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Siblings of Military Servicemembers: A Qualitative Exploration of Individual and Family Systems Reactions

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Abstract

How does having a sibling in the military affect young adults? Despite increasing attention to the challenges faced by spouses and children of servicemembers, the siblings of servicemembers have been largely ignored. This qualitative investigation uses unstructured narratives to explore siblings' perceptions of changes in their lives and changes in the family of origin associated with having a family member enlist in the United States military. Thematic analyses revealed an acute period of conflict followed by reorganization, awareness of the parents' distress, changes in the emotional climate of the family, shifts in family roles, admiration for the military sibling, and increased meaning and purpose for the family following the servicemember's enlistment. Computer-assisted text analyses revealed both positive and negative emotional content associated with the siblings' military service. For professional psychologists who come into contact with siblings of servicemembers, it is important to recognize that military enlistment can have ripple effects and complicate other common individual and family stresses. More generally, it is important to provide siblings and the family of origin with information about what to expect during and after the servicemember's enlistment, especially since these families may lack support and contact from others going through similar transitions.

Keywords

siblings; military service; family stress; family conflict and reorganization

Many young adults who enlist in the United States military have siblings who are of similar age and developmental phase, although these siblings' pursuits of individuation may not involve military service. Although researchers and clinicians are paying increased attention to the toll of military service on families, discussions of the effects of such stress on family systems have not included siblings. In general, little is known about how siblings respond to normal but challenging family transitions, such as when a brother or sister departs from the family for college, employment opportunities, or other independent pursuits. Such transitions require adjustments and realignments in family roles, responsibilities, and relationships. Having a sibling enter the military, however, likely brings about unique challenges due to the dangers and hardships of war, and possible uncertainties about the servicemember's whereabouts. How can mental health professionals meet the needs of siblings of servicemembers? How do families of origin typically respond to a young adult's military service? This exploratory study investigates how young adults react to and experience having a sibling in the military as well as how they perceive reactions of other family members to provide guidance to practitioners who may be called upon to provide services to "newly military" families and siblings of servicemembers.

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Families with a Military Member

Several recent studies have examined how military members' spouses (e.g., Mansfeld, et al., 2010; Wright, Burrell, Schroeder, & Thomas, 2006) and children (e.g., Chandra, Lara-Cinisomo, Jaycox, et al., 2010; Flake, Davis, Johnson, & Middleton, 2009) cope with a family member's military service. Theories of stress spillover and ambiguous loss have informed much of the recent research on the adaptation of military families. Spillover (Repetti, 1989) occurs when stressors experienced within one family subsystem are translated into stresses in other subsystems. For example, spouses of servicemembers report high distress during transitions in the servicemember's work (e.g., during pre-deployment, deployment, and at reunion; Pincus, House, Christensen, & Adler, 2001); consequently, children in military families are more likely to exhibit problems if their civilian parent reports high levels of distress (Chandra et al., 2010; Flake et al., 2009). Within the family of origin, it is anticipated that parents' distress surrounding their military child's deployment may spill over to siblings of the military servicemember.

The theory of ambiguous loss (Boss, 2004) also provides insight into changes in families that may increase distress and potentiate spillover in military families. With military separations, in which the family member is physically absent but psychologically present, the family wrestles with ambiguity about the role of the absent family member. Adaptation to this ambiguity is hypothesized to result in uncertainty and renegotiation of roles and responsibilities of each family member. Research supports the occurrence of role shifts and boundary redefinition among families with a servicemember parent (Faber, Willerton, Clymer et al., 2008; Mmari, Roche, Sudhinaraset, & Blum, 2009). Yet, neither spillover nor ambiguous loss theories have been applied to the family of origin, despite the fact that parents and siblings are important sources of support for servicemembers, particularly the 46% of active duty servicemembers who are unmarried (2008 Demographics Profile of the Military Community). Little is known theoretically or empirically about family of origin reactions to servicemember enlistment.

