

MILITARY CULTURE AND THE HOME: PAYING ATTENTION TO THE IMPACTS ON THE FAMILY

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Traditionally, the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) is seen as a demanding organization, requiring its members to serve Canada before themselves (Government of Canada, 2022). The expectations of institutional identification, devotion, and loyalty that personnel are socialized to meet impact all aspects of life, leading researchers to refer to the military as a “greedy institution” (Segal, 1986). It is well documented that family plays an essential role in the readiness and effectiveness of military members (e.g., DeGraff et al., 2016; Ganz et al., 2021; O’Neal et al., 2020). However, there are also documented negative impacts of military service on family functioning, including decreased family cohesion, disproportionate household and childcare management, and an increased emotional burden on non-serving partners (Huffman et al., 2017; O’Neal & Lavner, 2021; Oudi et al., 2023). While research has investigated family impacts as a by-product of military-related duties (e.g., deployments, relocations, perceived danger), there is significantly less known about how military culture and ethos directly impact families, particularly children growing up with a parent in the military. An understanding of the impacts of military culture on children in military families will allow the CAF to better comprehend the insidious elements of military culture that need to be transformed. Therefore, this paper connects existing literature on military culture and military families in order to identify their impacts on children, and inform recommendations for research, policies, and programming.

Positionality

I approach my work by consciously merging two unique aspects of my identity. The first is my background as a child of a CAF Veteran, and the second is my occupation as a researcher whose work has primarily explored moral injuries and military families. These aspects of identity allow me to draw from my personal experiences as a foundation for exploring and conducting academic research. Through conscious, reflective practices, I engage with research grounded in the awareness that my own experiences are not the only experiences children of military members may have.

As a child in a military family, military culture often acted as the foundation for how I perceived and interacted with the world. It defined how emotions were expressed, how respect was demonstrated, and how order was maintained in my household. This culture was woven into the fabric of understanding in my family, since both my parents also had parents and grandparents who served. Unlike my civilian peers, I grew up with values shaped by military traditions. Service before self was necessitated and practiced in a multitude of ways, from stoically watching my father go to war, to packing a house to go to where the military decided would be our new home. I was raised to revere the uniform my father wore, behave in expected ways that were modelled for me, and respect a strict hierarchy. It is only through looking back on my childhood as a researcher that I have recognized the significance of military culture in my development.

Military culture

Military culture has been conceptualized as the ethos and attributions contributing to the common core values, beliefs, and behaviours within military organizations (Murray, 1999). The core values of loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honour, integrity, personal courage, and commitment identified by Ganz and colleagues (2021) are, at face value, aspirational traits; they are also synonymous with beliefs and behaviours such as adherence to rules, obligation to the institution, deference to the demands of others, and self-effacement. The warrior ethos, seen as vital to operational success, is also the barrier stopping members from asking for help. The collectivist identity that bonds comrades in arms also delineates the soldier from the parent, partner, or spouse. Military culture has been described as one which promotes pride, masculinity, competitiveness, partying, decisiveness, authoritarian approaches, hierarchy, and conformity (Callaghan, 2016; Jordan, 2007). As an actively constructed phenomenon, militarized ideology is expressed through hegemonic practices embodied by personnel at all stages of their careers.

Honour, personal courage, and duty to one's country constitute a trifecta of morals through which personnel can make sense of their actions. The construction of "selfless service" that military members are expected to adopt assists them in putting the needs of the nation and their comrades above their own (Ganz et al., 2021). While selfless service is associated with increasing operational effectiveness and bonds with other service members, it may be that family members perceive it as a barrier to emotional and meaningful connection. It has been particularly well documented that, post-deployment to potentially morally injurious missions, family functioning is impaired by challenges in communication, expression, and self-disclosure (Link & Palinkas, 2013; O'Neal et al., 2018), and these changes may be especially evident in a returning soldier's reduced parenting self-efficacy (Zelkowitz et al., 2023). This may be partly explained by the necessary changes in family structure that occur during prolonged separations.

