, but generally appears to be neutral (Angrist & Krueger 1994).
formation, even after exiting the service.  

It is important to mention that the military compensation package of benefits has a monetary value far exceeding the cash value of income that soldiers receive. In fact, cash pay and allowances make up only 48% of total compensation, which means that when total compensation for service personnel is figured in, they compare quite well to civilians, matching the top 80th percentile of civilians in compensation (DoD 2008). The soldier’s deferred benefits, such as retirement pension, for example, have important long term implications for economic wellbeing that are not often considered in the preceding analyses. Those veterans who serve twenty years in the service (granted, only about 15% of enlistees and 40% of officers) can retire from the military as early as their late thirties, securing a second civilian career while at the same time receiving an immediate and inflation-protected lifetime annuity from the service. This is an important area in which the socioeconomic studies of veterans and their families should be extended, especially in light of the foundering national social security system for civilians.

Overall, the implications of higher socioeconomic attainment for some veterans suggest that there should be a ripple effect for families through the life course. We might expect that disadvantaged and/or minority families are better off economically when the parent is a veteran. Therefore, important research questions should examine how the children of veterans compare to the children of nonveterans across a variety of important life indicators—educational attainment, earnings, wealth and family formation patterns for starters. Given the recently increased military presence of mothers, attention should also be given to whether these patterns vary by the gender of the parent in service, and if they are multiplied in the case of joint-service marriages.

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2 For female veterans the evidence is less sanguine. Although there is an earnings premium for women of the Vietnam service era, there is not from the AVF era (Prokos and Padavic 2000). In fact for white women there may be a penalty (Cooney et al 2003).
Outcomes for Marital Stability

The evidence for whether military service might be associated with greater long term marital stability is contradictory. Among current active duty members, most research shows that, contrary to popular thought, divorce rates are not elevated in the military. As with other trends, there appears to be a marital stability premium for soldiers from disadvantaged backgrounds who would otherwise have been more vulnerable to marital dissolution in the civilian world (Lundquist 2006; Teachman and Tedrow 2008). This advantage does not apparently persist into the life course beyond active duty status, however. But to the extent that veteran status also confers greater long term financial stability to these groups, one might expect that it would also translate into a protective effect for marriages in the long term. More research is needed into the later life stages of veteran marriages. The general trend seems to be that military service for men, even for those who experienced deployment, is neutrally associated with eventual divorce (Laufer et al. 1981; Angrist and Johnson 2000; Karney and Crown 2007). Some research suggests that women active-duty soldiers have higher divorce rates than men, however (Karney and Crown 2007; Lundquist 2005; Angrist and Johnson 2000). But unambiguously, combat experience uniformly impacts marriages and families negatively. Divorce rates are higher among both combat soldiers and veterans (Gimbel and Booth 1994; Ruger et al 2002; but for one exception see Call and Teachman 1996). And the bulk of qualitative research indicates that military families often experience high levels of conflict and stress after combat deployments occur (Karney and Crown 2007).

As the preceding chapter on veteran’s health made clear, soldiers who have seen combat are more prone to disability and emotional distress, such as post-traumatic stress disorder
(PTSD). These “hidden wounds” (Hendin & Haas 1984) are all factors that increase marital and family stress. The extent to which this will impact a large generation of families all depends, in part, on era and numbers of soldiers fighting in war zones. While combat soldiers have always been a minority compared to those serving in support roles, the changing nature of warfare in recent engagements has blurred the line between frontline soldiers and others. The rapid advancement of war zone transportation and medical technology means that more soldiers survive combat. Perhaps as a result, one in five recent veterans suffers from PTSD or depression (Tanielian and Jaycox 2008), which is linked with family conflict, violence and substance abuse (Hendrix and Anelli 1993; RAND Corp. 2008; Harkness 1993; Cosgrove et al 1995).