Sibling Relationships in Early Adulthood

The sibling relationship typically is the most enduring family bond, and positive sibling relationships are linked to enhanced cognitive, emotional, moral, and psychosocial outcomes (Dunn, Brown, & Maguire, 1995; Howe & Ross, 1990). Children often identify siblings as sources of support when faced with family stress. However, in stressful family environments, sibling relationships may evidence spillover of negative affect and behavior, or may serve a buffering or compensatory function (for a review see Brody, 1998). Although warmth, conflict, and rivalry characterize sibling relationships in early adulthood, on average, sibling bonds become more positive and less conflictual during this period (Scharf, Shulman, & Avigad-Spitz, 2005). Yet, due to the transitions and role shifts during this period of development (Arnett, 2000), siblings may redefine their relationship as they identify their own career and family trajectories (Newman, 1991). Young adults' open-ended reports about their sibling relationships (Milevsky, Smoot, Leh, & Ruppe, 2005) suggest that geographic distance may affect the tone of sibling relationships; however, relationship quality prior to separation may moderate this effect. Whereas those with emotionally close relationships were unhappy with physical separation, those with detached or conflictual relationships described improvements with distance. Whether the effects of required separation due to one sibling's military service are similar to the effects of normative transitions in early adulthood (e.g., going off to college) is not yet understood.

A Qualitative Exploration of Siblings' Perspectives on Military Service

This exploration was designed to provide phenomenological background and to generate hypotheses about the impact on young adults of having a sibling in the military. We examined open-ended narratives for specific themes related to shifts in family roles, responsibilities, and relationships, and for changes in perceptions of the military member or the family. We also submitted the narratives to Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC; Pennebaker, Francis, & Booth, 2001) to examine the relative balance between positive and negative affect.

Description of Civilian and Military Siblings

Participants (N = 8; 4 females, 4 males) were undergraduate students recruited through the psychology research pool and on-campus announcements. Participants received course credit or a $30 gift card for participating. We sought individuals with a sibling who currently was serving or recently (within the prior two years) had served in the United States military. One additional participant completed the procedures, but was excluded because he also had recently served in the military. Participants ranged in age from 19–22 years (M = 20.96, SD = .98). Responses to self-report questionnaires indicate that the participating siblings were not depressed (Beck Depression Inventory II [Beck, 1996], M = 9.11, SD = 4.03; range = 5 to 15), and did not experience clinical levels of psychosocial symptoms (Symptom Checklist-90, Revised [Derogatis, 1992] Global Severity Index M = 52.0, SD = 41.6; range = 16 to 120). Participants were of diverse ethnic/racial backgrounds: four identified as Caucasian, one as Asian, one as Hispanic, one as African-American, and one as multi-ethnic (Asian and African-American). Relationships between participants and servicemembers varied somewhat; one reported on a step-brother; another on a cousin who lived with the participant's family for a number of years and shared a bedroom with the participant; and two had both a sibling and a parent with military service history. Seven participants were younger than their military sibling. The average age difference between siblings was 4.75 years (range = 1–12 years, SD = 3.6). Four participants were in two-parent biological families, three were in step-families, and one had recently divorced parents. Five participants had other siblings in addition to the servicemember: two had a younger sibling, one had an older sibling, and two had three or more siblings/stepsiblings.

Participants' military servicemember siblings were serving or had served in the Navy (n = 3), Marine Corps (n = 1), Army (n = 3), and National Guard (n = 1). Seven of the military siblings were male. At the time of the interview, four military siblings were stationed in the U.S., one was stationed abroad, two were deployed, and one had separated from the service. Military siblings had been serving for an average of 4.3 years (range = .7–10.5, SD = 3.4), and all were enlisted personnel. Four military siblings had experienced deployment, with a range of 1–4 deployments. Three military siblings had been exposed to combat.

Military Timeline and Narrative Procedures

Following informed consent procedures and a background questionnaire, the interviewer and participating sibling reviewed calendars covering the past 5 years to obtain a timeline of the military sibling's service. The interviewer identified date of initial enlistment; obtained the details of the military sibling's recent trainings and deployments; and recorded significant life events for the participant, the military sibling, and the family over the past five years. The interviewer also obtained information about the military sibling's duties and specialty. This interview was videotaped, as were the subsequent open-ended narratives.

Participants provided two 10-minute narratives: The first narrative was in response to: *"How has your life changed and what is your reaction to having a family member in the military?"*

The second addressed: *"What changes have you noticed in the lives of other family members and what are their reactions to having a family member in the military?"* The participant was assured that there were no right or wrong answers, and that individuals often report both positive and negative experiences. Each participant was encouraged to speak freely and to include any details he/she felt were relevant. The interviewer remained in the room for the narratives so that the participant could talk to a person. If the participant became silent for a period of time, the interviewer repeated the question or provided a prompt. Research assistants transcribed the narratives and the first author checked the transcripts. Analyses provided qualitative description of common conceptual themes in the narratives, and more objective quantitative analysis examined the relative emphasis on positive and negative emotional content.

