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How Being Aware of Military Culture Influences Social Work Practice With Female Military Personnel

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Walden University

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Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

John Raymond Gonzalez III

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
2022

Abstract

How Being Aware of Military Culture Influences Social Work

Practice With Female Military Personnel

by

John R. Gonzalez III

MSW, University of Central Florida, 2014

BS, University of Florida, 2006

Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Social Work

Walden University

May 2022

Abstract

Active-duty women in the military seek help through the Family Advocacy Program (FAP) on military bases from social workers with a master's degree in social work (MSW) who are hired by the federal government or by firms that contract with social workers to serve military personnel. Most of those social workers have no military background per se, which brings into question how being aware of the military culture might influence their practice with female military personnel. Grounded in self-awareness theory, which places focus on one's awareness relative to one's culture and environment at any time, the purpose of this action research study was to explore the influence of awareness of military culture on social workers in their practice with female military personnel, especially as it relates to the combat experience of active-duty women. Seven social workers employed in FAPs on three United States Air Force bases were interviewed. Data were collected and analyzed using constant comparison and thematic analysis to identify common themes, trends, and patterns that may have policy and practice implications for increasing awareness of the military culture among MSW social workers in FAP. Findings indicate social workers help female military personnel take advantage of and benefit from the social and economic opportunities the military offers them. The implication for positive social change is for social workers employed in FAPs across all service branches to address military cultural to provide female military personnel with better services, especially those who have served and/or who will serve in combat where male bias is most prevalent.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate my work to my father, who passed away in 2004. His knowledge and influence encouraged me to continue to strive for greatness. He inspired me to not be stagnant in my goals or education. My father helped make me the man I am today, and I know he is still watching over me.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study and Literature Review

Introduction

Although women represent only 15% of the military population, their contribution to the military and to its mission has made the American military one of the strongest in the world (Boyd et al., 2013; Conard & Sauls, 2014; Middleton & Craig, 2012). However, as women have been placed in new roles, particularly in direct combat (Boyd et al., 2013; Goldstein et al., 2017), they have returned from that experience with a variety of psychosocial problems and mental health needs (Conard & Sauls, 2014; Maiocco & Smith, 2016). As such, social workers who have no military background often provide services on military bases via the Family Advocacy Program (FAP) to active female military personnel who have returned from combat or are training for combat. Within the context that women may have been impacted in the therapeutic process by the male-oriented bias in the military culture, social workers on bases must be aware of the military culture in practices with active female military personnel.

There are four sections in this project. The first provides the introduction and overview of the study. The second section highlights the methodology used in collecting and analyzing data. In the third section, the findings of the study are presented. Last, the implications of the study for policy, practice, future research, and social change are identified and recommendations posed.

Problem Statement

Social workers are challenged to have an awareness of the male bias in the military culture when they practice with female military personnel, especially those who

have served and those who will serve in a combat role. Of the 2 million service members, women comprise approximately 15% of the forces that are deployed to these combat zones (Boyd et al., 2013; Reeves et al., 2016; Street et al., 2009). In 2018, the Center for National Security noted that 600 women were recruited for or transferred to combat occupations and 12 women graduated from Ranger School. In the Marines, there were 92 women serving in combat, although only 11 women were in infantry positions.

Even with the increasing number of women serving in the military, the extent to which women are integrated into combat positions is questionable (Callahan, 2016). In combat battalions, the military culture is one in which there is a male bias and men are often perceived to be the only ones to be in combat (Callahan, 2016). As such, women often have a minority status that relegates them to maternal and sisterly roles in combat units (Crowley & Sandoff, 2017). In this situation, women may experience considerable verbal and emotional abuse in the role of being a soldier in combat at the very least.

In addition, women in the military run the risk of being sexually assaulted. McGraw et al. (2016) noted that although more men than women are sexually assaulted in the military each year, the rate of sexual assaults is higher for women, which means that some women are sexually assaulted multiple times. Khan et al. (2018) highlighted the fact that men often sexually assault women in combat situations, which is referenced as military sexual trauma (MST). In addition to sexual assault, women in combat may experience traumatic events as do men, such as witnessing killing or losing someone close to them.

In the context of self-awareness, those who provide social services on military bases need to have some awareness of the male bias in the military culture to understand the psychological needs of the women they serve, especially the needs of women who will serve and have served in combat situations (McGraw et al., 2016). In this regard, several researchers have shared concerns about client-provider communication as it relates to awareness of the military culture in providing service to women (Chanfreau-Coffinier et al., 2018; Kimerling et al., 2015; Koblinsky et al., 2017; Mankowski & Everett 2016; Wagner et al., 2015). In turn, this issue can impact the therapeutic alliance (Mankowski & Everett, 2016; Wagner et al., 2015).

On military bases, the FAP is designed to provide mental health service to active military personnel and their families. As such, the federal government and other private companies recruit social workers with and without military background to meet the mental health needs of individuals and families on military bases across the nation. Although social workers in the FAP may or may not have an awareness of the male bias in the military culture, research is lacking that shows how awareness of this cultural bias influences their practice with female military personnel, especially practice with those who are preparing to serve in combat and those who have returned from serving in combat.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this action research study was to explore how awareness of the military culture influences social workers in establishing a positive relationship with female military personnel they serve. This information, which was obtained from social

workers in FAP, is needed for those social workers to better understand how the lack of awareness of the military culture may impact the therapeutic process, especially with women who have served in combat and those being trained for combat.

The following three research questions were used to guide the study:

- Research Question 1. In what ways are social workers aware of the military culture in building rapport with female military personnel?
- Research Question 2. How do social workers address the strengths in the military culture in their practices with female military personnel?
- Research Question 3. In what ways do social workers think the therapeutic relationship with female military personnel could be improved with awareness of the military culture?

Key Definition and Description of Participants

Prior to presenting the findings, the description of the participants was presented by age, gender, social work experience, and job title. All participants were women between 35 and 60 years of age who have been employed as a family advocacy treatment manager (FATM) between 2 and 15 years. The mean age of participants was 47 years of age, with the two youngest participants being 35 years of age and the oldest participant being 56 years of age. The average number of years employed for six participants was 3.5 years with the seventh participant having been employed for 15 years. The following definition of military culture was read to each participant before the interview began:

Military culture is a shared, collectivistic, and militaristic cultural enmeshment.

From this broad perspective on military culture, it is necessary to understand the

structure of the military, the language used, the commitments military personnel make to a unit of service, and how military personnel value honor and service” (Lane, 2019; Tschaeppe, 2018). In this context, Callahan (2016) characterized military culture as basically a “combat, masculine-warrior” premise that is used to prepare men (and women) for combat. It is a culture that men shaped, and being a soldier is viewed as a masculine role only and is perceived as men’s work.

Nature of the Doctoral Project

This qualitative study utilized an online interview approach to collect data from social workers regarding their awareness of the military culture. The participants consisted of social workers with a master’s degree in social work (MSW) who are hired either by the federal government or by associations that provide social work services to individuals and families in FAPs on military bases. Twelve social workers who have no military service experience were recruited from three U.S. Air Force (USAF) bases to participate in this study with the hopes that at least seven of those social workers would participate in the study. Kristensen and Raven (2015) suggested that a mediator or “gatekeeper” approach allows researchers to use their formal or informal positions and relationships to connect with potential participants. As such, I invited the 12 social workers to participate in the study. Of the 12 social workers, seven responded to volunteer to participate in the study.

Once the sample was selected, a day and time for each online interview was determined. A semistructured interview guide provided an open forum that allowed each participant to share openly and offer their perspective and insight regarding the study

questions. I collected and saved the data for analysis using the online interviewing platform Zoom (<https://zoom.us>). I then coded and analyzed the data using Microsoft Excel to identify common trends, patterns, content, and themes.

Significance of the Study

The findings in this study have implications for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers concerned about understanding how being aware of the male bias in the military culture influences social workers in their practice with female military personnel. Policymakers may need to mandate funding for the training for social workers with little or no military background that focuses on the military culture, especially those social workers employed in FAP and who serve active female military personnel. This training would provide them with additional understanding in meeting the needs of female military personal who may have experienced gender discrimination as a result of the male bias in the culture of the military, especially women who have been or will be in combat.

Implications for Practice

The implications for practice include that this study may offer social workers employed on three military bases the ability to comprehend how the male bias in the military culture influences their practice with active female military personnel, some of whom will experience or have experienced combat. Additionally, this study may provide insight into services or practices needed to enhance awareness of the military culture, which could contribute to efficacy in treatment and services. For example, social workers may need to utilize a narrative approach to allow a female client to share her military journey as a means of establishing a therapeutic alliance with her. Furthermore, the

findings should help stakeholders (e.g., the federal government) identify concerns and gaps in training and education within their facilities to ensure that clinical social workers are adequately equipped to provide quality care for female military members.

Implications for Research

The findings of this action research study could offer a solid foundation for further research regarding the need for social workers to be aware of the military culture. Based on the findings in this study, a quantitative study could identify the extent to which clinical social workers are aware of the military culture. Another study could look at the efficacy related to military cultural awareness training among social workers. An additional study could also focus specifically on perceptions of female military personnel the affect that the male bias has had on them.

Social Change Implications

Self-awareness theory suggests that self-awareness is contingent on the environment in which one functions (Quappe & Cantatore, 2006). Social workers in the FAP can become more awareness of the male bias in the military culture as they function in the military environment, though additional awareness education and training on the military culture may be warranted. With a greater awareness of the male bias in the military culture, social workers in the FAPs across the nation could help improve the overall integration of women into the military.

Social workers in the FAP offer unique therapeutic experiences with their ability to provide person-centered, evidence-based treatment and are in the position to offer services and resources for female combat veterans. However, with more self-awareness

about the experiences of women in the military, social workers in the FAP can implement gender-specific interventions that allow female military personnel to describe and give voice to their experiences in the military. The hope is that with a better understanding of those experiences, social workers in the FAP will provide services that result in positive lifelong mental health outcomes for female who serve in the military, especially those who have experienced or will experience combat.

Theoretical Framework

Duval and Wicklund (1972) introduced self-awareness theory with the premise that individuals can focus on themselves and their environment at any time, which enables self-evaluation. A major proposition in the theory is that self-evaluation allows individuals to compare the self to standards of behavior in their environments, and in this process, individuals are able to make changes and/or modify thinking or behavior relative to standards of correctness. Specifically, Merrell-James (2019) posited that self-awareness theory explains how individuals can be aware of “the self” relative to their culture, which in turn allows for individuals to identify their biases when becoming aware of other cultures (Merrell-James, 2019).

