

Parenting under fire

An ecological perspective on understanding
child maltreatment in military families

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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).

Theoretical perspectives – contd.

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?

Questions – contd.

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.

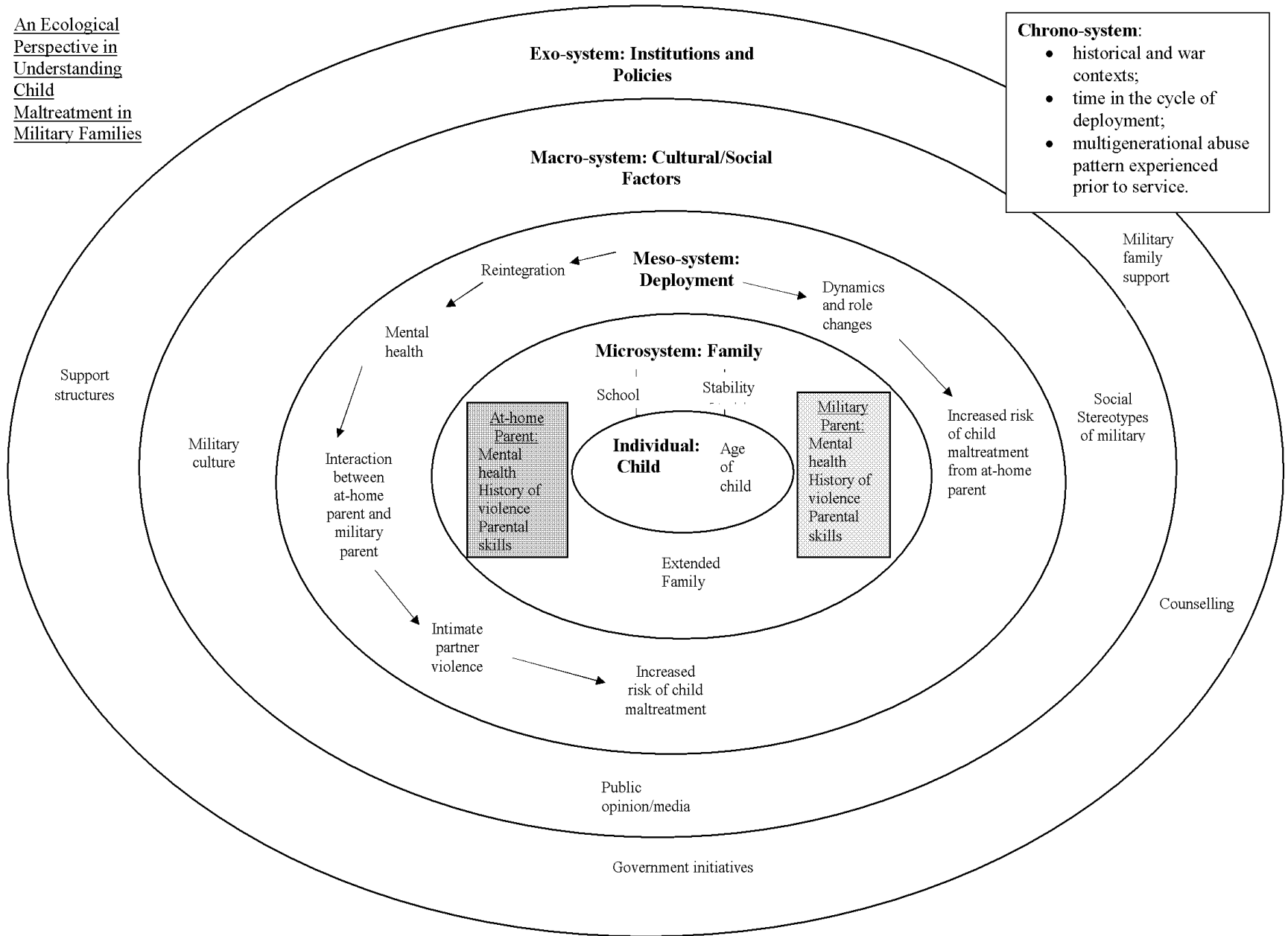
3. In light of the above, what is the potential to share learning regarding best practice in supporting military families between US and UK?

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)

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Examples:

- **Micro**-level: parental factors
 - ie: 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 – ie: 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 preventions strategies
 - Culturally transferable?



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