Military culture often includes a problematic dyad of hegemonic displays: militarized masculinity and avoidance of mental health care. The military is often perceived as a hypermasculine institution, which is reflected within the broader culture. The social construction of an *ideal soldier* values gendered enactments of stoicism and violence (Wegner, 2021), often to the detriment of individual and family health. Aspects of militarized masculinity often trickle into the home through attitudes and externalized behaviours (Bauer & Giles, 2021), which may further permeate into children's attitudes and values.

Military culture constructs a mentality which sees failures (e.g., challenges during deployments, mental illness, physical limitations) as personal faults (Ganz et al., 2021). Described by MacKenzie and Wadham (2023) as a form of institutional gaslighting that camouflages legitimate concerns of military dysfunction, positioning instances of failure as individual outliers while simultaneously positioning successes as examples of institutional superiority creates a culture where personnel and their families have heightened resistance to the prospect of needing help.

The “tough it out” mentality can create vulnerabilities for serving members who may ignore or negate concerns to continue performing duties. This phenomenon has been termed a “culture of silence” (Tompkins et al., 2022, p. 411), where a shared social silencing of concerns, violations, and harm done within the military creates perpetually unsafe environments. While the CAF’s practice of meritocracy is seen as a way of increasing organizational achievement, it can be a “self-defeating illusion” (Zhang, 2024, p.3) that rewards the appearance of merit rather than genuine contributions. In an organization that exerts great demands on members and their families, it is particularly problematic to create environments that deter individuals from seeking mental health support. The direct impacts of this culture are demonstrated in the military members, who have been found to underutilize healthcare services, with identified barriers including fear of impact on their career, association of stigma, and mistrust in healthcare (Hom et al., 2017). However, these impacts are not limited to serving personnel. Military-connected children report similar perceived barriers to accessing health care (Becker et al., 2014), demonstrating the threads of military culture that extend throughout families. This is particularly problematic in light of studies which have shown children in military families have higher rates of mental health-related concerns (Acion et al., 2013; Cramm et al., 2019; Mahar et al., 2023; Milligan et al., 2013).

Military culture and the children

Childhood and adolescence are times of significant cognitive, physical, and social-emotional changes that influence development into adulthood. Family environments have been demonstrated to impact self-esteem (Downey, 2014; Krauss et al., 2020), use of microaggressions (Curran et al., 2023), academic success (Kiewra & Rom, 2020; Marjoribanks, 2005), interpersonal conflict (Larkin et al., 2011), resilience to trauma (Daniels & Bryan, 2021), and later life satisfaction (Ni et al., 2021). Research has demonstrated that military-

connected children experience increased adverse childhood experiences compared to civilian peers (Bommersbach et al., 2022; Hinojosa et al., 2023). While a number of stressors, including relocations and deployments, are used to explain this discrepancy, military culture often remains overlooked. The elements of military culture that negatively impact serving members, such as militarized masculinity (Bauer & Giles, 2021; Wegner, 2021), have the potential to trickle into the family and impact children in nuanced ways. Children have reported feeling that their parents' careers in the military created challenges, such as receiving inadequate attention or increased uncertainty or self-blame for their parents' difficulties, lasting into adulthood (McCormack et al., 2022). Furthermore, adult children of military members display insecure attachment styles at higher rates than civilian peers, which Freeman and colleagues (2024) found to be unrelated to the presence of deployments or relocation, indicating that there is something about military culture itself that influences children as they develop.

As many aspects of military culture are not outwardly observable or are misunderstood by outsiders, its role in children's lives is often overlooked. Even the parents of military children have been found to have a low understanding of the impacts of military service on children (Crow & Seybold, 2012). Military-related stressors, including relocation, prolonged separation from a parent, and increased awareness of risk to parents, have consistently been identified as a unique constellation of stressors for children in military families (Hill et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2023). However, little is understood about the interaction of military cultures and these stressors.

