



Relationship provisions, self-efficacy and youth well-being in military families



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ABSTRACT

Anchored in the social organization theory of action and change (Mancini & Bowen, 2013), this empirical analysis of military youth examines relationship provisions as related to youth outcomes of anxiety, depressive symptoms, personal well-being, and academic performance. Data were collected from parents and their adolescents, ages 11–18, living in the continental United States ($N = 273$ military families). Findings from this analysis of military youth indicated that the relationship provisions available to youth were implicated in more positive youth outcomes, and self-efficacy served as a mechanism linking relationship provisions to anxiety and school performance but not to depression and personal well-being. Policy and practice implications are provided, including the importance of establishing and sustaining youth programs and community initiatives that build on natural, informal networks.

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Military operations in Afghanistan (Operation Enduring Freedom) and Iraq (Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation New Dawn) in the aftermath of September 11, 2001 have placed unparalleled demands and challenges on military families and the children and youth who live in these families. Lengthy and multiple wartime deployments for service members, in combination with deployments related to national and international relief missions, have placed enormous stress on America's military and created long periods of parental absence from the home for service members with children, with many two-parent families essentially functioning as one-parent households. Spouses and children have not been immune to these consequences, including experiences of secondary trauma (Dekel & Monson, 2010). The mortality and morbidity from war cast a long shadow onto the lives of service member families (Huebner, Mancini, Bowen, & Orthner, 2009).

The potential magnitude of the presenting situation is reflected in part by the number of families serving in the shadows of war. More than two-in-five DOD active-duty members have children; a similar proportion (43.3%) of reserve component members have children (DOD (Department of Defense), 2013). Although a greater proportion of these children are five and under (42.6% for the active component and 28.8% for the reserve components), approximately one in four of these children is between the age of 12 to 18 (22.4% for the active component and 29.6% for the reserve components; (DOD (Department of Defense), 2013). The modal family structure in the active-duty military includes a military service member with a civilian spouse; however, the military also includes dual-military marriages with children and single

military members with children. In these cases, children and youth may have both parents or their only parent deployed or facing the demands of military service. It is sobering to note that in our sample of youth in military families (hereafter, military youth), none were more than seven years old when these wars in the aftermath of 9/11 began, and, for many of them, they began life at the same time the United States entered these conflicts.

Transition and change are accurate descriptions of what military members and their families experience on a regular basis, which may take the form of deployment, member and family moves from one installation to another (permanent change of station moves), separation due to short-term training obligations of a military member (TDY), or even unaccompanied tours of duty in which the military member is not necessarily in a war zone but nevertheless separated from his/her family. National Guard and Reserve military members and their families experience many of the same transitions and challenges plus the added dimension of usually living remotely from military installations and are often therefore less-connected with military resources and other military families (Huebner, Mancini, Wilcox, Grass, & Grass, 2007; Kudler & Porter, 2013). We contend that in the face of family transition and change, social life becomes a significant protective factor for military family members, especially for youth in those military families (Bowen & Martin, 2011). Moreover, we contend that, in particular, interpersonal relationships are closely connected with supporting important individual qualities that youth possess, and in turn those qualities of youth, in this case self-efficacy, have profound implications for core youth outcomes (Easterbrooks, Ginsburg, & Lerner, 2013). Our question is, what do relationships provide to youth; that is, how do these relationships function in their lives? Then, how are these relationship

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provisions related to important youth outcomes, and moreover, what is the significance of self-efficacy as a bridge between relationship provisions and outcomes of depression, anxiety, personal well-being, and academic performance among military youth?

Theoretical foundation: Social organization and relationship provisions

Social organization theory of action and change

An empirical examination of the influence of relationship provisions on the successful adaptation of adolescents in military families is consistent with current comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs) in the civilian sector and community capacity building efforts (CCBs) in the U.S. military. Although different labels are used to describe these community-based efforts, they share a common focus on building social capital, which emerges through social connections and relationships and operates as a social energy for individuals in achieving their goals and demonstrating resilience to adversity (Bowen, Mancini, Martin, Ware, & Nelson, 2003; Bowen, Martin, Mancini, & Nelson, 2000; Kubisch, Fulbright-Anderson, & Connell, 1998; Mancini & Bowen, 2009). As broad community intervention strategies, both CCIs and CCBs bring together formal systems and informal networks to attend to the complex needs and strengths of children, youth, and families (Kubisch, Auspos, Brown, & Dewar, 2010; Mancini & Bowen, 2013). Our empirical focus in this paper is on those informal networks.