In the context of self-awareness theory, Quappe and Cantatore (2006) proposed a four-level model of cultural awareness. At the parochial level, individuals are aware only of their own way of doing things as the best way. At the ethnocentric level, individuals recognize that doing things in a culturally different way is possible, but they believe the way it is done in their own culture is best. At the synergistic level, individuals realize that choosing the best way of doing things regardless of cultural results in benefits. In the

participatory level, individuals realize that awareness of other cultures results in bringing people together via dialogue, which can bring about creativity.

In being aware of the military culture, Callahan (2016) highlighted the notion that military culture is basically a “combat, masculine-warrior” premise wherein preparing men for combat has been at the core of a culture shaped by men. Being a soldier is viewed as a masculine role only and is perceived as men’s work. In this culture, Crowley and Sandoff (2017) found that female soldiers used masculinity, such as being a tomboy, to fit into their combat units, or used femininity to be “sisters” or “mothers” to male soldiers. In this context, male soldiers used sexual harassment against female soldiers to signal a lack of acceptance. In terms of accomplishing the masculine duties, women are empowered, but in terms of truly being accepted, women are disempowered.

For social workers, the National Association of Social Work (NASW, 2021) Code of Ethics establishes that cultural awareness is a professional standard of practice. In working with female military personnel who may have been sexually abused and/or sexually harassed in combat, it is important for social workers in a therapeutic milieu to be aware that women who are or have been in combat situations have adhered to a culture that is at its core biased against them. As a standard of professional practice and a first step in the therapeutic process, social workers must be aware of the military culture to form an alliance with female military personnel, especially those who are or have been in combat positions and engage them in the therapeutic process.

Values and Ethics

The NASW (2021) has created a set of values and principles to establish a foundation for social workers to adhere to guidelines that ensure the safety of the practitioner and client. The primary focus of the social work profession is to increase the quality of life for people and ensure their basic human needs are met; especially groups who are underrepresented, oppressed, living in poverty, and/or vulnerable. This aligns with the core values of the NASW Code of Ethics, which are service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence (NASW, 2021). For the purpose of this project, I focused on the identified core values of service and competence. These core values align well with this project as it explored a concern plaguing a particular population and looks to provide knowledge for social workers to obtain further competency to address the issue.

The core value of service within the social work profession is demonstrated in this project through the efforts of identifying how military cultural awareness can help build rapport among active-duty female soldiers. Social work ethical principles related to this value suggest the importance of social workers using knowledge, values, and skills to help address social problems and help those in need (NASW, 2021). Furthermore, the goal of the social work profession is to ensure that services, information, and resources are equally available for all people (NASW, 2021).

Competency is another important component inherent to the social work core values that illustrate the necessity for continued growth in knowledge (NASW, 2021). This ensures that social workers continue to strive to increase their knowledge and skills

to incorporate into daily practice. In addition, the NASW values and principles related to competency encourage social workers to contribute to the knowledge base of the profession, creating an increase in effective services and evidenced-based practice (NASW, 2021). The goal of this project was to provide additional knowledge to the field of social work as well as generate information to ensure social workers are competent in this area.

Literature Review

Given its up-to-date nature and comprehensiveness, Google Scholar was the primary source used to identify articles relevant to my research topic. The key terms used were *clinical social worker*, *women/females in the military*, *women/females in combat*, *military culture*, *veterans*, *clinical practice*, *combat*, *combat experience*, and *community*. In order to ensure the information was up-to-date and accurately depicted gaps in research, only articles published in or after 2015 were included in the review. Exceptions were made with respect to older articles that document the history of women in the military. The goal of this search was to determine the gap in research that would generate my problem statement.

Women in the Military

Since 1973, there has been a steady increase in female active-duty members within all military branches (Jomana, 2014; Muirhead et al., 2017). From 1990 to 1997, there was a 2.6% increase in female active-duty members with a subsequent increase of 0.9% by 2011 (Jomana, 2014). Currently, women represent approximately 14.5% of the

military active-duty population, with 18% contributing to the reserves, and 9.4% of the reserve population comprised of veterans (Koblinsky et al., 2016; Muirhead et al., 2017).

The contribution of women to the military and its mission has made the American military one of the strongest in the world (Boyd et al., 2013; Conard & Sauls, 2014; Koblinsky et al., 2016; Middleton & Craig, 2012). Moreover, the population of women in the military continues to increase with 20% of new recruits being women (Koblinsky et al., 2016; Strong et al., 2015). As a result, researchers estimate that the female veteran population will increase by 17% in the next 20 years (Strong et al., 2015). As the number of female veterans increase, so will the need for them to access appropriate physical and mental health services.

Noncombat Roles

Although women have historically been restricted to base activities during previous wars, their contribution has been significant and important to the combat mission of the military (Street et al., 2009). Women's contributions during war have been documented as early as 1775 during the War of Independence when women accompanied their male relatives or significant others to the battlefield to provide services such as cooking, clothes washing, and wound care (Chaumba & Bride, 2010). During World War I, more than 49,000 women served as nurses, typists, clerks, and telephone operators. World War II allowed women with special skills to participate in certain roles, such as piloting military aircrafts (Chaumba & Bride, 2010).

In the Vietnam War, women were primarily nurses or clerical assistants, and their enlistment was capped at 2% of the military forces. Even so, their involvement

demonstrated a significant importance of women's roles within the military forces (Street et al., 2009). The roles and representation of women in the military increased during the Gulf War, with women comprising 11% of military forces, and less than half of those women were assigned medical or administrative duties (Barry, 2013; Carney et al., 2003; Street et al., 2009). During this war, women were deployed in important combat support duties, such as military policing and flight fueling (Barry, 2013). Street et al. (2009) identified that with the shift in roles, women's experiences with combat increased. Moreover, data demonstrated that women encountered at least one combat experience during the Gulf War (Street et al., 2009).

Combat Roles

Since the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, women have reported an increase in combat exposure and traumatic events (Strong et al., 2015). Legislation has granted women the opportunity to serve in combat arms positions, which places women in new areas of combat exposure, including armor, air defense artillery, infantry, and Special Forces (SOF). Those new arenas of combat are likely to expose women to new forms of combat-related trauma, as well as deployment risk related to mental health (Strong et al., 2015).

After the Gulf War, new legislation and changes in the Department of Defense policies eased restrictions that excluded women from combat-related positions (Street et al., 2009). This created additional opportunities for women to obtain new occupations that were once previously restricted to them (Chaumba & Bride, 2010). More than 2 million men and women have served in Afghanistan and Iraq, with many returning with significant wounds manifesting in either physical or mental injuries (Street et al., 2009).

Of the 2 million service members, women comprised approximately 15% of the forces deployed to these combat zones (Boyd et al., 2013; Reeves et al., 2016; Street et al., 2009).

Gender-Specific Services Needed

These deployments have included by far the largest number of military women in American history (Reeves et al., 2016). Gross et al. (2018) observed MST rates in women veterans who served during the Iraq and Afghanistan war, which generated an estimated 14% to 49% among this population. The numbers will continue to increase as new conflicts emerge (Reeves et al., 2016). With this said, as these women return to civilian life, it will be imperative that there are adequate mental and physical health services available to this particular population of women. Additionally, these services should be cultivated to encompass best practices dedicated to addressing the unique needs of women who have experienced combat.

Female Military Personnel and the Military Culture

Lane (2019) proposed that military culture is a shared, collectivistic, and militaristic cultural enmeshment. From this broad perspective on military culture, it is necessary to understand the structure of the military, the language used, the commitments military personnel make to a unit of service, and how military personnel value honor and service (Lane, 2019; Tschaeppe, 2018). Lane contended that service providers must practice cultural humility in order to understand the unique nature of the military culture and treat members of the military.

Relative to Lane's (2019) perception of the military culture, Callahan (2016) highlighted the notion that the military culture is basically a "combat, masculine-warrior" premise wherein preparing men for combat is at the core of a culture men have shaped, and being a soldier is viewed as a masculine role only and is perceived as men's work. This aspect of the military culture presents a dilemma for particular populations who want to experience the broader cultural experience of being in the military. This is especially true for female military members who serve in combat.

Combat Situations

In combat situations, women may be especially vulnerable to the masculine-warrior aspect of the military culture. Crowley and Sandoff (2017) found that female soldiers used masculinity, such as being a tomboy, to fit into their combat units, or used femininity to be "sisters" or "mothers" to male soldiers. In this context, male soldiers used sexual harassment against female soldiers to signal a lack of acceptance. In terms of accomplishing the masculine duties, women are empowered, but in terms of truly being accepted, women are disempowered.

Need for Awareness

Although Atuel and Castro (2018) emphasized the importance of understanding military cultural competence, awareness of the military culture must precede being competent within the military culture. Being aware of a culture that is based on the masculine warrior premise is especially necessary to understand how women adhere to a culture that seems biased against them. Specifically, women in the military are subjected to high rates of military sexual harassment and assault (Blais & Monteith, 2019; Khan et

al., 2018). In fact, MST continues to be a major concern within the military with approximately 20%–43% of women identifying an experience of MST (Gross et al., 2018).

In addition to the influence of the military culture, female service members, like their male counterparts, may experience a variety of traumatic events in combat, including being wounded, losing someone, seeing dead bodies, or killing an enemy combatant (see also Boyd et al., 2013; Gross et al., 2018; Khan et al., 2018; Street et al., 2009; Strong et al., 2015). The combination of MST, military stressors, and combat-related traumatic events has created complex mental and health care needs for women veterans (Gross et al., 2018; Ming Foyne et al., 2018) and led to an increase in risk of women veterans having physical and mental health problems (Gross et al., 2018).

Awareness of Military Culture in Services for Female Military Personnel

The military/veteran culture can add an additional component to the complexity of health care needs of female military personnel (Butler et al., 2015). Several researchers have shared concerns about client–provider communication as it relates to awareness of the military culture in services provision to women (Chanfreau-Coffinier et al., 2018; Kimerling et al., 2015; Koblinsky et al., 2017; Mankowski & Everett 2016; Wagner et al., 2015). Researchers have also emphasized the importance of the therapeutic alliance and how communication between client and provider should be valued (Mankowski & Everett, 2016; Wagner et al., 2015).

Use of Veterans Affairs Services

Women in the military have become a more complex and diverse population than in previous decades due to changes in women's roles and paradigm shifts within the military (Kimerling et al., 2015; Mankowski & Everett, 2016; Tsai et al., 2015). The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is the main source of health care for veterans (Mankowski & Everett, 2016; Mattocks, 2015; Tsai et al., 2015), and as such, the military population depends primarily on the VA for a variety of health care needs (Mattocks, 2015). Within the past decade, the number of women receiving care from the VA has more than doubled (Mattocks, 2015). Yet, of the estimated total population of 850,000 female veterans who utilize VA services (Mankowski & Everett, 2016), only 9% use the VA for care (Mankowski & Everett, 2016; Mattocks, 2015; Muirhead et al., 2017).