For children in military families, the impact of military culture influences multiple arenas. Canadian teachers have noted that they perceive children from military families as hesitant to develop and sustain friendships, particularly with civilian peers who may not understand the operational tempo of military life (Hill et al., 2022). Educational impacts may be most frequently noted in those children who experience frequent relocations, which necessitate children to adapt to new curriculums and expectations (Rowan-Legg, 2017)

or increase risks of communication breakdowns between educators and the family (Classen et al., 2019).

While there are many ways military culture impacts children outside of the home, there are also ways in which the culture may impact children within the domestic space. One example of this impact is mealtime experiences. A study conducted on US military personnel demonstrated that military members might change their eating behaviours as a result of exposure to militarized environments. Such changes may include eating meals quicker, enforcing strict regimens surrounding mealtimes, experiencing food insecurity, and engaging in unhealthy weight-related behaviours (e.g., restriction, “bulking,” purging), with many participants sharing that these behaviours continued after their military career (Ferrell et al., 2021). These impacts of military culture may then be expressed in children through disordered eating patterns or diagnosable eating disorders, which have been shown to be connected to a parent's relationship with food and body (González et al., 2021; Kontele et al., 2023). This risk is consistent with findings that children in military families appear to be at increased risk for eating disorders, with the prevalence rate rising by nearly 65% between 2016 and 2021 (Thompson et al., 2023).

Some literature has demonstrated that challenges associated with military upbringing may be especially prominent for military-connected children in marginalized groups. For example, Klein et al. (2023) found that youth with diverse gender expressions in military families had more adverse outcomes than their peers. This finding is echoed by De Pedro and Shim-Pelayo (2018), who found that LGBTQ+ military-connected children were more likely to use substances, including alcohol and cigarettes, than non-LGBTQ+ military-youth. It has been hypothesized that the hypermasculine and heteronormative nature of military culture leads youth in military families to a pattern of secrecy around sexual orientation and gender identity (Gyura & McCauley, 2016), which may not be addressed in primary care settings. This can be exacerbated by the disadvantage military families have within the Canadian healthcare system.

While serving members have access to military-specific healthcare providers, military families are relegated to the provincial civilian network. For families who frequently relocate, this has resulted in Canadian military-connected families being four times less likely to have a healthcare provider than civilian counterparts (Rowan-Legg, 2017) and treatment trajectories often being disrupted. These discrepancies are particularly concerning in light of findings that indicate children in military families take longer to be diagnosed with mental health conditions as a result of frequent relocations (Williamson et al., 2022). Civilian healthcare providers have identified several challenges that may arise with military members seeking treatment, including clashes in culture which manifest in fear of disrespecting or disobeying clinical judgements, disengagement from treatment rather than sharing different opinions, reduced comfort in help-seeking, and communication styles that are misaligned with civilian psychotherapy contexts (Treichler et al., 2023). Similarly, a study conducted with participants from nine countries in North America, Asia, Europe, and Latin America found that military spouses have reported difficulty in finding professionals who understand military cultural needs, resulting in barriers to care not reported by the general population (Lewy et al., 2014). While understudied, these challenges are likely shared by children being raised within the military culture. However, healthcare providers may be unaware of the reason behind the challenges. In light of this, it is vital that civilian healthcare professionals are provided with continuing education opportunities to develop military cultural competence, including awareness, sensitivity, knowledge, and skills (Tam-Seto et al., 2019). Additionally, educational opportunities must be created that challenge military culture when needed, rather than unconsciously reproduce it. The guidance of culturally sensitive healthcare providers may be able to serve as a catalyst for military members and their families to critically evaluate the norms of military culture, helping break down and transform the practices that seem ingrained in military and military-connected life.

