Parenting under fire

An ecological perspective on understanding child maltreatment in military families

Dr Gabriela Misca

CPsychol CSci AFBPsS FHEA
Background

• Children and adolescents of military parents are a diverse population around the globe
• Compared to the general population they face a range of unique stressors due to their particular family circumstance (Lemmon, and Stafford, 2014)
• An emerging body of research, primarily from the US, has established the need to address child abuse and neglect in the military family (Gibbs et al, 2007, 2008; Rentz et al., 2006, 2007)
• Features of military family life may act as risk factors for child maltreatment (Martin et al., 2007; Riggs and Riggs, 2010).
Outline

• Reporting on an on-going study
  • Development of the theoretical model
• What evidence is available to support the specificity assumption of incidence, risk and protective factors for child maltreatment in military families?
Theoretical perspectives

Cycle of deployment

• Deployment:
  • social isolation, lack of resources, inadequate monitoring and family disruption = risks associated with child maltreatment
    • by diminishing the “fitness to parent” of the stay-at-home parent (Riggs and Cusimano, 2014).
    • deployment = indirect risk for child maltreatment
    • moderated by the at-home parent’s physical, mental or emotional state following deployment of their partner/spouse (McFarlane, 2009).

• Reintegration
  • returning parent’s mental health risks such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depressions, injury and substance abuse (Gibbs et al, 2008).
Family violence

- The context of other forms of family violence
  - such as partner violence or a history of previous abuse pattern and/or experienced prior to the individual being enrolled in military service (Finley et al, 2010; Martin et al, 2007).
- If domestic violence is also an occurrence in the household
  - this may affect the parents’ mental states (depression, emotionally drained, distracted, low self confidence)
  - in turn can restrict how emotionally available each parent is to the child
  - subsequently may lead to child maltreatment (Dodd, 2009).
- Spousal abuse
  - has been linked to PTSD in returning veterans (Sherman et al., 2006; Teten et al., 2010)
  - significantly predicts child maltreatment in military families (Foster et al, 2010; Martin et al., 2007; Rentz et al, 2006).
Limitations of extant theoretical perspectives

- Resilience
  - Children can and do flourish in military families
- **Family attachment network model** (Riggs and Riggs, 2011)
  - identifying risk and protective factors for military families
  - BUT does not go beyond the parent-child attachment dyads
- Need for a holistic, child centered approach that takes into account factors beyond the individual and family levels
  - to capture the complexity of the phenomenon
  - and thus better inform prevention and intervention strategies
Methodological challenges

- Notoriously difficult to study
  - child abuse and neglect
  - military families/populations
- Underreporting
  - Augmented in military families?
- US research: the incidence of child maltreatment varied in different historical and war contexts
- PTSD in returning veteran parents - secondary traumatic stress induced in children (Seamore, 2012)
- Very limited research and evidence exploring child maltreatment issues in military families within the UK
- Are US findings transferable to UK context?
Questions

1. How extensive is child maltreatment thought to be in military families?
   • In light of potential issues of underreporting, what is the most successful methodological approach to evaluate its incidence?
   • To what extent and in what conditions such methods would be culturally transferable?
2. Is child maltreatment in military families different from non-military families?
   • And if so, what are the specific risks and protective factors that interplay in its occurrence?
   • With increasing numbers of women serving as active duty military, how issues of gender may interact and change the dynamics of child maltreatment in military families?
Questions – contd.

3. In light of the above, what is the potential to share learning regarding best practice in supporting military families between US and UK?

Should interventions (prevention strategies, treatment / therapy options) be specifically tailored for military families?
An ecological perspective

• Comprehensive in its nature, the ecological model of child maltreatment in military families will map the risk and protective factors at several hierarchical systems:
  • micro-, meso-, exo-, macro- and chrono- systems that also interrelate to influence the outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 2005)
• An insightful child centered approach that takes into account factors beyond the individual and family levels (Misca and Smith, 2013)
Examples:

- **Micro**-level: parental factors
  - i.e: stay-at-home parent’s stress due to the spouse’s deployment or the mental health of the returning parent post-deployment

- **Meso**-level – interactions between parents
  - i.e: spousal abuse and domestic violence

- **Exo**-system level – i.e: the “military culture”
  - family and community supports that may act as risk or protective factors for child maltreatment.
  - different military forces and how this might impact on military families.

- **Macro**-system: societal contextual factors
  - E.g.: popular attitudes toward military and how these may fluctuate over time

- **Chrono**-system: socio-historical circumstances such as the historical and war contexts,
  - time dimension in the cycle of deployment
  - multigenerational abuse pattern experienced prior to service.
Summary

• An ecological module of child maltreatment in military families:
  • Map risk and protective factors for child maltreatment in military families
  • Offer a child centred comprehensive approach
  • Guide intervention and prevention strategies
  • Culturally transferable?