However, Tsai et al. (2015) found that 24% of female veterans identified the VA as their main source of health care, which suggests that community agencies address additional health care needs of female veterans (Chanfreau-Coffinier et al., 2018). Wagner et al. (2015) attributed the low numbers of women accessing care in the VA system to the lack of services available to them compared to those available for males. Gender-specific care, such as prenatal care and reproductive health, are lacking (Murihead et al., 2017; Tsai et al., 2015), and research findings have indicated that there is a need for service providers in both the VA and community settings (Mattocks, 2015).

The VA has generated interventions to increase gender-specific military cultural awareness. For example, Fox et al. (2016) discussed a web-based training called *Caring for Woman Veterans* (CWV), which is a program that offers VA employees the

opportunity to increase gender-specific knowledge and sensitivity. However, the findings show that only 10% of employees utilized the CWV training, on average. This lack of utilization demonstrates the need for additional programs that enhance the awareness of the military culture as it relates to women (Fox et al., 2016). Although the VA provides training and support for providers, clinicians have fewer women on their caseloads, which results in providers having little need to understand gender-specific practice with female veterans, especially those who are combat veterans (deKleijn et al., 2015).

Mattocks (2015) highlighted the concerns of having multiple sources of health care due to the possible problems that arise due to the involvement of several agencies/organization address different types of problems. The intent of the Patient Aligned Care Team program in the VA was to use an interdisciplinary care team for assessment and intervention with veterans in need of mental health services (Leung et al., 2019). This benefitted men more than women, given the greater use of the VA among men (Mattocks, 2015).

Community-Based Services

Lane (2018) noted the need for providers to have cultural humility in providing services to military members. Chanfreau-Coffinier et al. (2018) recognized that providers in communities may not understand the military culture or the stressors of military life as they impact female veterans. As such, if the community provider lacks the cultural humility to understand women's military service, then they may not offer appropriate and/or adequate services to the female veterans (Chanfreau-Coffinier et al., 2018; Koblinsky et al., 2017; Wagner et al., 2015). Despite the lack of service for female

veterans in the VA, the VA has attempted to provide access to veterans in the community.

For example, one of the known initiatives established is *Primary Care-Mental Health* (PC-MHI). The intent of this program is to provide specialists and/or case managers in primary care clinics with the option to offer care for veterans with mental health illnesses (Leung et al., 2019). PC-MHI is team and population focused and relies on measurement and evidence-based practices, but the major limitation of the program is that the primary care clinics serve many clients annually. Nonetheless, the VA has tried to provide access to care for women in community-based agencies.

Social Work Services on Military Bases

FAPs exist on military bases to (a) provide military personnel and their families with adequate services and resources to help build and identify individual and family strengths, (b) develop and increase protective factors, and (c) ensure safety and the well-being of service members and their family. This program utilizes social workers as the primary clinical provider, and since its inception, social workers have been selected and/or recruited from around the United States. The recommended requirements for these social workers include an MSW degree from an accredited University and independent clinical licensure. Although social workers are educated and well versed in clinical practice, being unaware of the military culture could have an impact on the social workers ability to provide appropriate treatment and services. Geppert (2017) noted that children of veterans often engage in “giving back” by joining the military or working in a type of military organization.

Summary

Moore (2019) highlighted that it is important for those who provide clinical services to military personnel to understand, as well as “appreciate,” the uniqueness of the military culture. Moore argued that the lack of awareness will influence treatment outcomes, and this could be especially true in addressing the needs of female military personnel. While social workers in the VA represent an integral part of service provision for female military personnel and social workers in community-based agencies provide services as well, licensed social workers in the FAPs often provide services to active military personnel and their families on military bases. Given that these social workers may have often have no military background - either as military members or experience in practice with military personnel, they may be unaware of the influence that the military culture has on the female military personnel, especially those women who have experienced in training or in service the masculine-warrior culture associated with combat. With that in mind, this study focuses on how awareness of the military culture influences the relationship between FAP social workers and female military personnel.

Section 2: Research Design and Data Collection

This study focuses on how social workers provide services to women in an environment where male bias is often still prevalent (Meyer et al., 2016). In the VA and in community agency settings, licensed clinical social workers are typically those who provide care for veterans; however, licensed social workers provide services to active female military personnel on military bases, as well. This means that those social workers should be aware of how the military culture may affect female military personnel, especially those women who are being trained for combat and those who have returned from combat.

In this section, I present a comprehensive overview of the research design of the study. The methodology of the study is discussed relative to the participants and means of collecting data. Last, I highlight the data analysis and the ethical procedures used in conducting the study.

Research Design

The purpose of this action research study was to explore how awareness of the military culture influences the ability of social workers to establish a positive relationship with female military personnel they serve. The answers to the following questions have provided insight into how clinical social workers in the FAP can provide the services that women in the military need by gaining a better understanding of the military culture:

- Research Question 1. In what ways are social workers aware of the military culture in building rapport with female military personnel?

- Research Question 2. How do social workers address the strengths in the military culture in their practices with female military personnel?
- Research Question 3. In what ways do social workers think the therapeutic relationship with female military personnel could be improved with awareness of the military culture?

This action research study focused on the perceptions of clinical social workers regarding how being aware of the male bias in the military culture influenced their practice with female military personnel. As such, the findings in this project showed how social workers might make changes in their practice with female military personnel relative to the influence of the military culture in their experiences. In addition, the findings may result in recommendations for training, funding, and targeted services for active female military personnel on military bases.

An interview group approach incorporates a collective approach to making social and cultural change (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010). In this project, the use of the interview approach allowed clinically licensed, social workers in FAP to share their thoughts about how being aware of the male bias in the military culture influences their practice with active female military personnel. The responses of the participants provided valuable information regarding how being aware of the male bias in the military culture might influence their practice with female military personnel who are preparing for combat or have returned from a deployment to a combat situation.

The following operational definitions are worth considering in understanding this study. First, *self-awareness* is the ability to gain insight into one's own "self," which

includes exploring one's own culture and race relative to bias (Merrell-James, 2019; Silvia, 2020). Second, *cultural awareness* means gaining insight into levels of awareness about the values, belief, issues, and complexities of cultures outside of one's own. Third, *military culture* encompasses a warrior-like mindset, which is a mission-first focus with a "combat, masculine-warrior" ideology, regardless of life-or-death situations (Callahan, 2016; Carter & Watson, 2018). Fourth, *combat* adds different complexities to military culture, due to environmental, psychological, emotional, and cultural influences that can shift the paradigm of the core cultural components of the military (Carter & Watson, 2018). Lastly, within this study, a *social worker* is defined as a civilian working with the military, with little to no experience with the military. These social workers are also clinically licensed and have obtained their MSW from an accredited university.

Methodology

Using an online interview approach to collect data, I asked participants to share their perspectives in response to five questions that elicited their perceptions about how being aware of the male bias in the military culture might help social workers improve the services they provide to active female military personnel, especially those who have experienced combat or will experience combat. Approximately 60 minutes was allowed to pose questions to each participant, and their responses to questions were audio recorded. The recorded responses were then transcribed, and the content was analyzed through coding, which allowed for identification of categories and themes (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Participants

Twelve nonmilitary MSW social workers from three USAF bases who provide services via FAP were recruited to participate in the study. Nonmilitary social workers were recruited to better understand the extent to which social workers, not members of the military, are aware of the military culture. Kristensen and Raven (2015) suggested that a mediator or “gatekeeper” approach allows researcher to use their formal or informal positions and relationships to connect with potential participants. As such, participants known to me as a function of my position in FAP were invited to participate in the study.

The rationale for selecting these participants was to gain insights into how the awareness of the military culture influences their practice with female military personnel. The perspectives of social workers who have no military background are important to understand the need for social workers in FAP to have more education and training to better address the needs of women who are active in the military. Additionally, the participants provide services on military bases and to active military personnel, which is often different than services social workers in the VA or in community settings may provide.

An email invitation was sent to the selected participants. The invitation provided the social workers with information that would allow them to make an informed decision about participation in the study on a voluntary basis. A window of 10 days was given for responses to see how many social workers accepted the invitation to participate in the interview. Those who agreed to participate did so via email by responding, “I consent.”

Once the sample was selected, a day and time for the online interview was determined, and on the date of the interview, participants were introduced to the study (see the interview script in the Appendix).

Instrumentation

Although no instrument was used in this study, a structured interview schedule was used to elicit information from participants in the interview regarding their perspectives on practice with female military members, as well as those who have experienced combat, that pertain to cultural awareness for this population. The following questions were presented to participants:

1. In what ways do you describe your cultural background in the home in which you grew and developed?
2. In what ways do you think your cultural background is like the military culture?
3. Based on your practice with female military personnel, how do you think service in the military might provide females with opportunities that they otherwise might not have?
4. In what ways do you think females in combat or in training for combat might have different experiences than women who are not in combat or in training for combat?
5. If you know that a female might be deployed for combat or has returned from combat, in what ways might awareness of military culture help establish rapport with her?

These questions are related to the research questions in the following ways.

Participant Questions 1 through 3 address Research Question 1. Participant Questions 3 and 4 address Research Question 2. Last, Participant Questions 3 through 5 address Research Question 3. The relationships between participant questions and research questions are shown in Table 1.

Table 1*Relationship Between Participant Questions and Research Questions*

PQ	RQ1: In what ways are social workers aware of the military culture in building rapport with female military personnel?	RQ2: How do social workers address the strengths in the military culture in their practices with female military personnel?	RQ3: In what ways do social workers think the therapeutic relationship with female military personnel could be improved with awareness of the military culture?
PQ1: In what ways do you describe your cultural background in the home in which you grew and developed?	X		
PQ2: In what ways do you think your cultural background is like the military culture?	X		
PQ3: Based on your practice with female military personnel, how do you think service in the military might provide females with opportunities that they otherwise might not have?	X	X	
PQ4: In what ways do you think females in combat or in training for combat might have different experiences than women who are not in combat or in training for combat?		X	X
PQ5: If you know that a female might be deployed for combat or has returned from combat, in what ways might awareness of military culture help establish rapport with her?			X

Note. PQ = participant question; RQ = research question.

I used Microsoft Excel to code, categorize, and identify common ideas, themes, and patterns in responses to the research questions (see McNiff, 2017). First, the data accumulated from participants were compiled into themes. Second, the themes in the data were categorized. Third, the themes were coded, and last, common ideas, themes, and/or patterns were identified.

I used both thematic analysis and constant comparative methods to analyze the data in this study. Thematic analysis is considered to be a descriptive method used to characterize and analyze themes in data (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). The constant comparative method focuses on the continuous comparison of data and themes, to generate, improve, and develop new categories during the coding process (Williams & Moser, 2019). As such, the goal of the analysis was to generate a conceptual theory that accounts for the ways social workers in USAF FAPs can establish rapport with female military personnel. This approach involves open and selective coding to identify themes in the data that addressed three research questions. Open coding is the process that allows for identifying and categorizing words that relate to each research question and categorizing them in some way. Selective coding is the point in the process when the researcher begins to apply theory to the categories identified.

