

Understanding Military Culture: A Guide for Professional School Counselors



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School counselors must be knowledgeable about military culture in order to help military students and their families in a culturally competent manner. This article explores the nature of this unique culture, which is often unfamiliar to educators, including its language, hierarchy, sense of rules and regulations, self-expectations and self-sacrifice. Specific suggestions, such as professional development, self-examination and cultural immersion experiences, are provided so that professional school counselors can increase their multicultural competence when working with this population. Finally, a case study illustrates the challenges associated with this culture and implications for school counselors in regard to increasing cultural competence when working with military families are discussed.

Keywords: military, school counselors, families, culture, cultural competence

The professional school counselor is called to be a culturally competent practitioner (Holcomb-McCoy & Chen-Hayes, 2011). The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) position statement on cultural diversity emphasizes that school counselors should work for the success of all students from all cultures (ASCA, 2009). Overall, school counselors should work to develop their self-awareness, knowledge and skills when it comes to working with students from diverse cultures (Remley & Herlihy, 2014).

While other cultures have been explored in-depth in the professional school counseling literature (Bradley, Johnson, Rawls, & Dodson-Sims, 2005; Byrd & Hays, 2012; Smith-Adcock, Daniels, Lee, Villalba, & Indelicato, 2006; Yeh, 2001), military culture has not. Military culture is often unfamiliar to educators (Atuel, Esqueda, & Jacobson, 2011) who encounter military students and their families regularly. Every school district in the United States has a child who is in some way connected with the military, and 80% of all military children attend public schools (Military Child Education Coalition, 2014). Therefore, it is essential for school counselors to be knowledgeable in navigating military culture in order to support military students and their family members in their schools (Luby, 2012; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2014).

Overall, military culture is a unique one (Luby, 2012) that presents distinctive challenges for its service members and their family members (Brown & Lettieri, 2008; Gooddale, Abb, & Moyer, 2012). While the military itself can be viewed as a profession, the military extends into the service members' personal realms as well, affecting everyday lifestyle as well as the lifestyle of family members (Cozza & Lerner, 2013).

Visible and Invisible Aspects of Culture

While strategies for working with military children and their families during deployments have been investigated in the professional literature (Allen & Staley, 2007; Cole, 2012; Robertson, 2007), this article

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explores military culture in order to help increase the school counselor's knowledge and awareness. McAuliffe (2013), citing the metaphor of an iceberg, encouraged counselors to explore both the visible (above water) and invisible (below water) aspects of culture. Culture that is most easily observed by outsiders, like the tip of an iceberg above water, is considered *surface culture* (McAuliffe, 2013). Culture which is not observed by outsiders, like the larger part of the iceberg under the water, is considered either *shallow culture* or *deep culture* (McAuliffe, 2013). Shallow and deep culture correspond to more intense emotional experiences that may require extensive counseling services and support from the school counselor (The Iceberg Concept of Culture, n.d.; McAuliffe, 2013).

The present author seeks to inform the school counselor about the nature of surface, shallow and deep cultural aspects of the military and provide implications for school counselor practice. In order to fully describe the nature of military culture and its meaning for military students and their family members, this article begins with an exploration of the surface-level aspects of military culture (language, hierarchy, sense of rules and regulations) and then progressively explores the more emotionally intense shallow and deep aspects of military culture (self-expectations and self-sacrifice). Finally, this article presents a case study that illustrates a professional school counselor's culturally competent approach to working with a military student.

Language

The first area of military culture explored in this article is language, which is a visible, surface-level aspect of the military lifestyle. Encountering military culture has been compared to navigating a foreign country, with its language an important aspect of this navigation (Huebner, 2013; National Military Family Association, 2014). Each of the five military branches has its own set of terms and acronyms that relate to job title, position, location, services, time and resources for military service members and their families (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2014). Each military branch also has its own set of moral codes (Kuehner, 2013) such as honor, courage and strength, which affect the service member's personal and professional outlook (Luby, 2012). Learning and understanding the language embedded in military culture is essential for professional school counselors in order to remove any communication barriers between the school counselor and family members (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2014).

