



Negotiating home base: Narratives of psychological well-being among female military members



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ABSTRACT

The current study aimed to understand how active duty service women with low levels of current psychological distress make sense of their military experiences in ways that might contribute to psychological well-being. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with active duty female members in the Canadian Forces and transcripts were analyzed using narrative analysis. A sense of belonging was found to be of utmost salience to the women, with several participants negotiating and constructing places that felt like home to them, and with different degrees of attachment to the military versus civilian world. The findings of this work are discussed within the context of focusing prevention and intervention efforts on increasing belongingness and a sense of home for female service members.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the proportion of women has been increasing in several militaries around the world, as has their participation in traditionally male-dominated roles. Researchers across a number of disciplines have recognized that the experiences of female service members are unique and complex, and there have been growing efforts to accurately capture these experiences (e.g., Gouliquer and Poulin, 2005; Poulin et al., 2009; Sasson-Levy, 2002; Silva, 2008). Understanding the challenges faced by military women, and particularly, the resources that help them stay psychologically well in the face of these challenges, can inform mental health services and efforts aimed at increasing wellness for female service members.

A number of studies have addressed how women manage working within the masculine culture of the military, and efforts at being accepted by male service members have surfaced as important themes within this work (e.g., Davis, 2009). An adoption of a masculine identity has been described, for example, including having to “think and act like male in order to be accepted” and emulating male behaviors such as using cuss words, speaking in a low tone, and acting physically and mentally tough during military service (Sasson-Levy, 2002, 2003; Taber, 2005, p.292). With regards to sexual assault, studies have found that some women downplay their experiences so as not to allow further exclusion or diminishment (Sasson-Levy, 2002), or wear masculine clothing and use their social networks to protect themselves from sexual harassment and assault (Cheney et al., 2015).

Interestingly, acting out femininities has also been documented as a way for women to perceive that they belong. Hauser (2011), for example, demonstrated that some women in the Israeli Armed Forces navigated their environment by using traditional femininity to play pseudo caregiver roles for male service members, including making the military a more comfortable and home-like environment for them.

In Melissa Herbert's work, she aimed to answer, “...how is it, if at all, that women employ strategies that allow them to function in the male-dominated world of the military?” (1998, p. 23). She found that many women had to find a balance between femininity and masculinity, while acting either way had consequences, such as being marked a ‘slut’ for being too feminine or a lesbian for acting overly masculine. In a composite narrative of three military mothers, Taber (2013) found that the women actively shifted their focus over time on home/family versus military service, and that this decision was influenced by stage of life. Meanwhile, among female veterans who used VA Healthcare, women reported experiencing a range of stressors including sexual harassment and, upon return home, interrupted familial and social relationships (Mattocks et al., 2012). Coping strategies varied from negative behaviors such as prescription drug misuse and social isolation, to positive strategies such as exercise, counseling, and connecting with other female veterans for support. Finally, in a recent systematic review of qualitative research on the well-being experiences of female veterans, some of the common themes across studies included difficulties with re-adjustment and belonging upon return

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home and continuing to endure the traumatic impact of war. However, there were also themes of post-traumatic growth and constructing new meaning (Jones and Hanley, 2017).

To date, research with female service members has focused on the challenges that they face and the impact of those challenges, rather than on how many women persevere and thrive. However, understanding the meaning-making processes of women demonstrating an absence of distress/positive mental health could also inform psychological prevention and intervention efforts for all women in the military. Psychological well-being has been defined as comprising six facets: Personal development and growth, positive relationships with others, perceived purpose in life, autonomy, self-acceptance, and mastery of one's environment (Ryff and Keyes, 1995). To date, there has not been a specific attempt to examine the narratives of still-serving members in order to understand how they make sense of their military experiences in a way that might help with their psychological well-being.

Using narrative analysis, the present study aimed to answer the following research question: How do female members in the Canadian military with low levels of current psychological distress make sense of their military experiences in ways that might promote well-being?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were a purposive sample of ten active duty female service members in the Canadian Forces who had been deployed on at least one tour in support of the combat mission in Afghanistan and who had not sought individual mental health services in the previous 12 months. As a proxy of mental health, a participation criterion in the current study was non-engagement of mental health services in the year prior in order to facilitate the understanding of mental health and wellness maintenance. Ethics approval was obtained from the appropriate institutional review boards. A sponsor internal to the Canadian Forces assisted with participant recruitment by distributing the recruitment advertisement to contacts at a number of bases in Canada to be posted in several locations (e.g., health clinics, electronic messaging boards, community newspapers).