Thematic Analyses of Narratives

We used qualitative thematic analysis methods (Boyatzis, 1998) to draw reliable themes from participants' narratives. As part of a constant comparative process, the authors conferred regularly throughout data collection about common elements of the narratives. As narratives were transcribed, they were also reviewed to extract themes. Following data collection, we constructed a preliminary set of themes, read the narratives for these preliminary themes and refined the themes. Two independent raters then coded narrative transcripts based on the final set of themes; only themes that could be reliably extracted were retained.

Five conceptual themes emerged from our coding of participants' narratives. In our discussion of these themes, we present direct quotes in order to illustrate the themes while remaining faithful to participants' unique expressions of their experiences. Additional quotes from the participants' narratives are available upon request from the authors.

Family conflict, reconciliation, and becoming a "support team."

Seven of the eight participants described conflict surrounding the sibling's initial decision to join the military, followed by reconciliation and acceptance of the decision. Siblings perceived conflict in a number of family subsystems. Conflict between the parents and the military member was often described as parents not anticipating or approving of the decision. Two narratives reflected sibling's perceptions that parents were totally unaware that the military member was planning to enlist until after the fact. For example, one participant said:

> He actually joined when my parents went to Vegas. And so, that was kind of a surprise…they weren't really supportive at all cause they told him before so many times like, "You don't need to join the military, just go to school, or do something else"…when he first joined they were really, really upset and my mom cried and everything, and it was this big ordeal…I don't know if most people are happy when people join the Navy but, in my family, it was not a happy thing.

One respondent noted that his parents were angry with him for supporting his sibling and keeping the enlistment a secret:

> We were at the dinner table and my step-brother told that he wanted to enlist in the military…it was a really bad argument during that dinner…about whether he should go in the army or not, and my parents were at first not approving…I was sort of actually helping my brother enlist in the military so that was one of the reasons why they were sort of mad at me too, because I was supporting him, and they got a little mad [at] that.

Another participant reported conflict between her mother and her military brother's new wife over limited phone time with military member. Another reported intergenerational conflict between her parents and grandparents, who reportedly had a mistaken assumption that the parents had encouraged the decision to enlist.

Interestingly, however, for most (6 of 7) of the conflict descriptions, siblings reported that conflict subsided within a relatively short timeframe and family members began to increase support for the military member. One participant noted:

> As time has gone on, it's been more accepting and more accepting, from everyone in my family. We just know that he's gone and we know that he's in the military and we know that he signed another contract… we're getting used to it….it's not as intense or dramatic as it was when he first signed up.

Some participants described their families as forming a team to support the new servicemember. Siblings perceived a culture of support and military spirit emerging within their families, who wore military apparel, sent care packages, and aided the servicemembers in making decisions related to their military careers. In the words of one participant:

> They [my parents] have become pro Navy…my dad's wearing all the Navy gear… my mom going through that whole empty nester's thing and sending all those care packages, and my grandparents, looking out for him.…I think our support means a lot to him. Not having a family supportive of his job would be probably the worst thing to him.

Another participating sibling described unification in support of the servicemember:

> I don't want to say the family dynamic changed, but I think that my family did rally together more so than it would have if we didn't have a member of our family in the military. Not to compare it, but I think that the way that people in the military work together and come together as a team that's kind of what our family did to rally behind my cousin and to support him in his choice that he made and to just be there 100% behind him for every decision that he made in life.

Loss and anxiety permeate the family system

Six participants described experiencing feelings of loss or anxiety within the family associated with the sibling's service. The departure of the servicemember was perceived to profoundly affect these families, and siblings reported particularly strong effects on their parents. One described her family's collective pain:

> All of us have this regret that we should have done something…that we could have prevented him from going….And pain that we feel like he wanted to leave because we were all so close…And…I guess we're kind of mad… he always talks about defending his country, but we're mad cause we don't really want him to, we want him for ourselves…I know it sounds bad, but we don't want him to do it. We want him to be home, safe, with us.