An open-coding process to structure how the information provided would be captured was used to ensure that the data and experience of participants would be accurately collected (McNiff, 2017). Furthermore, organizing the obtained information to identify additional subcategories within the primary categories allowed for connecting categories (McNiff, 2017). The goal of this analysis was to gather data that could provide

further insight into the cultural awareness among clinical social workers for female veterans.

The reliability of this study was addressed through *methodological triangulation*, which is defined as a method of analyzing multiple data points to help people understand the experience of a common situation or occurrence (Fusch et al., 2018). I used triangulation in this study to compare the perspective of participants' responses, which should generate reliability in the outcome data (Fusch et al., 2018). The more reliability there is in response to each question, the more likely the content is to be valid. *Content validity* is the extent to which there is agreement among respondents about the content in responses to questions. As such, triangulation in this study helped determine reliability, and in turn, reliability determined content validity to an extent. Transferability of the findings in this study were determined by applying findings to the world of practice (Fusch et al., 2018).

Ethical Procedures

The participants in this study were informed about the goals, intentions, process, risks, as well as the benefits of this research project. Participants were made aware of the voluntary nature of the study and the ability to withdraw at any time. In addition, the information obtained from participants is confidential and secure. During the data collection process, no harm came to any participant; nor was there any conflict that arose between participants and myself. There were no incentives offered to participants for their role in the study. Furthermore, I had Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to further ensure this study meets high ethical standards.

Summary

The section addressed the research design in terms of data collection. The methodology section highlighted the selection and recruitment of participants, as well as a description of the guide that was used to elicit information from the participants. The last two sections showed how the data were analyzed with the aid of Microsoft Excel and the ethical procedures that were followed in the conducting of the study.

Section 3: Presentation of the Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this action research study was to explore how awareness of the military culture influences social workers in establishing a positive relationship with the female military personnel they serve. This information that was obtained from social workers in FAP is needed for those social workers to better understand how awareness of the military culture may influence the therapeutic process, especially with women who have served in combat and those being trained for combat.

The following research questions guided the study. First, in what ways are social workers aware of the military culture in building rapport with female military personnel? Second, how do social workers address the strengths in the military culture in their practices with female military personnel. Last, in what ways do social workers think the therapeutic relationship with female military personnel could be improved with awareness of the military culture?

To address the three research questions, five questions were posed to social work participants in the study:

1. In what ways do you describe your cultural background in the home in which you grew and developed?
2. In what ways do you think your cultural background is like or different from the military culture?

3. Based on your practice with female military personnel, how do you think service in the military might provide females with opportunities that they otherwise might not have?
4. In what ways do you think females in combat or in training for combat might have different experiences than women who are not in combat or in training for combat?
5. If you know that a female might be deployed for combat or has returned from combat, in what ways might awareness of military culture help you establish rapport with her?

In the context of the worldwide pandemic, the data collection process was completed using the audio recording component of the Zoom videoconferencing platform. Each participant's interview was scheduled individually at a time chosen by the participant to allow for flexibility, and participants consented to these interviews before I conducted them. All data were collected, transcribed, and analyzed by me. This section contains a review of the data analysis and findings.

The focus in Section 3 is on data collection and recruitment process, as well as on the process by which data were collected and analyzed. Furthermore, the findings of the analysis will be presented in this section, and even though the identity of participants is confidential, a brief description of each will be presented. The section will close with a summary and a transition into Section 4.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data collection process took approximately 2 months. I sent email messages requesting participation in the study to 12 licensed clinical social workers assigned to provide services on three different military bases. These social workers were selected based on their knowledge and experience working with active-duty female personnel. Of the invitations sent, seven social workers volunteered to participate in the research study and replied with “I consent,” which indicated both willingness and consent to participate in the study. The Walden University IRB approved this approach to obtaining informed consent (Approval no. 10-30-20-0657741).

I then sent emails to each of the seven participants to inquire about their availability for being interviewed. Each participant’s schedule was different, and it became difficult to schedule interviews due to increased workloads of participants, COVID, and time-off for the holidays. However, all the participants were able to be scheduled and interviews were conducted.

Data Analysis

During each interview, the same questions were posed to participants with responses recorded on Zoom. After each interview, the audio was converted into an MPEG-2 audio layer III (mp3) file and stored on my computer, which is in a secure office space and requires the use of a password known only to me. After collecting and transcribing the data from the audio recordings, I reviewed both the transcription and audio a second time for accuracy and consistency. I then labeled each transcription with the participant’s identification number (e.g., P1, P2, etc.). The data were then coded using

Microsoft Excel and entered by categories, trends, and themes. The coding was targeted to identify and form categories to develop a data-driven process of analysis, which allowed the formulation of themes and provided guidance and answers to the research questions.

Both thematic analysis and constant comparative methods were used to analyze the data in this study. As such, the goal of the analysis was to generate a conceptual theory that might account for how social workers in the USAF FAPs establish rapport with female military personnel. This approach allowed for simultaneously collecting and comparing the responses of participants to each question posed to them. This approach involved open and selective coding to identify themes in the data that addressed three research questions.

Validation Procedures

To establish credibility and validity during this research process, I used member checking to ensure that participants' responses were what they meant by restating and/or summarizing information and then questioning the participant to determine whether participants meant what I had heard. This allowed for further clarification that increased credibility and validity. Methodological triangulation was used to determine reliability where multiple data points were examined to help understand the experience of a common situation or occurrence (Fusch et al., 2018). For example, six of seven participants in this study (85%) agreed in responses to the questions posed to them. Participants shared similar ideas and topics, while adding some unique responses during the interview process.

Additionally, the use of triangulation provided reliability in responses to each research question, which provided content validity (Fusch et al., 2018). Content validity can be described as the agreement between respondents related to the content in response to research questions. As such, triangulation helps determine reliability, which in turn, determines content validity (Fusch et al. 2018). This was seen in the responses that illustrated the importance of how cultural awareness and the strength of the military culture results in improved therapeutic relationships with female military personnel.

Delimitations and Limitations

A delimitation of the study was the use of interviews to collect data. This allowed for eliminating the possibility of group think among participants in response to questions about the military culture. In addition, this approach was used for fear that some participants might conform in their responses as a function of being members of the military culture, which could have led to the lack of collecting the richest data.

By comparison, one limitation was the lack of gender diversity. All participants in this study were female social workers. Although several different bases were selected for recruitment, no bases employed male social workers, and a male social work perspective may have provided additional insight into how being aware of the military culture could influence practice with female military personnel.

Another limitation of the study was that the participants were all members of the USAF. Interviewing members of the USAF provided limited insight into how important it is that social workers are aware of the military culture in practices with female personnel, especially when it influences social work practice with women who have been

in combat or are preparing for combat. The inclusion of social work practitioners who represent practices with women in other branches of the military, especially the Marine Corps and Army, might have provided further insight, given the differences in missions and cultures.

Findings

The findings presented in this section are based on analysis of data collected through participant interviews. The seven participants were women between 35 and 60 years of age who have been employed as a family advocacy treatment manager (FATM) between 2 and 15 years. The mean age of participants was 47 years of age, with the two youngest participants being 35 years of age and the oldest participant being 56 years of age. The average number of years employed for six participants was 3.5 years with the seventh participant having been employed for 15 years. The following definition of military culture was read to each participant before the interview began:

Military culture is a shared, collectivistic, and militaristic cultural enmeshment. From this broad perspective on military culture, it is necessary to understand the structure of the military, the language used, the commitments military personnel make to a unit of service, and how military personnel value honor and service” (Lane, 2019; Tschaepe, 2018). In this context, Callahan (2016) characterized military culture as basically a “combat, masculine-warrior” premise that is used to prepare men (and women) for combat. It is a culture that men shaped, and being a soldier is viewed as a masculine role only and is perceived as men’s work.

Participant Questions

In the following sections, I present the findings from each of the five questions posed to participants to address the three research questions.

Participant Question 1

A key theme in the responses of participants to the question “In what ways do you describe your cultural background in the home in which you grew and developed?” is that the social workers grew up and developed in homes that were “middle class.” For 6 of 7 participants, this meant growing up in a traditional nuclear family. Within this context, there were racial, ethnic, and religious variations in the participant descriptions of their cultural background based on race, family dynamics, class, and traditions. For example, Participant 1 described herself as a Mexican and Jewish American woman who described her core familial background and upbringing in the following way:

I would say I had a normal childhood upbringing. Although, you could say it was a weird combination of Hispanic, Anglo, and Jewish. I have lot of mixture of backgrounds in my family. So, we have very diverse groups within each other’s families. So were very distinct culturally, so rather I go to the Hispanic side of the family, which is Mexican and were from Texas, so Tejanos are kind of its own thing even among Mexicans. The Jewish side is kind of its own thing, and the Anglo side is also from Texas so that’s another sub-set. But very distinct. So, a lot of different groups, a lot of different points of view, and very different traditions. And growing up I got to move between all of those. I got to experience very different practices during the holidays and during just different cultural points of

view there are some very different ways of looking at things too. There were different views on things from politics to religion to everything, so I got exposure to a lot of different backgrounds growing up.

Participant 2 described her culture as being diverse:

I am half Puerto Rican and half Irish, so my cultural background is mixed between these two races. However, I do not look Puerto Rican so typical people assume I am Caucasian. I grew up in a fairly Caucasian upper middle-class neighborhood. That is basically it. That's how I would describe my culture.

Participant 3 described her cultural background as being a member of a Caucasian lower-class nuclear family from the South. She noted that her father was in the USAF until she was 2 years of age, and her mother was the primary bread-winner in the family.

After the Air force, my father became a salesman, so we moved around a lot between Atlanta and Baltimore, as well as St. Louis on occasions. Our family was mainly in the south, so I would say we had a southern upbringing with the stereotypical 'yes sir' and 'yes ma'am.' We moved around 17 times through my childhood all the way until I graduated high school. This is similar to the military. However, we did not have the social support like the military. I am sorry I did not get in the culture. My mother was the primary breadwinner within our family. My father was present, and I would say he was decent, but we had a lot of money issues. We are Caucasian and I would say we were lower middle-class.

Participant 4 described her culture as being a Caucasian American family.