The social organizational theory of action and change provides a theoretical foundation for informing community intervention efforts in both the military and civilian sectors (Mancini & Bowen, 2013). This theory elaborates on the intricate ways that community members and community institutions affect the quality of life of individuals and families, including health and behavioral health-related outcomes (Bowen, Martin, & Mancini, 2013; Mancini, Arnold, Martin, & Bowen, 2014; Mancini & Bowen, 2013); it now provides a larger framework for the current investigation. Community capacity is the core concept that anchors this theory and is defined as a sense of *shared responsibility* among and between community members and their *collective competence* in meeting important community goals and challenges (Bowen et al., 2000). These two elements of community capacity reflect the sentiment needed to make a difference in the community, as well as the action associated with making actual differences. The theory is geared toward explaining the differing ways people in communities come together and how that coming together makes a difference in what transpires in communities. From this approach, social capital (defined as the reciprocal exchange of information and trust that develops from these successful exchanges; Putnam, 2000) develops as people within informal networks interact. Consequently, social capital supports the development of community capacity (shared responsibility and collective competence).

In this investigation, we focus on a particular aspect of this social organization framework: how relationships function in the lives of youth, which is a type of social capital. We assume these relationship contexts provide the basis for supporting important youth outcomes, those psychological in nature, as well as those more behavioral, such as school success. We assume that youth draw on relationships to successfully navigate their lives; furthermore, the accumulation of social capital through relationships leads to important social psychological processes such as higher levels of self-efficacy, which we discuss below.

From the perspective of this theory, informal networks are the context within which social capital develops (Bowen et al., 2000; Mancini & Bowen, 2013). Informal networks involve interpersonal associations and relationships. These networks provide the impetus for the social capital that builds community capacity, which, in turn, enhances individual outcomes (Mancini & Bowen, 2009). Social psychological factors are posited to partially mediate the influence of social organizational processes, including their associated interpersonal relationships, on

individual outcomes. We assume, therefore, there are multiple mechanisms that form the pathways whereby outcomes are influenced, including those that spring from relationships, and that are evidenced at the individual level. More specifically, in the current study, we examine the mediating role of self-efficacy, a significant social psychological characteristic in research on youth (Tsang, Hui, & Law, 2012).

Relationship functions theory

How relationships function is a core element for understanding significant outcomes for youth (Motl, Dishman, Saunders, Dowda, & Pate, 2004). Some years ago Robert S. Weiss analyzed the specific role that relationships play in adulthood, especially among those who had experienced a major disruption in their lives (e.g. divorce, death of a spouse). His initial interest was in the concepts of the “functional specificity” of relationships and the “fund of sociability.” The former concept suggests that people need particular provisions from relationships and that having more of one relationship provision does not compensate for experiencing a deficit in some other provision. The latter concept suggests that people can have relationship needs met in a variety of ways by a variety of others, with the important thing being the aggregate amount of relationship provisions rather than any one particular provision. Weiss (1969) found support for the former concept and identified six relationship functions: (a) *Reliable Alliance*, knowing that one can count on receiving assistance in times of need, a function often provided by kin; (b) *Attachment*, that is feelings of intimacy, peace, and security as found in relationships with family members and very close friends; (c) *Guidance*, having relationships with persons who can provide knowledge, advice, and expertise; (d) *Social Integration*, a sense of belonging to a group with whom one shares common interests and social activities; (e) *Reassurance of Worth*, being in relationships that reinforce one's sense of competence and esteem; and (f) *Opportunity for Nurturance*, being responsible for the care of others. It is these dimensions of relationships that we assess among youth in military families.

The salience of these provisions might vary from person to person and from time to time in life, but they are considered essential for adequate personal adjustment. Weiss (1974) maintained further that the absence of these relationship provisions leads to distress. For example, if a sense of attachment is missing, a person experiences emotional isolation and profound loneliness. The absence of social integration leads to social isolation and boredom. Lack of a sense of reliable alliance is experienced as vulnerability. If needed guidance or advice cannot be obtained, a person becomes anxious and uncertain. If no one provides reassurance of worth or competence, low self-regard results, and without opportunities for nurturing and being responsible for someone else, a person is apt to feel that life is meaningless. Weiss' theorizing has been applied to various groups along the human lifespan, including adults (Mancini & Blieszner, 1992), both healthy and health-challenged individuals (Cutrona & Russell, 1987), and adolescents (Motl et al., 2004).

Related literature on youth development

This present empirical analysis of military youth examines how the provisions of relationships (indicators of social capital) are related to particular youth outcomes (e.g., anxiety, depressive symptoms, personal well-being, academic performance). Dimensions of relationship provisions include: reliable alliance, sense of attachment, guidance, social integration, reassurance of worth, and opportunity for nurturance (Cutrona & Russell, 1987). The self-efficacy of the adolescent is posited as a central social psychological mediator between relationship provisions and youth outcomes (see Fig. 1). In addition to examining these primary associations between youth outcomes and relationship provisions, the influence of pivotal family environmental factors and youth individual factors are examined: the youth's experience of parenting (including parental warmth) and youth's sex and age. Moreover, pivotal

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