Some participants reported that the loss permeated everyday life such that parents changed the way they interacted in the world. These families appeared to isolate themselves from previous support systems such as friends and neighbors, and retreat from previously enjoyable activities. One participant reflected on his parents' isolation:

> My parents have changed without my brother…my mother is really upset. My dad too is obviously upset…and when I come home, I see they're really depressed, it's like—the friction between my parents, they love each other but when we are at dinner, it's quiet….My parents don't even hang out with other family members

> because, for some reason, they say that when they see other family members who are their same age hang out with their sons and daughters they get a little depressed because they feel like they're missing something. And even when I come home it still doesn't seem enough…they're obviously happy to see me but it's like missing one leg, you just need the other.

Almost all respondents seemed acutely aware of their parents'—particularly their mothers'—pain, sadness and worry about the military member's safety. One participant described her mother's expression of anxiety and grief over her brother's enlistment:

> My mom, she's obviously really upset so she's affected in a really bad way I guess you could say. She likes telling other people that her son's in the Navy and how proud she is…but she definitely, every time he calls, if she misses it, she'll cry… she's always scared that that phone call is the last.…She keeps my brother's room really, really clean and she doesn't really like us to be in there any more…kinda like he passed away or something… one time my little niece, she grabbed something of his…and my mom was like, "Don't touch that! Don't touch that!" and she got really upset and she tried to put it back in the same spot and just kept over-analyzing it so, I can see it really, really, really affects my mom…after he left, she cried for days. Every day she would just be crying, in her bed, so, I think that's one of the worst things that ever happened to her.

When asked to speak about their own reactions, the participants often spoke first about their parents. The spill-over of parents' pain was distressing to the participants, sometimes seemingly more than their own direct reactions. One participant recounted a particularly significant memory of his mother's distress from his sister's first deployment:

> That night I remember we were watching the news … they were showing…the first raids over Baghdad.…And then at the bottom of the screen it says "Prepare for loss of human life" and my mom just starts bawling and stuff like that. And I get so scared because I didn't think that would happen. I mean, what's going on? You know, like, why is it feeling this way? I was a lot more stressed. I was crying. For as young as I was, I was a lot more religious than I am now, so I would sit there and pray and everything like that. My mom would tell us to go pray with her. She would do the whole, "Hail Mary, full of grace" and all that stuff and….rosary beads and all. And that scared me.

Change in family roles

Four participants described shifting family roles due to their sibling's service. Notably, some respondents' described a sense of protectiveness in their roles with parents, with the goal of keeping them from being lonely or sad. Non-military youth who themselves had moved out of the family home reported going home to visit more often. For example, one participant said:

> Ever since my brother left halfway through my college career, I've been hanging out with my parents more, I take more flights or drive back…because I've got to support my parents otherwise they're going to be lonely.…what I did was to come and visit them more often so that I showed that my step-brother's not the only one you can worry about.

Another participant gave an example of role vacancy, in the loss of her brother as a companion to navigate their parents' marital separation:

> It was kind of difficult actually not having him here through the parent separation thing, so I've kind learned to be more independent without him…when my parents first said that they were separating, he would call and he'd find out how I'm doing,

> but that was really hard…him being so far away and having such limited communication.

Changes in family roles also related to the impact on younger siblings. In one family, the participant reported that her younger brother seemed to benefit from the opportunity to mature and focus more on school without the distractions from the servicemember. In her words:

> I think it was a good thing for my younger brother, that my older brother went away, kind of a chance to develop who he was as an individual rather than trying to follow in my older brother's footsteps.…my younger brother and I are both more academically minded.

However, in another family, the military servicemember was described as someone who monitored his younger siblings, and the role vacancy incurred by his absence was apparent:

> When my brother left, the bad part was he was actually one of the better role models. He was one of the ones who didn't go to jail and turn out bad…he had his head on straight and it just took a toll on my brothers when he left because they didn't really have anyone to set them straight that they could actually kind of fear…that hurt a lot of people in my family because he was the glue…and everyone was scared for him.

Finding meaning and greater purpose

Seven of the eight narratives contained descriptions of how the servicemember's enlistment provided an important role model of hard-work and self-sacrifice and inspire more discipline toward personal goals in the participant and in other family members; for example, one participant noted:

> I think that the military…indirectly changed me…looking up to him as a role model, seeing how responsible and mature his first year in the military made him, I think that kind of rubbed off on me and I definitely do believe that I did mature and grow up faster than some friends of mine…I want to have people look at me and say, "I want to be like that guy…you know, being productive" and stuff like that.