So, I would consider myself a Caucasian American female and very patriotic. I was raised in a lower socioeconomic class. My parents divorced when I was 2 years old. I still have a good relationship with my father, he visited regularly. I learned from both of my parents, especially my mother, and my stepdad the value of hard work and education, and structure and discipline. My stepdad was very influential in my world, who was in the military, so hard work, structure, and discipline was very important from that aspect. My mother had a difficult time growing up, so she really stressed the importance of education to me and my sister. This might sound so funny, but she stressed how important it was to not to be dependent on a man. So, she created in us a desire for independence, but I think she did was made it where we did feel trap or stuck in a situation. There were no clear roles in our family as my mother and stepdad were both hard workers. It was just everybody helping out, so it was a real sense of equality in the family.

Participant 7 discussed her cultural background as being a Caucasian female in the American culture.

I identify as a Caucasian female and would say my culture would be considered an American culture. If that makes sense. I consider my family very typical. We follow the 'normal' traditions that exist within society. For instance, Thanksgiving we have the simple stuff like turkey, stuffing, gravy, you the typical things during Thanksgiving. We get a Christmas tree during Christmas. We are a

military family as my husband is in the Air Force. So, we typically follow a military structure like being close as a family and ensure we help those in need.

Participant 5 described her cultural background as being white and Norwegian.

So, my family background is almost all Norwegian, very white and Norwegian. And then growing up in my area, I was only exposed to white Norwegians and Germans. I was not exposed to a lot of different cultures; I did not get to experience a lot of different cultures where I grew up. It was homogenous and lacking anything interesting or exciting. Within my family the gender roles were equal with no one person having control. I remember around the holidays we would have lefse which is like a tortilla made from potatoes. We would make these other desserts during the holidays like krumkake and rosette.

Education was important in my family too. It was not a question about if you are going to college. It was you are going to go to college, and you are going to stay close to us. In my family there was a sense of strictness and structure. But at the same time there were inconsistency within my family when it came to things like discipline and mood of the family. So, that's how I would describe my cultural background. “

It is important to note that Participant 6 was unique in terms of her background. This participant described her cultural background in the following way:

That's a good question. As a Black female, that can be difficult to answer at times. From a family standpoint, I would say its standard. You know, mom, dad, and siblings. Although my dad is not my dad, I consider him my father, so I don't

consider it different from a 'normal' family. As far as culture, that is a different story, I would say my family embraced many cultures, but the Black culture be the main one. So, when you look at the Black culture there are so many different things combined in it. Especially since I am a Black female, my mother taught me to be a strong independent woman to that does not have to depend on a man. She was the breadwinner of the family and as such felt it important to contribute to the family. So, this is why I say the Black culture has so many different things to it and that's a hard question. My family celebrates the traditional American holidays like Easter, Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas and some other ones. Though there are things like foods and probably music that may be different or how these traditional holidays are celebrated.

Then both my parents were in the military, so that played a role in how I was raised. I know my mom made us have 'hospital corners' when making our bed because that's how you had to make her bed in the military. Or we had to be up earlier even on the weekends because she said so. But having different cultural influences, especially because the military allowed for us to have different cultures to explore, it would be difficult to sometimes because I may speak a certain way or act a certain way some Black people would say why you talk white or why you acting white because it wasn't viewed as a Black thing.

Participant Question 2

The major theme identified in the participants' responses to the question "In what ways do you think your cultural background is like the military culture?" was that the

military culture influenced participants' own cultural background, with all except one participant having a family member who had served or was serving in the military. This theme was supported in the responses from 6 of 7 participants. Participant 6 perceived that her cultural background was like the military culture due to her parents being in the military:

There were several things that blended into our family culture from the military, e. g. when making our bed, my mother would make sure the bed corners were and to the standard of the military. My parents provided a very strict family household where she felt she was held to a particular standard that was higher than most kids. There was nothing wrong with this, it helped me to develop respect for authority and the chain of command. However, working with the military I can see the similarities and how my parents and family culture was established.

Five other participants perceived similarities in the response of participant 7 because their previous or current family members either had been or was currently an active-duty member. They too perceived that many of the cultural influences from the military were integrated into their cultural background. In addition, it was established that the military does have its own culture, and it can be difficult to understand or see it looking from the outside in. Participant 1 shared this in the following way.

There are some ingrained traditions across the military and some specific ones that are at particular bases. Families are the same as the military depending on the region you live in. Like my family, the Tejano Mexicans in my family practice unique traditions, this is similar to the military as you have some traditions across

all bases, but some bases have their own flavor. This is what I have seen from my personal experience.

Differences wise, my family are Texans so we can be mouthy and can be opinionated. So, I can be a little rebellious and, in the military, you have to respect and sometimes hold your tongue. You have to learn not to question authority sometimes. I had to remember what my grandparents taught me, that when you are in someone else's house you have to follow their rules. I had to learn from my active-duty counterparts that it's about the rank and the respect. If that person is your superior, you have to follow the rules.

As a military spouse I was not really involved in that, and I really did get into it like. But we still have the structure of the military integrated into my family. And I had weird military experience, my husband work for detachments where we were told not to tell people we were in the military. He had assignments where he would be gone for 6 or 8 months. I would dissociate myself a lot of times from my husband work, but I also did not understand a lot of what he was saying because the acronyms and military language he was using. Then there was an opportunity for me to get a job on base and I thought how hard could it be, I had been a social worker for 20 years. Then I realized there was a little something called the AFI (Air Force Instruction), and it is a little bit different. It was a big learning curve and big culture shock but once I decided I had to learn the ropes here. Then I figured okay I can identify with this, and I get this part and I do not get this, but I know why it is in place. So, I was willful ignorant about my

husband military experience but gained understanding once I started working with the military.

Participant 3 shared this:

Our family was based in Georgia mostly, so I would say we are a southern family which were had to say the yes sirs and no ma'ams. This is also probably due to my father cause he was prior Air Force. We also moved a lot that was also something similar to the military, so we had to create our own support system because we really did not have one. I would say that is a big difference from my family compared to military as we never really had that since of support or home. Although, military people move a lot, they have a since of family and connectedness among military families. We did not have that.

Participant 4 shared the following:

Structure and discipline was very strong in my family with a since of hierarchy as my mother was the one in charge. Plus, my stepdad was in the military, so I grew up in the military culture. In my family, growing up and even now, like when I introduced my culture, I am extremely patriotic. So, if I hear the national anthem me and everybody in my family are going to absolutely stop dead in our feet and honor that. So, the military culture has been and still has a important part of my family.

Participant 5 stated the following:

There was a huge enforcement of consistency, in like rules and regulations but at the same time there is no consistency whatsoever. Like one day they are saying

this is what is happening but change it the next day. I felt my family was the same way. Even my current family now, like when my husband comes home or through my experience working as well, it just seems like a lot of inconsistencies from leadership. But it appears we have adapted some of the randomness and inconsistencies related to the military.

Participant 7 added this:

I would say my family is similar to the military culture because like I said earlier my family was a very typical family that followed the rules and trends of society. Plus, my husband is in the military so a lot of the military culture and influence can be seen in my family. I would say we definitely take the structure and the discipline from the military but growing up I had the same things, so it just became more refined I guess I would say. Another thing I would say is similar is that being a support family is something that has continued into my current family. The military can be very difficult on a family, so it can be important to have other families as a to support you.

Some participants felt that even though they had someone in their family that served in the military, they still felt like they lacked knowledge regarding the military culture. This was illustrated with 4 out of the 7 participants stating that although they had someone who served in the military within their family, they still needed to understand and gain additional knowledge about the military. Four of the participants spoke of their spouses being in the military. For example, Participant 1 made her point in the following statements:

As a military spouse, I knew about certain parts of military culture because of my husband, but I rarely participated in military activities or asked about his work.

However, when I started working for the military it became apparent, I did not know as much as I thought I knew about the military culture. One thing that's different is how you have to engage with higher rank people in the military. You must understand the hierarchy (chain of command) within the military to ensure you speak with the appropriate leadership and not break the chain of command.

Participant 4 wanted to share how being a spouse does not necessarily mean you are aware of the full military culture:

Being from a military family and being a military spouse, I thought I understood the military culture. But working for the military has been different. Having training would be very beneficial before you work with the military, just so we understand the culture a little bit better. Because it is so much, the hierarchy, my gosh, there are all these ranks. Then you have what you call in the civilian world departments, here its elements, flights, squadron, group, and wing, people who do not know what that means it can be very confusing. To throw all of this out as a client to a Provider and the Provider looking at you crossed eyed like I do not know what you're saying. Yes, I do think having training up front prior to the provision of services would be ideal.

Participant 5 provided a unique perspective on having a member of the family in the military.

My perspective as a spouse is a small wedge of what my husband lets me in on or what I know from other spouses. I think working in the military, you see much more of the daily ins and outs. I really think you need to be in it to know what they are talking about and understand all those experiences because it is very unique and very different from any civilian job. There would be so many days my husband would come home frustrated, and I would say every job is like that, every job does this and that, and he would say no this is different. I would just say just suck it up. Then I started working with the military and was like oh I get it. I grateful for working with the military so I can understand my husband's perspective more.

Participant 7 shared the same perspective in the following words:

Being a spouse, you know your role within the military culture. You can be supportive with key spouse and provide support for the military members. You do not get that involved with the working aspect of the military as a spouse, but you are more working to be a support system. As a provider, its different cause I now have to interact with leadership, first shirts, and other military hierarchy that I did not have to do as a spouse. As a spouse because you are involved and helping with the military you feel as though you know the military. Though, when you work for the military its completely different. I felt I had to learn the military all over.

Participant Question 3

The major theme in participant responses to the question “Based on your practice with female military personnel, how do you think service in the military might provide females with opportunities that they otherwise might not have?” was the belief that the military provides many opportunities for women. Those opportunities are related to employment, numerous benefits/services for women, and a focus on equality for women in the military, including equality in terms of pay, advancement, educational stipends, and leadership.

Employment Opportunity. The following responses illustrate the notion that the military provides many opportunities for women. Participant 3 spoke primarily about the stability the military offers for female military member. She shared that

to start with on the macro size is if the female has no exposure to the world outside of the small town they come from, the military offers them opportunities to be exposed to possibly overseas or different cultures or different ways of thinking then maybe they were brought up with. The female may have educational opportunity that they may not have had, had they not gone into the military. Another thing they have is a steady paycheck, many people do not have that nowadays. The military offers health services, although with restricts, is a good plus especially for females. I think as a female if you are aware of the base services, I think more supported if something happens. For example, if you are rape, if you have a traumatic incident (not combat related), like a care incident or

a friend committing suicide. I think there is a lot more services at your fingertips to get help than on the outside.

Participant 2 shared the following thought:

The Air Force is not perfect, but they do a good job in allowing women to go into certain career fields that are stereotypically a male's profession. Although there may be an idea of a job being male dominate, the Air Force does not care and will place a woman in that field and does not look at gender as a requirement for a particular job... there still exist some barriers but there continues to be opportunities for workplace equality in the military, especially in the Air Force.