**Outcomes for Veteran Children**

The life course literature emphasizes how early life conditions often play a major role in shaping individual trajectories through life, although there is ample evidence suggesting that these effects can still be modified and negated by institutions and events later in life (Laub and Sampson 2003). Life events occurring during childhood can often have the most lasting and long term impacts on individuals. As chapter five makes clear, increasing numbers of children are born before or during the period of military service. Therefore, many are embedded with their families within the military institution rather than only experiencing the military's influence filtered through their parent in the years following after service. Thus, many children come into direct contact with this "total institution" (Goffman 1961) at a very young, impressionable age and can themselves be thought of, in many ways, as veteran children.

The most common image in the media and, indeed, in the popular imagination is the child waving a tearful goodbye to their parent as he or she is shipped out for deployment to a war-
zone. Parental deployment introduces stress into the family in three distinct stages: the anticipatory stress that comes upon first learning of an upcoming deployment, the absence of the parent while at war, and the reintegration of the parent back into their family roles, assuming he or she survives the experience. Reuben Hill (1949) documented how families coped with each of these transitional stages during World War II in his seminal work *Families Under Stress: Adjustment to the War Crisis of Separation and Reunion*. The longer term impact on children of having had a parent engaged in war has been less frequently considered. Some research has documented an intergenerational impact of combat trauma on children’s well being. For example, offspring of veterans with PTSD are more likely to suffer secondary traumatization (Cosgrove et al. 1995) and to exhibit behavioral problems even many years later (Jordan 1992). In addition, the chance of parental death is substantially elevated for military children. Loss and bereavement carries its own set of implications for long term child development and this is highly variable depending on the age of the child (Worden 1996).

Less devastating, but more universalistic in the child’s experience of military service is frequent parent absence due to deployment even during peacetime, as well as overall geographic instability. Children of parents deployed during the first Iraq war experienced more stress and depression than other military children, and this was most acute in younger children (the majority of children in the military are under 11) and boys (Jensen et al 1996). Military families also move often, at a rate of every 3 to 4 years, depending on the branch of service. Studies on civilian children show that children who relocate often suffer in school achievement (Pribesh 1999); however, the effects have been shown to be much more negligible for military children (Weber and Weber 2005; Marchant et al 1987). This may be because structures have been put in place by the military to mitigate potentially negative effects of frequent moves, which is
discussed in further detail in chapter ten. This brings to light an important aspect that gets considerably little sociological attention, and that is the potentially unique and positive effects for children who were directly exposed to the service, particularly those who lived on base and whose parents served for longer than just one term.

As with veterans who benefit most from service, the children who likely have the largest long term pay off to their parents' veteran status are minority children. The explicit racial integration of military bases means that many minority children who would otherwise be living in poor and disadvantaged neighborhoods are removed from such conditions (Crockett 2000). The life course literature has found that childhood living conditions have potentially long term impacts on health and well being (Kuh et al. 1997). Even off-base neighborhoods in cities and towns that host military bases are distinctively less segregated than non-military base cities (Farley and Frey 1994), and this is attributable to the military's historic policy of demanding racial integration in those off-base rental housing and businesses frequented by its personnel (Hershfield 1985).

The military's comprehensive and free healthcare system through the TRICARE system means that service member dependents have access to excellent and comprehensive preventative medical and dental care. In this type of environment, it is no surprise that infant mortality rates are lower among women soldiers and military spouses, mitigating even the long standing and little understood US racial disparity in preterm births and mortality (Lundquist et al. 2010; Barfield et al. 1996). It is estimated that 30-45% of junior enlisted members would have no access to public or employer-provided healthcare coverage had they been working in the civilian sector (DoD 2008). As the previous chapter discussed, this healthcare access continues even following military service for many military families, and this is a direct way that veteran status
potentially impacts the future wellbeing of families. For one, families of any service member who died during service receive life time health insurance from the DoD. Second, retired military families continue to receive free healthcare, and this is the case regardless of whether the veteran dies or divorces (until dependents marry or spouses remarry).

