



Parentification in military families: Overlapping constructs and theoretical explorations in family, clinical, and military psychology



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ABSTRACT

This article reviews select literature that describes unique aspects of the challenges, roles, and responsibilities that family members may face as a result of the military culture and military family system. A particular systemic construct and clinical process that may be especially relevant to military families is *parentification*. Parentification has long been linked with negative outcomes investigated in the family and clinical psychology literature. This article summarizes the overlap in constructs and theoretical frameworks related to parentification, which appear in the family and clinical psychology literature that may have transportability to the youth and family military literature base. Directions for future family, clinical, and military psychology research directed toward youth and family functioning are proffered.

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1. Introduction

Interest in the United States military family has waxed and waned over the last century, specific attention has been informed by the scope and activities of military operations at any given point in time (Everson & Figley, 2011; Hall, 2008; Willerton, Wadsworth, & Riggs, 2011). The two world wars, the Vietnam conflict, and the first Gulf War and its associated pernicious aftereffects have received much attention from the scientific community, whereas the conflicts associated with Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom have only recently received attention from researchers, practitioners, and scholars (e.g., Chandra, Burns, Tanielian, & Jaycox, 2011; Faber, Willerton, Clymer, MacDermid, & Weiss, 2008; Huebner, Mancini, Wilcox, Grass, & Grass, 2007). Although studies have explored the impact of combat deployment on the mental and physical health of individual military members and sometimes that of their spouses or partners, little research exists with regard to the complex psychological aftereffects of military service, and thereby of military culture, on family functioning, family wellness, and family-related pathological outcomes (American Psychological Association Presidential Task Force on Military Deployment Services for Youth, Families, and Service Members [APA], 2007; Everson & Figley, 2011; Harrison & Albanese, 2012). In particular,

military children—an understudied population—may experience unique and diverse stressors and outcomes beyond those experienced by their civilian counterparts (White, De Burgh, Fear, & Iversen, 2011). Understanding the positive and negative sequelae of war and of life in a military context is a complicated, multilayered challenge. Yet there is a critical need to understand how best to culturally tailor interventions and treatments—that is, consistent with the culture of the military family and military support systems—that are directed toward the specific short- and long-term needs of military children and their families.

The specific psychology and ecology of the military family lack consensus because the clinical and empirical research remains sparse (Chandra et al., 2011; Harrison & Albanese, 2012). Of particular concern for policy makers is how periodic and extended separation from and absence of a parent as a result of deployment—and even death—affects the health, development, and functioning of military children and families (APA, 2007). The literature base of general family and clinical psychology is rich with descriptions of individual-, family-, and contextual-level factors that affect the behaviors, roles, and responsibilities of children, including the short- and long-term effects on these children and on the adults they become (Harrison & Albanese, 2012; Hooper, 2013; Hooper, DeCoster, White, & Voltz, 2011). This body of literature includes clinical and theoretical reviews, empirical investigations, and randomized clinical trials. Some of the findings accumulated in this expansive body of literature may be translatable to military families and may have relevance for a better understanding of their psychology, ecology, and culture.

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Because an increasing number of individuals on active duty are supporting families with children, the military has been compelled to consider the significant impact that military service has on the family as a whole (Gilreath et al., 2013; Huebner et al., 2010; Lester et al., 2011). For example, how do military families function in the absence of their military member (or members, in some cases)? How do they cope with the military member's return, especially when that individual is physically or psychologically injured? How individuals function within families, and how families in turn function within the military system, are increasingly important considerations for today's military and for those who are in a position to assist these families during difficult times. The significant changes in the demographic composition and family dynamics of military forces also underscore the importance of military family functioning and its subsequent impact on the military service member's performance, both at home and particularly in combat situations abroad (Lester et al., 2011). Though family functioning has long been studied as a precursor to child and adolescent outcomes, little is known about how the context of the military service system and culture affects family functioning, and about how the stressors and adversity associated with military service interact with the family system and contribute to child and adolescent outcomes (e.g., family discord, child maltreatment, family violence, and interpersonal violence; Everson & Figley, 2011). These changing dynamics raise ample concern and call for research to consolidate what is known about family systems with what is now emerging in the military literature.

To fill a gap in the military and youth literature, this article reviews the literature that has described the unique aspects of the military family system; the challenges, roles, and responsibilities that family members may face as a result of the military culture and military family system; and some constructs and processes described in the family and clinical psychology literature that may have particular relevance for military psychology practitioners and researchers. Although most of the literature has been informed by qualitative investigations, the emergent themes in the military clinical and research base may overlap with the themes evidenced in the family and clinical psychology literature.