Participant 5 stated:

I think the way the military is set up and they are directed into jobs, females are placed in male-dominated roles that they may not necessarily choose. But there ASVAB (Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery) scores says they should be place there. I know my husband is a mechanic and he has told me there are some women in the shop that have no clue what they are doing because they were just place there because of their scores. At the same time, they can be placed in areas where they can grow and thrive in certain areas. The military also provides the opportunity to place women in the leadership role. In some aspect though the military are given equality as they are seen for their potential rather than their gender.

Benefits/Services for Women in the Military. The following responses support the theme that the military provides women with many services. Participant 2 supplied a

few examples of the services that are reward to military female personnel that may not be offered or provided to women in civil jobs. For example, she emphasized paid maternity leave.

Paid maternity leave is a big thing I feel military women receive as a benefit.

Several employers do not offer this, but the military provides this for the service members. Additionally, women have the opportunity to leave the military after having a child.

Participant 4 stated:

The military bases provide childcare services military to families through the child development center. The child development center is on base and provides childcare services for military families. The military also provides childcare at a reduce cost compared to civilian childcare. In addition, the Air Force provides services, including the family advocacy program, new parent support program, airman family readiness, and a military OneSource program. “These services provide women with an opportunity to have access to care and the ability to seek help when needed.

Participant 5 also spoke about services:

With the military females are able to get 12 weeks of paid maternity leave with additional leave they can use. Whereas in the civilian world you lucky if you get your 6 weeks off and if you haven't been a company long enough get paid for those weeks can be difficult. Majority of the time civilian women have to take partial disability pay during that time. Finding daycare can be nearly impossible.

Where with the CDC (child development center) on the bases, there waiting list and priority level, but active duty is usually able to get in at a fairly quick rate.

You are able to have care and the care is near where they work, and you are able to pop over and see your kids if you need to or want to. If you are a civilian, you could be pretty far from where your kids are located every day and do not have that same connection available. Another advantage or service is the gym or PT (physical training) time, which is able to be used during work, depending on where you work, but being able to use that to stay in shape or get in shape on someone else clock is very beneficial. On the civilian side that is unheard of.

Participant 7 spoke about the accessibility to healthcare and mental health services that are benefits for reward to military members. Participant 7 noted that,

Women in the military have easy access to health care, as well as mental health. This provides women with an opportunity to address different issues or concerns that may arise during service. For example, say a woman has post-partum disorder and having a difficult time with work. What typically happens in the military a supervisor or the first sergeant would talk to that person to see if they need any support. If they believe this person needs help, they would refer them to mental health. The person would be taken right to the med-group that same day for further evaluation. In the civilian world, this rarely occurs, if not at all, because access to health care or mental health are not that readily accessible.

Participant 6 echoed the response of Participant 7 during her interview.

The military has a lot of protective factors when helping women in the military. Take family advocacy, for example, the program is designed to address family maltreatment which can be intimate partner violence or child abuse. It is an extra layer of support for military member but primarily for military women due to women being the higher rate of intimate partner victims. There are programs for civilians, but the access to programs such as FAP are easily accessible and across multiple bases. The FAP program can provide clinician service where if a case is open the client can come and see the provide for clinical services. Women in military have the ability to gain several different services such as health care, childcare, and mental health. There are some concerns of women getting access to some of these services because of the lack workers. So, at our base we are having trouble with people being able to get childcare because there are not enough workers currently. That's why it is important for social workers to be aware of the services on a base. Cause imagine you are just talking to a client about a service not knowing much about it and telling them its available, only to find out their client will struggle to obtain it.

Focus on Equality for Women. One participant spoke about the attempt to change the traditional military culture as an opportunity for women. Participant 1 spoke about the military gaining further awareness regarding the “boys club” culture that still exists within the military. “Although it is still a concern, the military awareness of the ‘boys’ club’ has caused them [the military] to work on changing the culture to where

there is a presence of inclusion.” Participant 1 also noted that, “there is still a way to go as some women feel they have to act or be a certain way to be ‘one of the guys’.”

Participant Question 4

The theme that emerged from the analysis of responses to the question “In what ways do you think females in combat or in training for combat might have different experiences than women who are not in combat or being trained for combat?” was the belief that women in the military feel like they must continuously prove themselves. Of the participants’ responses 43% alluded to the fact that women feel like they have to prove themselves just because they are women in the military. The second theme identified was the physiological differences and stressors that women in combat face that may be different for women that have not experience combat. The third and final theme that was captured in the data analysis was the military has made improvements in addressing the male bias or dominance that has historically existed.

Participant 1 addressed a concern of military sexual assault,

I do feel like things may be getting better in regards with the military and sexual assaults because of the military’s effort to address the issues. But I have kind of personal experience as one of my family members experienced this while deployed during the Iraq-Afghanistan conflict. However, I saw the impact it had on my family member and how she was treated differently when deployed. When she returned it was difficult for her to readjust and reintegrate back into society. I knew her anxiety was really bad, and she had troubles going out with friend and family. Oh not to mention the physiological differences women have in combat

zone compared to women who are not. Women who are about to deploy into combat have far more worries and stressors to deal with. Also, the impact the deployment will have on their mental health when they return. Think about it but for a woman it is completely different for them in a combat area. Like, I am not sure what would happen if a woman would get pregnant while in a combat area, but I would image this would be an added challenge and she would have to be sent home. Or if they are a mother and something bad happens to one their children back home. This can be very detrimental to them.

Participant 2 provided some possible concerns that women face regarding combat.

Participant 2 stated:

There is a general consensus that people in combat is more of a masculine position, so I think a lot of women face those challenges. Still, to this day I hear from males in the military women can't pull their weight. Additionally, the living conditions in a combat zone could be different as there are typically more men than women. So, there could be 20 men sharing amenities where on a few women have to share their amenities. The view of some men could be that this is unfair because women have few people to share the amenities with making a better circumstance. This could impact camaraderie.

Participant 2 also added that women perceive that they must constantly prove themselves.

Participant 3 discussed the paradigm shift in culture for women related to combat as other factors that can contribute additional stressors for women in the military.

Participant 3 stated:

Current female leaders, such as the Chiefs (Chief Master Sergeants) and Lieutenant Colonels (Lt.Col.), I feel they came up in a harder culture than what women are coming through now because there has been a cultural shift to not think a woman in combat is not such a strange thing. I see the older generation of women having more of a hardness about them because of the experience of having to fight their way through the military going through the ranks and becoming a leader, all while dealing with the sexism. Additionally, if they are not Caucasian, possibly having to deal with racism as well.

Participant 4 explored the difference of women who been in combat or prepared for combat compared to women who have not. Participant 4 stated the following:

When I think of some of the clients I previously had, I do not think rarely had a lot of women preparing for or been in combat. But that has to be accurate because there are many more men going into combat than women. But in terms of different experiences, I can only imagine and state the obvious of the high pace of that experience, the stress, constantly feeling on edge, especially in actual combat. Also, not knowing what is going to happen next. You combine this with a male domination of the military, and I would imagine they have internal struggles with how do I prove myself as an Airmen as a woman. So, you're a woman and they [men] might look down and say she can't do what I do. So, I imagine women have to prove themselves on a day-to-day basis. Just on a normal day-to-day work basis, I have had women feeling like they had to prove themselves just because they are a woman in military. So, you add combat to the mix and I can imagine

they feel alone. And as we know there is a direct correlation with increase sexual assault in deployed settings, so there is that stress as well.

Participant 5 explored the thought process of women in combat and discussed previous experiences with clients who have been in combat zones. Participant 5 stated the following:

So, I would say women in combat or training for combat are probably more of the mindset that death is a real possibility. So, if a mother is being deployed to a combat area, her thoughts are centered about not wanting to leave their children motherless. Whereas women who do not deploy do not have to worry about this. Also, there are different stressors that exist when your life is constantly on the line. For example, it can make your conversation with your family back home very difficult because you don't know what to say or cannot share your experiences and further disconnect from your family.

I had a female patient who came to see me post-deployment, she had been at a base that had been rapidly hit by mortars. She was the mother of two little girls and that was her ultimate fear that she would not make it back to her children and would leave them motherless. Also had another patient that worked in a clinic in a war zone area. Her job was to get injured and deceased soldiers. She was constantly surrounded by injuries and death. Also, she would have to bring in locals who were injured, which were often children. She was a mother as well, but she would picture her kids as these kids that were being brought in. She struggled

with this as a mother and she constantly was thinking what are my kids going to experience in life.

Participant 6 discussed difference from a personal experience:

The first thing that comes to mind when I think about this is the experience my mother had. Although she was not on the frontline going to war, she did have to prepare for deployment war zone area. This was difficult for our family and for my mother. Mentality she had to worry about leaving us but also get prepared for deployment that could be deadly. I later found out this took a toll on my mother which was very difficult for her to get over. My father was also in the military so when my mom left on deployment things fell on him to take care of the family. Upon my mother's return it was difficult for her integrate back into the family because the only person she had to worry about was herself, but she was thrust back into her motherly duties instantly. This helped me understand what female soldier can go through. They have to continue roles like being a mother and doing motherly duties instantly when they return from deployment. This is different for men as many do not have to worry because it was typical women stay home when men go to war. Women who do not deploy do not have to worry about this either. Another thing that was difficult for my mother was the second time she had to the deploy you elected not to because both she and my father would have had to deploy. This would have left us without parents for a well and if something would have happened, we would be without parents forever. My mother made a sacrifice and got out of the military, while my father remained. This is probably due to the

typical belief that the mother would be in a better position to take care of the children. This is another thing female military members have to worry about, and most male military members do not.

Participant 7 stated that:

Working with female as a provider, they are preparing differently than men. Most women I have worked with are mothers so their anxiety of leaving their children is high. Death is a far closer reality when you about to develop too. On top of that you have to worry of being the only woman around several men which can be scary for some. I am not saying this is something that always happens, but these women have to also be careful because of the high rates of military sexually assault during developments. At FAP we are able to get those restricted and unrestricted reports to help those women in need, so that is a service that can help from the other question.

Participant Question 5

One theme that emerged from the responses of participants to the question “If you know that a female might be deployed for combat or has returned from combat, in what ways might awareness of military culture help establish rapport with her?” is that social workers must be aware of the military culture as it helps social workers to understand the military language, environment, structure, and impact, which in turn makes building rapport easier. Another theme that was identified was that military members preferred to go to social workers that understood the military culture rather than those who had no knowledge or experience with it.