Importantly, and something that has all but been ignored by social scientists, is the early childhood exposure of white military children to neighbors and schoolmates of color. Perhaps as a consequence of the military’s racially integrated environment, African Americans make up a larger proportion of the military population than they do in the national population and interracial families form much more commonly in the military environment (Farley 1999; Jacobson and Heaton 2003). Therefore, racial majority groups come into more frequent, and more sustained contact with minority peers and superiors, a condition that predicts more inclusive attitudes of racial majorities toward racial “others” (Sigelman and Welch 1993; Amir 1969). There is little question that this degree of interracial integration, unheard of in most American civilian contexts, will have a long-term impact on children’s racial attitudes and beliefs.

The same is potentially true of children who have the opportunity to live abroad during part of their parent’s military service. Although international military bases can be relatively insular (this varies by country and era of service), deployed families are nevertheless exposed to significantly different cultural norms and languages for an extended period of time. The bicultural benefits and cognitive advantages of early exposure to language are significant (Armstrong and Rogers 1997). There has been some sociological study of the long-term effects of this phenomenon, which refers variously to military children as “third culture kids,” “transnational culture kids”, or “global nomads” (Useem 1990; Ender 1996, 2002). These studies are an important foundation, but they have not pursued specific developmental outcomes
and rely on self-identified veteran children. More systematic collection of data about this population is necessary.

Finally, an important way in which parents’ military service can have a direct impact on the long term development of their children is cases where military children grow up to pursue their own careers in the military. Studies have shown that the probability of enlisting and making a career out of military service is highly elevated among youth whose parents also served (Faris 1981, 1984; Kilburn & Klerman 1999). This relationship raises provocative questions about the linked biographies of parent and child across differing historical eras of military service. Little is known about how this process of intergenerational transfer from parent to child occurs. For example, is it merely a network diffusion effect (e.g. chapter 10 shows that military enlistments are also higher in geographical areas with a stronger military presence) or is it a direct consequence of parental influence and socialization? Important factors to consider are how this relationship may vary across gender of both parent and child and the ethnicity and social class origins of the family. Furthermore, how might the nature of the parent’s military experience mediate intergenerational transference of military employment? If the parent died in uniform, for instance, is the opposite type of transfer more likely to occur, for example a heightened likelihood of children joining war resistance movements? All of these topics are open questions for future research on inter-generational transmission of the military experience.

Outcomes for Veteran Spouses

Spouses of service personnel, however, may experience more negative effects as "veteran wives" than their children. For spouses, partnering with the veteran in the years following military service rather than during service may be optimal as regards longer term outcomes. Although frequent relocations are hard on children, the military system builds continuity into the
military school system in an attempt to compensate. Spouses, on the other hand, have no such continuity in their employment (or educational careers for that matter). As a result, military spouses find it difficult to maintain steady employment or to attain career mobility.

Many military bases are located in areas with few job opportunities for civilians (Booth et al 2000). On average, military spouses earn less and are more often unemployed and looking for work than civilian women (Hosek et al 2002; Payne et al 1992), as Amy Kate Bailey discusses in further detail in chapter ten of this volume. Unless spouses are also serving in the military (as in 10% of military marriages), the geographic structure of the military career necessarily de-prioritizes any spouse's career. Since the military is still majority male (86%), this means that military couples often find themselves replicating the traditional marriages of yesterday, with a higher incidence of stay at home mothers and working fathers. Evidence suggests that normative expectations for soldiers’ wives, particularly those married to officers, still retain a nontrivial degree of gender traditionalism from earlier eras.

While the military officially decreed in 1998 that officer promotion could no longer be based, in part, on the actions of his spouse, expectations for appropriate spousal roles still operate informally (Harrell 2001). Officer's wives are asked to perform a variety of uncompensated work, such as entertaining and providing social and support systems for the families of more junior personnel (Harrell 2001). Soldiers' wives of all ranks are generally expected to invest in their partners' career, being the primary caretaker of the children when their spouses are deployed and encouraged to participate in military culture integration classes and various military life support groups (Harrell 2000). And while the military's efforts to foster a sense of familial solidarity may help children feel more centered and integrated (for example, base schools mandate parental involvement and superiors often make personal visits to check in on
enlisted families in their units), military spouses may find such involvement to be invasive.