The ten women interviewed ranged in age from 25 to 55 years and had served in the military between 5 and 35 years. All women reported having been on at least one deployment, represented a range of ranks, and worked in numerous roles within the Canadian Forces that varied with respect to the male to female ratio typically represented. A number were currently unmarried with no children. One participant reported that she had not had the opportunity to deploy in support of the war in Afghanistan but was interviewed because she had other operational experience.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Semi-structured interview

A semi-structured narrative questionnaire was used to guide the interviews, with the duration of each interview ranging between 45 and 75 min. The interview guideline comprised 9 open-ended questions covering topic areas such as military life as a woman, challenges, sources of strength, and the processes by which women have understood their military experiences.

2.3. Procedure and analysis

Interviews took place (with the first author as interviewer) face-to-face, by telephone, or by Skype. Interviews were audio-recorded with the exception of one participant who consented to participate in the study but not to be audio-recorded. Detailed notes were taken during her interview in order to provide additional contextual information and corroboration for the other interviews.

Interview data were analyzed using narrative analysis. Narratives serve as a means by which individuals shape and construct their identities and make meaning out of their experiences (Bruner, 2004, p. 692; Kohler-Riessman, 1993; Smith and Sparkes, 2008). This methodology can also help to “illuminate critical moments in which changes in health and wellbeing are likely to occur” (Sandelowski, 1991, p. 164).

Kohler-Riessman (2008) has described three approaches to narrative analysis that were used to analyze the qualitative interviews of this research, both within and across interviews: 1) thematic analysis, which involves an analysis of the content of the interviews for frequent patterns, themes, and ideas; 2) structural analysis, an approach that examines the participants' ‘telling’ of their stories, or the ‘form’ that their narratives take; and 3) performative or dialogic analysis, or the purpose each woman had in telling a particular narrative at a particular time point to the interviewer (Kohler-Riessman, 2008). These three approaches are intertwined and are not necessarily analyzed separately.

In line with recommendations by Morrow (2005) and Stige et al. (2009), we used reflexivity, *verstehen* and mutual construction, credibility checks, and interpretation grounded in examples to establish rigor in this study.

3. Results

Of importance to the psychological well-being of the women in this study was having a sense of place in which they felt connected, emotionally attached, and like they belonged. Several narratives depicted the military as a particular place, and the women made efforts to assert themselves in their environments and develop military identities. However, some women described places of belonging *outside* of the military, or where the military was viewed as one among several places of belonging. Within the narratives were also inconsistencies as to where these women felt most connected, with different narrative threads highlighting a process of negotiation for the women between the military and home. The way participants described their experiences appeared to mirror a process of trying to construct places for themselves that were like ‘home’. Further, the women engaged in continuously modifying such places for themselves according to what they perceived to be most psychologically beneficial.

In her review, Mallett (2004) summarizes the work of researchers and theorists from a number of disciplines who have written about the concept of ‘home’, with the goal of understanding its meanings. She aimed to answer the question, “Is home (a) place(s), (a) space(s), feeling(s), practices, and/or an active state of being in the world?” and concluded that home has, in fact, been written about in all of these capacities and can be any of these things (2004, p. 65). We view place as a meaningful space through a process of narrative meaning-making. Throughout the discussion of our findings then, we will refer to the negotiations of place that the women undergo as a process of constructing and defining *home bases*. The term was appropriate in this particular context because of the home-like qualities that participants often allotted to the places and experiences they described (i.e., the military as well as home/civilian) and the belonging strategies that they employed in order for the military to be their place. However, the term also captures the *process* that the women undergo in negotiating their attachments to home versus the military (‘base’).

3.1. The military as a home base

3.1.1. The military as family and as a primary place of connection

Several women described the military in a way that indicated that it was where they were most comfortable and connected. The idea of the military family, for example, was salient for several of the women in this study, and in line with one meaning of home as being family (e.g.,

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