Social Workers Need to Be Aware of Military Culture. Participant 1 discussed the impact of having awareness of military culture to help establish rapport with female military members who have been deployed or who have returned from deployment by stating the following:

As stated before, I have had female family members that have been deployed. They have been impacted by their experience and currently dealing with PTSD. However, I am not saying that is the typical experiences of those returning from deployment. But knowing this I would want to ask and being aware of the military culture. I would want to ask open ended questions about how they are regarding back into their family, what is like to come back and if you have children what it is like being a mother again. Especially, after living in a tense environment and coming back and assimilating back to being a partner or mother, I would want to know if the person is having any challenges with this. Also, being able to understand to ask the person to explain what it is like to leave the battlefield physically but now having to adjust and understand a new reality mentally. Being aware of this allows me as a clinician to meet the member where they are and asking the right questions allows the person to tell me what their experiences are like. The female members are able to discuss their challenges and lead me through their experiences. Also, knowing the military structure helps too. If you understand the rank system, environment, and the traditions you are able to understand the language. For example, if you know what a lower ranked Airmen

job is, you are able to communicate with them, which makes it easier to build rapport.

Participant 3 discussed the hardships of women who go 'down range' (going to combat) and having possible traumas that could have occurred. Participant 3 noted that:

it is important to understand and know the military culture. Knowing the standards they must go through to rank up and promote or knowing the hardship that exist going down range set us (social workers working with military) apart from civilian social workers because we are trying to adapt and learn the military culture.

Military Personnel Prefer Awareness of Military Culture in Services.

Participant 2 provided insight into the importance awareness has on rapport building and how not having awareness of the military culture could impact the client-clinician relationship.

I think it definitely helps with rapport building because it is such a unique situation that not many women have face. So, kind of being awareness of what women go through is a huge help to building rapport, because some random clinician off the street that has no clue when it comes military culture, may not realize certain things about the military lifestyle that could be affecting or triggering their patient; you know different things like that. So, I definitely think that having an awareness of the military culture and kind of being embedded in that culture, definitely serves to build more positive rapport than say someone who has no clue. I even had some patients say things to that extent, that seeing

off-base provider that there is just something missing. Even though I am a civilian provider and not a military provider, still being able to be in the environment and embedding in the military culture has help to understand the military culture at a deeper level had I not gain this experience.

Participant 4 echoed a similar thought:

My clients have told me that they would prefer to go to a military provider because we (military social workers) understand their language when they pop-off with these different [military] terms we understand. Where if they were with a civilian provider off-base, a civilian provider would be like wait a minute, stop hold on, what are you meaning or what are you trying to say. So, I think just understanding the language is huge. We understand more about the impact on the individual, the couple, the family, and children more so than some civilian providers (off-base in the community). And just that can improve rapport immediately with our client. Also, we are trained to have more understanding about combat and the impact of combat on the individual and families.

Participant 5 describe awareness of the military can help from a personal perspective and professional. Participant 5 stated,

I have not deployed or served in the military, but I have experienced a deployment of the perspective of a spouse. So, I feel I can provide insight from that perspective and let the member know this is what helped, I went through this, and this is what helped while my family was going through it. I am able to share from the spouse perspective, like what I did for my kids or what my husband did

to get through his deployment. So, my personal firsthand experience and knowledge can translate to them because been through multiple deployment and although I have been on the other side I can kind of relate.

Also, I know it is important to know the military culture from a professional perspective. I have worked with many different contractors coming through the mental health clinic. Sometimes Airmen would come in and say they are having such and such concerns with my Captain and the contractor with zero military experience whatsoever is like while you just need to sit down with the Captain and explain 'x, y,' and 'z' and how they are making you feel. And A1C (Airmen first-class) cannot just sit down with their Captain and have this conversation, this is not how the military culture works.

And I think as a therapist you need to know some of things and how the system works so you can give legitimate advice. Even though I was a military spouse there was more as a therapist I needed to learn. You get to learn the daily ins and outs, where as a spouse I only knew what my husband told me or other what other spouses told me. So, I think these things really help to build rapport with female military members.

Participant 7 discussed this from a standpoint of understanding the squadron's mission:

It is important to understand the mission. Each base has a mission it must focus on, within the base there are groups that have missions which are broken down further from the bases overall mission. It even goes down to the squadron level where a squadron will have a mission they must complete too. It important you

know and understand these missions. When you are able to understand the mission, you are able to understand the person jobs. It is easier to relate to the person and you are able to provide right services for the client. For example, if you know someone is being deployed, understanding the mission will make providing services and resources easier than blindly trying to offer things that do not make sense to the person. For example, providing advice and/or counseling for someone going to the frontline and those who are security forces that will be guarding something is completely different. Knowing this would help build rapport with the client.

Participant 6 explained how awareness of the military could help build rapport with a female military member.

If a social worker is ignorant to the military culture, they will not understand the environment these female members are in during combat. They would not understand the struggle they have to endure from a physical or psychological standpoint. If they cannot understand that it will be difficult to develop rapport with these women. However, if you are aware of the military culture, you are able to ask the right questions or know what to say during a session that would get you the right answers. Especially, if the client is not talking or seems closed off.

Research Questions, Themes, and Conceptual Theory

The themes in the findings of the study relate to how awareness of the military culture influences the ability social workers in the USAF FAPs to establish a positive relationship with female military personnel to whom they provide services. Social

workers in this study provided a unique insight into understanding how awareness of the military culture might influence their ability to establish a positive relationship with female military personnel. The themes in participant responses are related to the research questions in the following ways.

Research Question 1

In what ways are social workers aware of the military culture in building rapport with female military personnel?

Based on open and selective coding, a key theme in the responses of participants is that social workers in the USAF FAPs have knowledge of the military culture because they have family members who are or were in the military. In this regard, the military culture was an aspect of the participants' own cultural background. Another theme is that a strength of the military is that it offers women many opportunities that may not be available to them as civilians, including benefits and services that provide women with equitable opportunities in the military workplace. A third theme is that military culture is changing a way from being one in which there is a male bias to one that is inclusive of women. Social workers believe that the military offers females military personnel multiple services, opportunities, and resource as well as providing cultural diversity. The following comments and researcher observations validate these themes.

Research Question 2

How do social workers address the strengths in the military culture in their practices with female military personnel?

Participants believe that the military provides many opportunities for women, including equality in terms of pay, advancement, educational stipends, and leadership. Another equally important theme is that women have access to numerous services, including health care, mental health care, childcare, paid maternity leave, and family advocacy. The tacit implication in that theme is that social workers may play the advocate and education roles in practice with women, as well as the therapeutic role. One participant perceived a strength in the military letting go of the “boys club” aspect of the culture.

Research Question 3

In what ways do social workers think the therapeutic relationship with female military personnel could be improved with awareness of the military culture?

As noted previously, one participant noted the importance of the military letting go of the “boys club” aspect of the culture as it relates to the therapeutic needs of female military personnel, such as the stress of trying to prove themselves in the context of the male bias in the military culture. Awareness about the possibility of sexual assault in a combat situation was mentioned as important information to have in therapeutic relationships with women who have been in combat. The themes in the research question are shown in Table 2.

Table 2*Identified Themes Related to Research Questions*

PQ	RQ1: In what ways are social workers aware of the military culture in building rapport with female military personnel?	RQ2: How do social workers address the strengths in the military culture in their practices with female military personnel?	RQ3: In what ways do social workers think the therapeutic relationship with female military personnel could be improved with awareness of the military culture?
PQ1: In what ways do you describe your cultural background in the home in which you grew and developed?	traditional, middle class, ethnic, racial, and religious tradition		
PQ2: In what ways do you think your cultural background is like the military culture?	military in family so military culture part of social worker cultural background		
PQ3: Based on your practice with female military personnel, how do you think service in the military might provide females with opportunities that they otherwise might not have?	Economic benefits in pay, rank, and leadership; social services, including physical health, mental health, childcare, and paid maternity leave	Strength in opportunities and diversity for females in the military	
PQ4: In what ways do you think females in combat or in training for combat might have different experiences than women who are not in combat or in training for combat?		Military letting go of the male bias in the military culture -females expected to prove themselves to males - can result in stress	Military letting go of the male bias in the military culture -females expected to prove themselves to male, especially related to combat -can result in stress.
PQ5: If you know that a female might be deployed for combat or has returned from combat, in what ways might awareness of military culture help establish rapport with her?			aware of the military culture as it helps social workers to understand the military language, environment, structure, and impact – prefer social workers with military knowledge

Note. PQ = participant question; RQ = research question.

Summary

The findings from Section 3 offered this study the ability to identify how being aware of military culture influences social work practice with female military personnel. Table 2 provides an illustration of the findings and how clinical social workers viewed the impact of the military culture and its influence on the social work practice. Social workers are able to help female military personnel take advantage of and benefit from the social and economic opportunities the military offers them, as well as by advocating the opportunity for women to serve in combat with confidence and safety if they choose to do so. Additionally, social workers are able to provide adequate mental health care that is structured and aligned with the military culture. These are just a few of the findings from the study. The findings in Section 3 provide a foundation for Section 4, in which I present recommendations and implications for social change with the social work profession.

Section 4: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Social Change

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore how awareness of the military culture influences the ability of social workers in the FAP of the USAF to establish a positive relationship with the female military personnel in providing services to them. The study was qualitative in nature and utilized a scheduled interview guide to collect data in one-on-one interviews with social workers in the USAF FAP via Zoom. It was conducted because the literature suggested that there was a gap in what was known regarding the influence that awareness of the military culture may have on services provided to female military personnel.

In this study, the key findings were that most participants in the study (a) were aware of the military culture as a component of their own cultural identity, (b) believed that the military culture results in equity for all, but especially for female military personnel, and (c) perceived that the USAF continues to address the “boys’ club” aspect of the military culture. Taken together, the findings suggest that the awareness of the military culture would be a strength for social workers establishing relationships with female military personnel. More important, social workers may have a particular ability to identify and understand the stress that some female military personnel experience in having a need to “prove themselves.”

The findings in this study extend the knowledge in the field of social work in several ways. First, it seems plausible that FAP social workers employed on all USAF bases can establish positive relationships with female military personnel based on

understanding of the military culture. Second, given that social workers believe in the equitable opportunities that are available to women in the USAF, they can ensure that female personnel are directed to the resources they need beyond equal pay. Third, social workers seem to understand the emotional stress that some women in the military experience in trying to improve themselves in the “boys’ club.”

Social workers in USAF FAPs who understand the military culture have the potential to establish relationships with female personnel that model the need for a shift in thinking about the military culture. Callahan’s (2016) description of a male-dominated military culture highlighted a need to create a more inclusive military and noted that a shift away from a male-dominated military is important for female military personnel, especially those who may be involved in combat. From a combat standpoint, women face the hardships of being “down range” but must continue to overcompensate or focus on being “one of the guys,” which perpetuates a cycle of the masculine warrior culture in the absence of change (Crowley & Standoff, 2017).