For these reasons, life course outcomes of veteran spouses compared to those of veteran children would be an important point of contrast for future research. As an "unseen member of the family" (Wertsch 1991), military authority subjects military families to a high degree of scrutiny, including, for example, intervention in instances of adultery and the aggressive intervention of social services (Burland and Lundquist 2009).

What does this suggest for military spouses in their later life stages? Economically, it means they are not building up the necessary human capital and job experience that would help to protect them in the event of divorce. Given that divorce affects one out of every two marriages, particularly among couples of lower educational attainment (86% of the military is enlisted, which requires only a high school degree to join), this is an important consideration for life course studies. Divorce is linked to a substantial reduction in women's economic wellbeing (Hoffman and Duncan 1988), and this extends to their children who are more often in their mother's custody. It also means that military spouses may feel trapped or overly dependent on their marriage and the military for their wellbeing. Implications for how this may impact the balance of interpersonal power in veteran families over the long term, as well as the consequences for women's self esteem development over the life course are important areas to be researched. Furthermore, the more recent role of male (non-service) spouses and the question of whether gender normative notions of spousal relations may interact differently with issues of career autonomy and power are a virtual lacuna in the literature.

There are also profound, often lifelong, consequences for the families of combat veterans who were disabled as a result of their military service. This falls most heavily on the military spouse. Just as the soldier’s spouse is unofficially relied upon by the DoD to support the
military’s aims, spouses of disabled veterans take on a major role where VA health services leaves off. A recent study found that the majorities of caregivers (usually a wife) spend about 10 hours a week caring for a wounded veteran for an average of 19 months, and, as a result, suffer significant economic penalties in lost time at work and in schooling (Christensen et al. 2009). Importantly, the study found that 43% of caregivers expected to be providing care for the longterm. The multiplying economic and emotional effects of intensive caregiving responsibilities carried out across the life course and possibly even into old age is a critical way in which military service quite literally becomes a lifelong obligation.

Our review of the literature suggests that Veteran Families present compelling initial evidence for furthering our understanding of the life course. Our review also uncovers many unanswered and unasked questions, particularly concerning non-traditional families. It is clear that the military offers substantial support to military families willing to adhere to the "traditional" married-with-children, breadwinner-homemaker model (Burland and Lundquist 2009), and as a result, this type of family is overrepresented in the military as compared to the civilian world. Even so, nontraditional families are present in the military, though they receive less support from the military as well as less scholarly attention. Is there a long term negative effect of veteran status for women and their families compared to male veteran families? Is it because they are more likely to be in dual-service marriages? Generally, how does the compounded effect of veteran status of two parents impact families in the long term? Another important question raised in chapter four that is rarely explored is how military status affects the life course of LGBTQ veterans, whose service presumably interrupts relationship formation.

The questions raised in this chapter also point to the need for new sources of data that
measure important markers of the former military experience on the family in the context of later life outcomes. Rather than asking individuals only about their own past military experience, surveys must cast a wider net, asking respondents about the military experience of their parents, and possibly even their siblings and children. Clearly, we need to know far more than only whether a family member was a veteran or not in order to gauge the full impact of what it means to be a "veteran family." Ideal measures would include his or her length and era of service, military rank and occupation, whether the military member served in a war, and whether he or she experienced combat personally. Survey questions must also attend to the family members' own exposures to the institution: did they experience the military directly as children or as spouses during the family member's military service? Or was their exposure indirect, taking place only after the family member had already left the service? In the former case, it is crucial to collect information on age and length of exposure, and whether and for how long they might have lived on base, attended military schools or lived abroad.