Another participant reflected, "One positive thing was he gave me motivation, and stuff.… I'll use his motivation as a way to climb the ranks and become a successful person in my career." Two participants reported a slight inclination to consider future military service. Another participant described increased sensitivity and empathy for other military families.

Other narratives revealed a "benefit-finding" as siblings noted that their families on the whole more intentionally appreciated what they have and acknowledged their love for one another. One participant stated:

> While my cousin was in the Armed Forces, I think that it taught not only me but a lot of …my family that we needed to come together and showed us really what life's all about and how things can go from being so good to so bad and how fortunate my cousin was that he actually was not injured, was not killed. He faced death many times and it just puts life into perspective. I think that it taught my family to love each other more than they already do and to be thankful for what we have and just cherish every little moment.

Benefits were also apparent for the servicemember, as three participants reported that enlistment in the military provided the servicemember with direction and stability. For example, one participant noted, "I'm happy that she's in the military because when I was

growing up…she was the sweet and kind sister that I always knew but she did get into a lot of trouble. I'm excited …that she has such a stable job."

Several respondents also noted positive changes in their parents and other family members —in some cases, more community service and, in others, more interpersonal connectedness. One participant stated, "My mom has done some more community service work for younger children because she feels that without a stepson, you have to take care of others." Others told similar stories of change and growth in other family members, for example:

> So I think that since my brother joined the military [my dad has] made more of an effort to talk to him…when my brother lived with us they didn't really talk that much…. I don't even think I've ever even seen my dad hug my brother. But since he's joined the Navy I know that he hugged my brother a lot…. And also my dad makes an effort to call him and write him and tell him how proud he is and things like that. So, he's made a lot more of an effort to get closer with him and be more bonded, which is good.

Two participants reported that other siblings had begun to pursue military careers as a result of their sibling's service.

Pre-enlistment relationship affects quality of post-enlistment relationships

Seven participants' narratives related anticipated and experienced changes in their relationships with their siblings; however, the changes were perceived to be affected by the quality of the relationship before the sibling's enlistment. Respondents who described close pre-enlistment relationships with their military sibling described particular pain and loneliness at the sibling's departure as well as sadness about real or potential loss of that closeness. Two participants with recently enlisted siblings described pain and longing associated with this change. One reflected:

> My step-brother's sort of like a best friend to me, not just a brother, because we always hang out, we both like the same stuff, watch the same movies, do the same sports…I've been much more depressed recently because I'm so lonely without my brother.

Two other participants, for whom the enlistment was a more distant event, described fears about the loss of close relationships with their brothers. One of these participants said:

> I did not want him to leave and I just thought I would never talk to him again and things were going to change and he was going to act different. But we've kept in touch and I'm actually really close with him, [like] I've always been.

By contrast, two participants who reported their pre-enlistment relationships were not very close remarked that their siblings' service initially did not have a major effect but, over time, the relationship became somewhat more positive. One of these siblings remarked:

> My brother and I never were like close friends or anything so my only reaction to him joining the military was just a little bit of surprise…we don't hang out really so it wasn't like I noticed anything to see him go to basic…just like when he was at college…But, for some reason, now that he's in the military, I find on both ends we kind of feel a sense of keeping in contact at least a little bit, you know we might send a Facebook message.

Computer-Assisted Text Analyses of Narratives

In addition to the extraction of common themes from siblings' narratives, complementary analyses were conducted utilizing Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC; Pennebaker, Francis, & Booth, 2001), a computer-assisted text analysis program. LIWC has been used in

previous studies (Pennebaker, Mehl, & Niederhoffer, 2003) to objectively evaluate cues of emotional and psychological processes contained in speech or writing. LIWC analyses provided indicators of the emotional valence of the narratives by calculating the proportions of positive emotion words (e.g., happy, pride, good) and negative emotion words (e.g., hate, tense, cry).