Hierarchy

Hierarchy is another important visible, surface-level cultural aspect of the military community. Rank and order are rigid in the military, with service members expected to show respect for and compliance with their superiors (Martins & Lopes, 2012). This authoritarian structure may be mimicked in the military family's home life as well (Hall, 2008). Overall, a service member's rank determines how much is earned financially (Huebner, 2013; Luby, 2012), how much education is provided, the level of access to resources (Hall, 2008) and the expected amount of responsibility (U.S. Department of Defense, 2014). The service member's rank impacts the family members' identity and sense of self, as the family identifies with their position in the military community (Drummet, Coleman, & Cable, 2003). School counselors should be aware that rank may influence not only the family's economic level, but their stress level as well, as it may determine the length and frequency of the service member's deployments (Luby, 2012).

Sense of Rules and Regulations

Moving deeper beyond the visible culture, military culture embodies a strong sense of rules and restrictions, as there are clearly defined rules and expectations for military service members and their families, including etiquette guidelines for spouses and children regarding dress, mannerisms and behavior in public (U.S. Army War College, 2011). Military families are directed where to live, when they can travel and with whom they can socialize. Additionally, higher ranking service members receive authority over the family's personal life. For

example, if a child is misbehaving in school or if the family is experiencing financial difficulties, the service member's superiors may become involved (Gooddale et al., 2012). Failure to abide by rules and expectations may result in expulsion from the military (Kuehner, 2013).

Self-Expectations

Another invisible aspect of military culture on a more intense emotional level are the expectations that military service members and their families hold for themselves. Today's military is a volunteer force, and service members freely join the military lifestyle (Hall, 2008). For these military members willingly serving their country, the concept of *warrior ethos* is prevalent in the military community, as both military members and family members take a sense of pride in their ability to overcome challenges on their own (Hall, 2008; Huebner, 2013). Military culture also promotes the notion of strength and emotional control (Halvorson, 2010), which in turn propels a fear of appearing weak (Huebner, 2013), especially in regard to mental health (Danish & Antonides, 2013; Dingfelder, 2009). School counselors should recognize that this pride may impede the military family members' sense of comfort seeking assistance.

Self-Sacrifice

Imbedded deeper within military culture is the notion of self-sacrifice. Guided by the ideal that the individual is secondary to the unit (Hickman, n.d.), military family members face numerous deployments, relocations and separation from each other (Park, 2011). These challenges are expected and anticipated, as they are a constant reality for military families (Military One Source, 2014) in times of war and peace (Park, 2011). For example, the deployment cycle is continuous, affecting family members as they prepare for, experience and reunite after the deployment (Military One Source, 2014). In the midst of these challenges, over half of military family members have reported that they are satisfied with the military lifestyle (U.S. Army Community and Family Support Center, 2005), emphasizing their commitment to routinely facing and overcoming challenges.

Cultural Implications for School Counselors

Self-Examination

Self-awareness is an important aspect of increasing one's multicultural competence and knowledge (Holcomb-McCoy & Chen-Hayes, 2011; Remley & Herlihy, 2014). School counselors should first explore their own perceptions and experiences related to the military in order to become more aware of any biases or preconceptions that may affect their work with military families. Questions for reflection might include: What are my perceptions of war? What are my own political beliefs regarding the military and war? Who in my family has served in the military and what is my relationship like with this person?

Professional Development

Seeking ongoing education is essential for school counselors to become multiculturally knowledgeable and competent as they work with military students and their families (Holcomb-McCoy, 2005; Holcomb-McCoy & Chen-Hayes, 2011). This education might come in the form of workshops or seminars regarding best practices for working with military families (Holcomb-McCoy & Chen-Hayes, 2011). If these opportunities are not easily accessible, school counselors might utilize educational resources through organizations such as The National Military Family Association or Military Families United, or through webinars focused specifically on counseling knowledge and techniques related to working with military families (ASCA, 2014). School counselors should be familiar with current professional literature related to best practices in working with military families so that they can understand and adapt these practices in their work with military families (Holcomb-McCoy & Chen-Hayes, 2011).