Discussion

There is a tendency to believe that military culture is first introduced upon induction into the armed forces, and solidified in basic training. However, for those who have a history of family service, military culture forms the fabric of their upbringing. Using a military-sensitive life course perspective is vital to understanding the ways in which military culture is integral to the process of childhood development. Traditionally, life course perspectives in Western society use a model which highlights significant changes in developmental maturity (e.g., Piaget's stages of development) where the children's needs take precedence. However, in military families, childhood development is nested into the context of prolonged separations, frequent relocations, and heightened awareness of a parent's mortality. Childhood development becomes secondary to a child's need to react and respond to the continual environmental shift. For example, children may need to shift into positions of autonomy earlier than their civilian peers to keep the household running during deployments. Hooper and colleagues (2014) and Truhan (2015) demonstrated this phenomenon, showing that, during deployments, children are often given roles or responsibilities inappropriate to their developmental level through a process of parentification (Hooper et al., 2014; Truhan, 2015). Military culture may also contribute to ideological distortions, which heighten distress. For example, in military contexts, the wrong choice can mean life or death. However, for children, making the wrong choice is often an opportunity for learning or growth. In military families, there may be a tendency to view choices in black and white, leading to perfectionistic thinking patterns and increased anxiety.

Future directions

Understanding, challenging, and changing military culture necessitates examining all areas that the culture permeates. Future researchers will benefit from expanding research questions to include the direct experiences of children from military families, looking at life-course perspectives.

Qualitative research, in particular, may help illuminate the ways military culture is perceived and acted out by children throughout their development. A better understanding of how military culture is enacted by children in various domains, including schooling, personal health, and social networks, is also warranted. Furthermore, there is minimal research that directly explores the perspectives of children in military families, instead relying on parent or caregiver reports. Research that integrates the perspectives of children in military families at various ages and throughout differing military life stressors will help leverage policies that target relevant protective factors. Discrepancies between adult and child experiences (e.g., Crow & Seybold, 2013) highlight that knowledge of military-connected families fails to consider the direct and unique experiences of the children, therefore leading to potentially incomplete understandings.

Policy and programs should take into account the nuanced and insidious ways in which military culture impacts children in all domains. Parents may benefit from opportunities to explore military culture in the home through education or guidance developed by military family resource centers. Educators and health professionals, in particular, may benefit from opportunities to expand their knowledge of how children experience military culture in order to assist children from military families. Awareness of how military culture permeates the home and shifts normative childhood developments is an important competence to be added to civilian health care curriculum and continuing education programs to bridge the military-civilian divide (Canfield & Weiss, 2015; Ulrich & Freer, 2020). However, for these programs to be implemented, the CAF must prioritize the family unit as a place in which military culture flourishes. Particular attention should be given to children in military families with a marginalized identity, since marginalized identity and military culture are compounded in complex ways that are only partially understood.

Transforming military culture necessitates awareness of the vast array of ways that the culture permeates families. While previous literature has examined elements of military culture that could be transformed, including military masculinities, meritocracy, and attitudes toward health, there remains a lack of attention paid to how children directly experience the culture and the long-term impacts, which is troubling. Studies that have looked at children from military families often rely on parent or service providers' reported data, which may obscure the authentic ideological patterns that children experience. Accurate representations of how children experience the culture through a life course perspective are needed in order to understand, challenge, and transform military culture in a way that is not only impactful, but lasting.

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Author Bio



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Kathryn Reeves (She/Her) is currently completing her Master of Arts degree in Family Studies at Mount Saint Vincent University, in Halifax, NS, where she focuses on the experiences of children in military families. Kathryn's thesis research will explore the intergenerational impacts of military service related Moral Injury, and is supported by Research Nova Scotia (Scotia Scholars Master's Award), The Royal Canadian Legion/Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health (Royal Canadian Legion Masters Scholarship) and MSVU (Nova Scotia Research and Innovation Scholarship). As a child of a Veteran herself, Kathryn's research is inspired by the strength of families on the home front and the desire to amplify their voices to enact meaningful changes to military culture and lifestyle.