Overall, LIWC analyses suggested that participants' narratives contained a mix of positive and negative emotional expressions. The mean percentage of positive emotion words (out of total words in the narratives) was 1.91 (range = 1.43–3.31, *SD* = .62), and the mean percentage of negative emotions was 1.03 (range = .53–1.87, *SD* = .44). Siblings' narratives contained more linguistic evidence of positive emotion than negative emotion; the average ratio of positive : negative emotion words was 2.04 (range = .87 – 2.89, *SD* = .65). Only one participant had a slight bias toward negative emotion (i.e., ratio <1); this participant's sibling had recently enlisted and soon would deploy to Afghanistan, so her distress appeared relatively acute. Regarding specific negative emotions, the mean percentage of anxiety/fear words (*M* = .23, range = .05 – .58, *SD* = .17), sadness words (*M* = .23, range = 0–.65, *SD* = .21), and anger words (*M* = .18, range = 0–.37, *SD* = .13) were similar. Narratives also contained similar levels of positive feelings (*M* = .56, range = .24–1.89, *SD* = .55) and optimism (*M* = .43, range = .04–.89, *SD* = .27). Percentages of positive and negative emotion words in participants' narratives were similar to those in Pennebaker et al.'s (2001) normative, non-clinical sample of adults who provided speech samples in a range of non-experimental research settings.

Discussion

The qualitative data presented here contribute to the recent surge of concern with and empirical inquiry on the adjustment of families of servicemembers by providing the first published description of the reactions of young adult siblings of servicemembers. Although the current study is based on a small sample of siblings and reflects the perceptions of only one family member, it provides poignant preliminary evidence that a young adult's transition to military service affects members of the family of origin. Adapting to a family member's military service appears to be an evolving process of individual and family adjustment. Initial reactions reflected an increase in family conflict in a number of different family subsystems. However, faced with the irrevocability of the decision to enlist, the family members coalesced with one another and with the servicemember and rallied in their support. In addition, both qualitative thematic analyses and quantitative linguistic analyses attest to the presence of both positive and negative reactions to a sibling's enlistment in military service, exemplified by participants' collective descriptions of conflict and support, loss and meaning making as well as by the emotional valence of the words they used to tell their stories. Overall, having a sibling in the military appeared to be a deeply felt experience for these participants—not one associated with incapacitating levels of distress but a relevant context for other events in their lives.

Intersecting Transitions: Young Adult Siblings of Servicemembers

For participants in this sample, the sibling's enlistment tended to occur at an important developmental transition in their own lives. Many of these participants had recently moved away from their families to attend college. The narratives of these siblings reflected some forfeiting of their own growing autonomy as they responded to the needs of their parents and younger siblings and attempted to improve the mood of other family members. Although describing examples of heightened connectedness to the family of origin, the participants did not indicate that this was an unwanted sacrifice or was solicited by the parents. Instead, these actions seemed to be the participants' own solutions to perceived stressful family situations.

Implications for Psychologists

Although the implications of this research are based on a small sample, siblings seem to be deeply affected by a brother's or sister's enlistment. Moreover, although this sample comes from one university, servicemembers' siblings are found in colleges, trade schools, high schools, and middle schools as well as workplaces throughout the nation. Practicing psychologists are quite likely to encounter the siblings or parents of servicemembers. Many such family members, however, may not think it necessary or useful to reveal this information unless directly asked.

We hypothesize, based on the information collected, that having a military sibling is likely to be a highly significant life event for most civilian siblings and to influence the family context overall. The civilian siblings interviewed here appear quite aware of how their parents and other family members are impacted by the sibling's military service. It is unknown, however, whether others recognize, acknowledge, and make opportunities to discuss the impact with the civilian sibling.

As professional psychologists, we first need to be aware of military enlistment as a potentially significant family context for anyone seeking psychological services. Accordingly, when psychologists gather intake information about family background, we recommend including standard inquiries about current or recent military service by a family member, including a sibling, child, or parent. Second, the possibility that military service intersects with and complicates other life transitions and stresses should be considered when understanding someone's life story and formulating hypotheses about present concerns. A sibling's enlistment may complicate normal decisions for young adults, such as whether to move out of the family home, what college to attend, or what work to pursue. Third, for young persons experiencing personal stress, the family may be less available as a source of social support. Parents may be preoccupied with the military sibling's service; additionally, the military sibling, who was perhaps previously the closest companion for dealing with family stresses such as parents' arguments, now is less available. Fourth, psychologists may need to consider likely consequences of worrying about a military sibling (e.g., academic difficulties), particularly one sent on a dangerous mission or a military assignment that cannot be discussed. Finally, the servicemembers themselves are likely to be aware of, and possibly feel responsibility for, the stress experienced by their family members. Military psychologists may wish to help servicemembers understand the reactions of family members and cope with their personal reactions to what is going on at home, especially if family of origin distress interferes with job performance (Shulman, Levy-Smith, & Scharf, 2000).