Specifically, parentification is a particular construct and clinical process that has been discussed and investigated in the family and clinical psychology literature (Champion et al., 2009; Fitzgerald et al., 2008; Hooper, L'Abate, Sweeney, Ganesini, & Jankowski, 2014; Hooper et al., 2011; Locke & Newcomb, 2004). Parentification, although implicitly linked, is being discussed in the context of military families with greater frequency than in the past. This article attempts to extract, assemble, and make explicit this body of investigations—albeit qualitative in nature—that has appeared in the literature.

This article examines the parentification construct for likely relevance and links to numerous processes and outcomes related to war, family systems and functioning in a military context, and the military culture (Harkness, 1993; Harrison & Albanese, 2012; Riggs & Riggs, 2011). In addition, this article elucidates how constructs and theoretical frameworks that appear in the military literature overlap with constructs and theoretical frameworks that appear in the family and clinical psychology literature.

2. Parentification

Parentification is a ubiquitous phenomenon that occurs in families to varying degrees, with both positive and negative consequences (Byng-Hall, 2008; Earley & Cushway, 2002; East, 2010; Hooper, 2007b; Hooper, Marotta, & Lanthier, 2008; Jankowski, Hooper, Sandage, & Hannah, 2013; Kam, 2011). Parentification has been defined as a distortion of, disturbance in, or lack of appropriate boundaries between family subsystems, resulting in a functional or emotional role reversal in which the child takes on adult responsibilities that are inappropriate for his or her developmental stage and age (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973; Hooper, 2012; Jurkovic, 1997; Kerig, 2005). In addition to the diffusion

of boundaries, the hierarchical structure is often inverted, such that the children compose the executive subsystem, where the power exists and family decisions take place (Hooper, Doehler, Wallace, & Hannah, 2011; Kerig, 2005).

The term *parentification* was introduced by family systems theorists Minuchin, Montalvo, Guerney, Rosman, and Schumer (1967), who asserted that in the process of parentification, "the parent(s) relinquishes executive functions by delegation of instrumental roles to a parental child or by total abandonment of the family psychologically and/or physically" (p. 219). Other terms used interchangeably with *parentification* have included *adultification* (Burton, 2007), *spousification* (Sroufe & Ward, 1980), *role reversal* (Macfie, McElwain, Houts, & Cox, 2005), *adultoids* (Galambos & Tilton-Weaver, 2000; Greenberger & Steinberg, 1986), *little parent* (Byng-Hall, 2008), *mature minor* (Garber, 2011), and *young carers* or *young caregivers* (Aldridge & Becker, 1993; Siskowski, 2006). Garber (2011) provided a comprehensive review of how some of these terms may be defined, operationalized, and differentiated.

Two types of parentification are generally described in the literature (Jurkovic, 1997; Minuchin et al., 1967). These are *emotional parentification*, when a child attempts to fill an emotional or psychological void for a parent or siblings, and *instrumental parentification*, when a child attempts to engage in behaviors and activities to assist a parent or siblings. Taken together, the behaviors are typically directed toward reducing anxiety and increasing stability in the family system (Hooper, 2007b). Emotional parentification appears to be the more deleterious of the two types of parentification, representing a maladaptive solution to family or parental anxiety and a destructive force for the child and for the adult he or she becomes (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973; Chase, 1999; Hooper et al., 2011; Minuchin et al., 1967). The effects of parentification in childhood can be persistent throughout the lifespan and can span multiple generations (Chase, 1999; Hooper et al., 2011). Recently researchers and practitioners have expanded the understanding of the implications of parentification based on cultural or social determinants, including the cultural context in which parentification takes place. For example, new culturally relevant considerations related to the roles and responsibilities of parentified youth include language brokering, prolonged and multiple military deployments, and gender-focused considerations (East, 2010; Hooper, 2012; Kam, 2011; Maysseless & Scharf, 2009; Telzer & Fuligni, 2009).

Given the cultural context in which military families are embedded, investigations related to deployment-derived parentification should be considered (Harrison & Albanese, 2012). This family systems construct is particularly relevant to military families due to the stress, adversity, and trauma usually associated with military deployment and the potential psychological burden experienced by military partners and children (Harkness, 1993). Balanced examinations that look at a range of antecedents and outcomes—the positive and negative aftereffects recently reported in the family and clinical psychology literature—should be considered in the context of military families as well (Smyth, Cass, & Hill, 2011).

In the sections that follow, we first briefly describe the military family system, contexts, and roles that may lead to parentification. We then provide an overview of the method we used to select the articles included in this review. Finally, we suggest directions for future research.

3. Military family system

Military families face many of the same daily stressors that civilian families do, including concerns about childcare, education, extended family, parenting, and career choices. Nevertheless, military families also face unique stressors and challenges in daily living beyond those that civilian families face (Drummet, Coleman, & Cable, 2003; Lester et al., 2011). Military families have less control over their lives—especially where they live, whom they live near, and what schools their children attend. Military families are expected to move repeatedly,

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