Section 4 of this project first addresses how the findings are related to the ethical practice in social work. Second, I explore how the findings will help to produce recommendations for social work practice. Last, this section of the project addresses how the results of this study will contribute to the implications for social change.

Application to Professional Ethics in Social Work Practice

Ethics are an important component of social work practice. The NASW Code of Ethics establishes an ethical foundation which helps the social work profession navigate through concerning issue that may raise in practice. These core principles and standards

developed by the NASW help provide structure to ensure social workers are ethically responsible with regard to clients, colleagues, practice settings, professional standards, to the social work profession, and to the broader society (NASW, 2021). With this said, the findings in this study can be applied ethically with respect to practicing cultural competence, addressing social change, helping people in need, and building relationships (NASW, 2021).

Cultural competence is an important pillar within the NASW Code of Ethics as well as in the social work profession. When social workers practice in a culturally competent way means that they educate themselves about diverse populations of clients with whom they practice. Furthermore, the ethical application of cultural competence in this project illustrates the importance of understanding one's own culture, as well as being competent in the military culture that serves military personnel from a wide variety of different cultures.

Service is a core principle in the NASW Code of Ethics that focuses on addressing social problems and the needs of people. The results address the gap in research about the knowledge of FAP social workers have regarding the military culture in practice with female personnel. In turn, the results provide information and recommendations that could help the profession of social work. In addition, this core principle addresses the social concerns that impact active-duty female military personnel.

The final ethical standard addressed in the results is the importance of building relationships, a key aspect of the NASW Code of Ethics. It is essential to build rapport and meet clients where they are, which is the cornerstone of the social work profession.

The findings in this study illustrate a connection between cultural competency and building relationships. Cultural competence provides the ability for a social worker to gain an understanding of the client, which in turn provides an opportunity to strengthen the therapeutic relationship between FAP social workers and female military personnel.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice

The results of this study have the potential to enhance social work practice with female military personnel. The notion that FAP social workers need to be aware of the military culture to establish rapport with female military is the central concept in the recommendations. The recommendations related to the findings are described in the following subsections.

Recommendations

A standard hiring process incorporating military culture should be created for social work programs across the USAF FAP agencies during the hiring process. The reason to keep it within the USAF is that each branch of the military has a variation of the military culture, and this research only addressed social workers for the USAF. The following would be a policy change recommendation as this would need to come from the administrative director of the USAF FAP programs.

The recommendation is to create a course for the newly hired social workers that provides them with the foundation needed to learn about and understand the culture of the military. From the perspective of a clinical social worker, this recommendation allows FAP social workers who may have an understanding of the military from a familial perspective (i.e., military spouse) to realize that, as a professional, it is important

recognize the military cultural experience. This would allow for a more structured approach to educating social workers about military culture when they are hired into the system. Additionally, it would help to ensure that social workers are appropriately integrated into the military culture and not thrust into the job so quickly. If this recommendation is implemented, it should allow USAF FAP social workers to develop and increase their awareness of the military culture, especially the male bias in the culture, which would improve their ability to provide services and support to women in the USAF.

Another recommendation is for USAF FAP social workers to receive annual or biannual training on military culture. Social workers are required to maintain their licensure through continuing education, and this recommendation would provide social workers with the ability to stay abreast of the changes of the military culture, as well as meet the requirements for licensure. These trainings can help social workers identify concerns of female military personnel as those concerns relate to the definition of military culture, which could also provide them with additional information and new ways that women can adapt to the military culture.

Transferability/Limitations

The transferability is low for the social work profession as it is difficult to transfer or generalize this topic to the civilian sector because the study focuses on the military. Additionally, the transferability is also a challenge with the different branches of military because each has different rank systems, rules, services, and cultural structures within them. However, this study could be replicated with other FAP programs with the USAF,

which would provide additionally data and further insight in the research findings. Also, a limitation that was identified and stated previously was several different bases were selected for recruitment, none of those bases employed male social workers at the time of this study, and a male social work perspective may have provided additional insight into how being aware of the military culture could influence practice with female military personnel.

Recommendation for Further Research

Additional research is needed across all branches of the military to gain more insight into how awareness of military culture might influence the relationships between FAP social workers and female military personnel. Although this study focused on FAP social workers who serve women in USAF, findings might be different among FAP social workers who serve women in the U.S. Army and/or U.S. Marine Corps (USMC). As the population of women continues to increase in all branches of the military, more research seems needed to understand how the awareness of the military culture may influence the relationships between FAP social workers and female military personnel who are and have been involved with combat.

From a broader perspective within the field of social worker, the findings in the study show that additional research related to awareness of culture among social workers is needed. The social work profession must address a variety of cultures. It is difficult for social workers to understand all the cultures and subcultures of the world. Furthermore, as this study demonstrates, it is important for social workers to be provided with adequate knowledge of the cultural environment they are working in.

Dissemination of Findings

The dissemination of the information produced from this project could be offered at an annual meeting for FAP social workers. The information could be made accessible to the majority of social workers who are employed in USAF FAPs, as well as to the leadership of USAF FAPs. This would allow for buy-in from the most key stakeholders of the program and potentially lead to social change within the FAP program.

If the recommendation is followed that allows for annual cultural training for FAP social workers, the findings of the study could also be shared in that setting. The information would provide those participating with the understanding of why the training is needed and its importance. In turn, this would allow social workers to gain further insight into their awareness of the military culture or the lack thereof.

Implications for Social Change

Clinical social workers provide care and services to diverse populations of clients. However, little was known about how awareness of military culture among social workers in the military can impact their relationships with female military personnel. The findings in this study suggest that clinical social workers in the USAF FAPs are aware of the military culture primarily by way of family and friend experiences with the military. With programs that provide ongoing education and training to all military social workers about a changing military culture, social workers can help women be successful at all levels in the military system.

In turn, when women leave the military, the likelihood is that their successes in the military will transfer to success in the civilian workplace. Measuring this transference

could result in a feedback loop in which stakeholders in the civilian workplace provide military leaders in all branches of military service with information about how to enhance opportunities for women in the military to benefit them in the civilian workplace. With ongoing awareness of the military culture, social workers can play a key role in helping women take advantage of all opportunities as the military changes. Additionally, here are social implications of change from the micro, mezzo, and macro level perspective:

Change at the Micro Level

At the micro level of change, the social workers who participated in the study could develop a questionnaire or assessment instrument that explores the experience female military personnel have regarding male bias in the military culture. This would inform those social workers about how the culture may affect women emotionally. This can help the local social workers from this study to develop unique services and help identify the cultural concerns identified by female military members they work with. With the many women now employed in strategic command situations in the USAF, aspects of the military culture (e.g., male bias) can result in additional stress for many women working in these environments. Being able to identify this early would be beneficial for both the social workers and female military members because it would offer the ability to develop additional preventative services on base. Also, it would work toward reducing the identified negative impacts of the military culture on that base.

Change at the Mezzo Level

Through research and understanding of the military culture and its impact on the family, the social change on the mezzo level would be to help address domestic/intimate

partner violence in military families. A recommendation regarding this problem would also be focused on the social workers who participated in this study. Through a presentation format, the findings in this study could enlighten other USAF FAP social workers regarding the need to explore how the military culture may impact the high rate of domestic/intimate partner violence on USAF bases that to some extent is likely driven by the male bias inherent in the military culture. Utilizing focus groups of military personnel, with both male and female participants, could offer important data on how the military culture impacts family relationship.

This potential for social change at this level would be the reduction of domestic/intimate partner violence among families in the USAF. Additionally, it would provide FAP social workers with guidance and information on appropriate evidence-based practices and services that could help reduce violence in these families. In this process, FAP social workers would be able to gain further awareness of the male bias in the military which could allow for building rapport faster, determining adequate services, and providing more preventative care for military members, especially female military personnel and female partners.

Changes at the Macro Level

At the macro level, a recommendation is to involve the stakeholders, such as the Director of FAPs and uniform leaders of USAF, to require nonmilitary social workers in FAPs on all USAF bases to participate in educational workshops. These educational workshops could help the social workers gain insight into the military culture and how it may impact female military personnel. This recommendation has the potential to reach

social workers in the FAPs across 52 USAF bases in the United States, and in turn, to help the multiple clients they serve. Thus, the impact of this recommendation will allow FAP social workers to better provide female military members with the mental health services they need. Additionally, with the increased knowledge of the cultural concerns, such as the male bias within military, FAP social workers can develop more services, groups, and assessments that are more aligned with the needs of female military female personnel.

Summary

Awareness of the military culture among social workers is an important aspect of practice when they work with women in the military. The findings in this study illustrate the need for social workers to be aware of the military culture to ensure that they develop positive relationship with female military personnel. Furthermore, the findings in this study also show that social workers take on the referral role, as well as the therapeutic role, to ensure that female military personnel access the resources that are available to them.

In addition, the findings in the study suggest the need for more research to be conducted within all military branches to know more about how social workers address the needs of women in the military. The increasing number of women in the military forces point to a paradigm shift in the male-dominated structure of the military. This research study contributes to the notion that social workers may be particularly helpful to female military personnel when they ensure that women can access the resources available to them in the military.

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Appendix: Script for Interview

Good day to you! My name is John Gonzalez, and I want to thank you again for your willingness to participate in this study. Before we begin, I would like to read a definition of military culture that might be helpful for you to keep in mind as you respond to five questions I will pose to you.

“Military culture is a shared, collectivistic, and militaristic cultural enmeshment. From this broad perspective on military culture, it is necessary to understand the structure of the military, the language used, the commitments military personnel make to a unit of service, and how military personnel value honor and service” (Lane, 2019; Tschaep, 2018). In this context, Callahan (2016) characterized military culture as basically a “combat, masculine-warrior” premise that is used to prepare men (and women) for combat. It is a culture that men shaped, and being a soldier is viewed as a masculine role only and is perceived as men’s work.”

Today, I pose to you five questions, to which the answers will contribute to understanding the level of awareness social workers have regarding the military culture, and how that understanding could influence how social workers practice with female military personnel, especially those who have experienced combat. As you know, these women often have more issues as a result of combat than females in the military who have no combat experience.

In no way will any response be attached to your name. Rather, the responses will be viewed in aggregate without anyone’s responses being identified, and as such, they

will be anonymous. A summary of the findings will be emailed to you after the data analysis is complete.

If you are ready, I will begin the interview now.

The following questions will be presented to participants:

1. In what ways do you describe your cultural background?
2. In what ways do you think your cultural background is similar to or different from the military culture?
3. Based on your practice with female military personnel, how do you think service in the military might provide females with opportunities that they otherwise might not have?
4. In what ways do you think females in combat or in training for combat might have different experiences than women who are not in combat or in training for combat?
5. If you know that a female might be deployed for combat or has returned from combat, in what ways might awareness of military culture help establish rapport with her?