Cultural Immersion

In order for a school counselor to learn more about the nature of military culture, especially in regard to its language, the counselor might more fully encounter the military community (Alexander, Kruczek, & Ponterotto, 2005; Díaz-Lázaro & Cohen, 2001). For example, the counselor could volunteer on a military base and interact with military families, thereby gaining a better understanding of the challenges they face related to their culture. The school counselor also might partner with a military organization such as a Fleet and Family Support Center or the United Service Organization in order to experience military culture and lifestyle. Finally, a school counselor could attend military ceremonies or events that are open to the public in order to experience the rituals and to hear the language associated with military culture.

Culturally Competent Practice

Having acquired knowledge of military culture, school counselors should focus on culturally relevant interventions for working with military family members. School counselors might capitalize on the collective, teamwork mindset of military family members and build partnerships with them to enhance their child's success in school, working to break down resistance that the family may feel toward receiving counseling services and support (Bryan, 2005; Cole, 2012). Learning the military language and becoming familiar with the military's visible and invisible cultural norms constitute an important aspect of unconditional positive regard and support. School counselors also should focus on the strengths of military families as they affirm their potential to overcome challenges in their daily lives (Myers & Sweeney, 2008). Culturally competent school counselors likewise work to promote the sense of self-efficacy in military students and family members, equipping them with the tools and resources they need to be successful academically, socially and emotionally (Zimmerman, 2000). Finally, school counselors should support military family members in their choice of and commitment to making sacrifices, providing them with needed emotional support as they work to overcome the challenges of the military lifestyle.

Case Study

The following case study provides an example of a military child who is struggling emotionally, socially and academically in a school setting. This student's challenges reflect the stressors that military students and their families experience within military culture and lifestyle. Following the case study, the author will provide suggestions for how a professional school counselor might approach this student and his family in a culturally competent manner.

Justin was a 9-year-old elementary school student at Freedom Elementary School. This school was located next to a large military base and mainly served military students who lived in nearby base housing complexes. Justin's father was in the Navy and had recently left for a 9-month deployment. Justin lived with his mother and two younger sisters, ages 2 and 3. Justin's father was a high-ranking sailor who would be considered for promotion the next year. He had served in the Navy for 15 years and was eager to advance to a higher rank.

Justin's teachers referred him to the school counselor because his grades had dropped. They reported that Justin appeared to become easily and visibly frustrated during math class, so much so that he often broke his pencil and began to cry. When Justin's teachers tried to help him, he assured them that nothing was wrong and denied any feelings of anger or frustration. Justin's teachers reported that socially, Justin was friendly with several of his classmates who lived in his neighborhood, but seemed aloof during lunchtime and recess. He preferred to work individually in the classroom and showed signs of resistance when assigned group tasks. Justin's teachers contacted his mother, but she assured them that he was doing fine at home and would be "a good kid" at school as well.

When the school counselor invited Justin into her office to assess his situation, Justin proudly reported that his father had left him “in charge” of the family while he was away. Justin told her about his father’s ship and his important job in keeping the other sailors safe during the deployment. When the school counselor gently inquired about Justin’s frustration in the classroom, he stated that he wanted to do well in school to please his father, who expected him to receive good grades. When he did not know the answers to his math problems, he became angry with himself. Justin then asked the school counselor not to tell his mother about his feelings of frustration and anger because he did not want to “bother” her with his problems. He was accustomed to hearing her crying at night and sometimes slept with her so that she would not have to be alone. Justin also worried about appearing strong to his classmates, many of whom had parents who worked with and for his father.