"We take care of our own," claims the military. We are right to test that claim. Since the military subjects demographically different populations to the same policies, we can and should document how all soldiers in the aggregate benefit or suffer from these policies as well as studying elsewhere how effects of policies differ by demographic populations. The contractual nature of these benefits means that they are all connected to sacrifice on the part of the recruit and his or her family. Who meets "the needs of the military"? Which groups sacrifice the most for the least benefit? This logic of complexity demonstrates our sociological commitment to understanding how various events and conditions affect different groups differently. While distinct population segments among Veteran Families remain unstudied, it is nonetheless a
significant contribution of the sociological sub-field of Veteran Families that it has brought the critical themes of diversity and variable outcomes to the military discourse of equality.

It is not just the recruit who enters into a contract with the military; the family of that recruit enters into a long-term relationship with the military as well. It is well established that military families (those that conform to the military's narrow and exclusionary definition of family) are shaped, supported, controlled, and protected by the institution they serve. So powerful is this connection between the military and the service member's family that the family does not necessarily "get out of the contract" even in the case of divorce from the veteran or the veteran's death. For example, the effects of a service member's serious injury (including PTSD) on his or her family are long-term. The military and its proxy, the Veterans Administration, attempt to regulate this relationship of give and take between family and military. The two currencies of the ongoing engagement are compensation (paid to the family -- "We take care of our own") and sacrifice (paid to the military by the family -- "the needs of the military").

Benefits paid to surviving family members of a fallen soldier constitute the most conspicuous exchange of benefits for sacrifice. The substantial benefits (usually hundreds of thousands of dollars, followed by a lifetime pension) ensure that the family of the fallen soldier will be connected to the military in a profound and lasting way. The civilian family will even be subject to ongoing regulation by the military, since the military requires that widows and widowers remain unmarried to receive full benefits. The families that have been most damaged by their connection to the military are eligible for the most generous post-service benefits but also subject to the greatest ongoing control. This is the deliberate policy of the military, and who could object to matching benefit to sacrifice? Yet the logic of reciprocity is not adequate to connect the complexity of the military to the complexity of family. Is a pension really adequate
compensation for the total loss of a needed family member?. Should the government be paying a widow or widower not to remarry? The logic of reciprocity requires that she continue to sacrifice in order to receive ongoing benefits. The generous package of benefits along with its attendant requirements defines the meaning both of the death of one young person as well as the life of another.

Veteran Families are families of which at least one member served in the military. There can be no Veteran Families without veterans. Yet once the connection between military and family is created, the veteran becomes expendable to the ongoing relationship between his or her family and the total institution he or she served. In fact, the disappearance of the veteran (through incapacitation or death) from family life may result in that family-military relationship being strengthened as the military steps in to fill the void created by the fallen soldier. In this light, can we accept Waller’s claim that the veteran must be reintegrated into the stable and stabilizing institution of family? Is reintegration into the family a prerequisite to reintegration into civilian society? We cannot accept Waller’s premise, because the evidence shows us that the family of the veteran is not a civilian space to which the veteran returns. Instead, it is a militarized space, subject to continued regulation by the total institution it supposedly left behind. The military refuses to relinquish all control over the Veteran Families for which it offers to provide so generously. Can Veteran Families ever be fully reintegrated into civilian society? Perhaps the more relevant question is: do they want to reintegrate back into a world that perhaps has less to offer them in terms of benefits than the military they are ostensibly leaving behind? The military has a hard time relinquishing control over the families it has had under its control, but Veteran Families seem to be anxious to maintain the connection themselves, even at the cost of a little freedom. The most famous public policy programs for veterans (the G.I. Bill.
the V.A loan, Vocational Rehabilitation, Disability Compensation) are all ostensibly designed to compensate the veteran fairly for losses incurred during service and to move that veteran quickly and efficiently on the path to normal civilian life. Yet somehow the complexity of life eludes the simple and confident logic of the military. Benefits do not always match perfectly with sacrifices made. Even after a family has formally separated from the service, it often remains stuck in a variety of long-term engagements with the military that influence the life course of veterans and their families in ways that cannot be predicted or controlled by military policy but certainly should be understood by sociology.

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