A policy implication of these narratives is the need for education and prevention, perhaps soon after enlistment. Although distress of servicemembers' families of origin is apparent during the acute phase of the transition to military service, little formal support or information is available to help these families navigate this shift. In contrast to spouses and children of military servicemembers who may have the support and camaraderie of living on a military base, siblings and parents are dispersed throughout communities and may not know how to access social support of others going through parallel transitions. Few participants mentioned having friends, other relatives, or neighbors with military family members. There are on-going support networks and groups for parents of military servicemembers, particularly for mothers, e.g., Navy for Moms and Blue Star Mothers of America. Parents often receive some introductory materials (e.g., pamphlets) when their children enlist or graduate from boot camp/basic training. However, we found no educational materials or preventive services aimed specifically for siblings of service members. One way to consolidate resources for siblings of military members might be to offer internet-based information and blogs for this technologically savvy age-group.

An additional policy recommendation is that families of origin be explicitly included in existing programs. Recent initiatives (e.g., through the Department of Defense and Department of Veterans' Affairs) have increased the availability of psychoeducation, prevention, and intervention programs for families of servicemembers and veterans (Makin-Byrd, Gifford, McCutcheon, & Glynn, 2011; Gottman, Gottman, & Atkins, 2011) but focus almost exclusively on military spouses and children. The resilience orientation undergirding these approaches (Reivich, Seligman, & McBride, 2011), which enhances existing strengths and creates additional sources of family support, would have wider benefits by flexibly defining "family support" and inviting and including a variety of family members. Attending to the entire kinship network, including the family of origin, will enable these programs to enhance community readiness and support all who serve "on the homefront."

Study Limitations and Future Directions

This preliminary investigation of siblings of those serving in the military has several limitations and also raises additional questions for future exploration. A primary limitation is that the information is based on a very small sample of siblings. Furthermore, those siblings are in college and cannot be considered representative of many individuals with siblings in the military. Collecting data from more siblings and from siblings who are not in college would enhance the generalizability of these findings. In addition, attention to the respondent's age when the sibling enlisted could prove informative. Relatedly, to understand the unique implications of having a sibling in the military, servicemembers' siblings should be compared to young adults whose siblings leave home for other reasons. We hypothesize that a sibling's military service is associated with distinct concerns about possible risks, especially during wartime, although we recognize that such concerns are likely dependent upon military assignment. Assessing whether distinct reactions are associated with a sibling's military service requires a control group of siblings in a comparably distant location for a similar length of time.

Another consideration in terms of our small sample is the high variability in servicemembers' time since deployment, length and location of service, and dangerousness of job specialization. Although we focus primarily on enlistment, similar information could be obtained about deployment, that is siblings' and other family members' reactions to stage of deployment, e.g., preparation, reintegration, etc., which would offer a more nuanced examination of family members' reactions. Relatedly, servicemembers in the families described here have heretofore suffered no major physical injuries, which could elicit greater distress.

Siblings' reports of parents' reactions are informative, but direct inquiry of parents would likely offer additional perspectives. Statements presented here about parents' reactions are based solely on the perceptions of the civilian sibling. Another unique feature of this sample is that it represents families with one child who enlisted in the military and another who is studying at a university. For some enlistees, the decision to enlist in the military may be motivated by the future benefit of college tuition. Participants included here had figured out other ways to pay for college; thus, for these families, the decision to enlist might be perceived as an alternative to or diversion from attending college rather than a means to that goal. Data from servicemembers' siblings who are not attending college would be a useful complement to these data.

Conclusions

In sum, siblings' narrative responses to a general, open-ended prompt about individual and family changes associated with having a sibling in the military evinced remarkably consistent themes, despite the diversity of the military siblings' experiences. These common

themes included initial upheaval followed by reconciliation, negotiation of role shifts, heightened sense of uncertainty and potential loss, feelings of isolation from others not in a similar situation and, on the positive side, new appreciation for family relationships, and continuity in sibling relationships despite the distance. With awareness of these themes, psychologists are likely to be better prepared to recognize and discuss similar topics that emerge in their work with siblings of military members and to provide information about what family members might expect as they, too, become part of the military culture. Although these findings are quite preliminary in light of the small sample, we hope they will prompt further empirical and clinical exploration of the risks and benefits of a sibling's enlistment in military service. Addressing the experiences and needs of siblings of servicemembers is an important service for psychologists to provide.

Biographies

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