A culturally competent school counselor should recognize several cultural factors affecting Justin’s well-being related to his family’s military lifestyle. First, even at this young age, Justin carried a strong sense of duty and self-sacrifice, seeing himself as a warrior in battle (Hickman, n.d.). Like many service members and their families, Justin also had high self-expectations (Halvorson, 2010), as he wanted to perform academically to please his father. Another military cultural factor affecting his well-being is that Justin seemed to resist help from his teachers, asserting his independence and attempting to demonstrate an appearance of wellness for his classmates and his mother, for whom he assumed emotional responsibility (Hall, 2008; Huebner, 2013). Even in the midst of these struggles, similar to other service members and their families who proudly persist in the midst of challenges, Justin professed pride in his father’s work and role in the military and hoped to see his father continue successfully in his career path (U.S. Army Community and Family Support Center, 2005).

After listening to Justin talk about his self-expectations and the emotional and social challenges he faced, the school counselor asked Justin if he would like to meet with her each week to talk more about these issues. The school counselor told Justin that she also would observe him in his classroom to check on his progress and to see how she can better help him. However, she would do so under the premise that she was observing the class as a whole, so that his classmates would be unaware of her true purpose there. She explained to Justin the tenet of confidentiality and how his classmates would be unaware that he was visiting her office on a regular basis (Linde, 2011). Justin seemed relieved at her suggestion and eagerly agreed to talk with her further.

Suggestions for School Counselors

When counseling Justin individually, using appropriate military terminology (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2014), a professional school counselor should first work to build rapport in order to explore his feelings. As a military child, Justin should be affirmed and thanked for his role in his father’s deployment and his efforts to comfort his mother.

In order to address his difficulties in the classroom, the school counselor can equip Justin with anger management or self-soothing techniques to use when frustrated. In addition, the school counselor can focus on increasing Justin’s leadership qualities and abilities, which are a key aspect of military culture. This focus on leadership development has been found to help in building anger management skills and behavioral self-efficacy in children and adolescents (Burt, Patel, & Lewis, 2012). In order to further decrease his frustration in the classroom, the school counselor can provide areas of academic support for Justin, such as a tutor in the community (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). The school counselor should finally explore Justin’s feelings of missing his father as the family progresses through the stages of deployment, as well as his feelings of worry about his mother (Cole, 2012). Throughout these conversations, the school counselor can show respect for the military ideals that Justin professes, encouraging him to hold reasonable self-expectations and to take pride in his desire to succeed in school.

The school counselor also can partner with Justin's mother during the deployment. Affirming her strengths and the warrior ethos that she too may carry, the school counselor might offer Justin's mother support in terms of resources in the community that she might find helpful during this time (Bryan, 2005). After building rapport with her, the school counselor can encourage the mother to seek individual counseling or support groups to help with any emotional issues related to the absence of her husband, explaining the importance of her social and emotional functioning to the social and emotional functioning of her children (Chandra et al., 2010; Gibbs, Martin, Kupper, & Johnson, 2007). If Justin's mother expresses concerns over confidentiality and fears endangering her husband's upcoming promotion due to the appearance of weakness within the family, a common concern in the military community, the school counselor can work with Justin's mother to find resources outside the military community or in a geographically remote area (Danish & Antonides, 2013; Dingfelder, 2009).

In addition to supporting her emotionally, the school counselor might consider empowering Justin's mother's role as a parent as she cares for her young children during the deployment. She might educate Justin's mother on the stages of deployment and how she might best help her children move through each of these stages (Cole, 2012). Finally, the school counselor might encourage and facilitate open communication between Justin and his mother so that they can express their feelings to one another. Justin's mother should be aware of his struggles so that she can work to support him during the time of separation from his father (Dollahide & Saginak, 2012).

Conclusion

As seen in Justin's case, a great need exists for culturally competent school counselors to support our military families (Brown & Lettieri, 2008; Gooddale et al., 2012). School counselors should be knowledgeable about military culture so that they can successfully support military families in overcoming the challenges that they face (Luby, 2012; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2014). Once school counselors are able to understand and navigate this unique culture, both the visible and invisible aspects, they will heed the call of providing equitable services to all students and their families (ASCA, 2009).

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