

A Call for Military-Centric Social Work Education

Mark R. Marquez¹, Terri Moore Brown², Chester D. Dilday²,
Tamara M. Woods² & Gregory E. Perkins²

Abstract

Military-Centric Social Work Education is discussed as a mindfulness-based conceptual approach to the development and delivery of social work curriculum and instruction, as well as a way of addressing the specialized educational needs of social workers who may provide social work services to veterans, military personnel, and their families. A call to action is presented to social work educators to effectively educate social workers to be competent in addressing the ever increasing needs of those military-connected individuals who have volunteered to protect and defend the United States of America (U.S.A).

Keywords: Military social work, social work education, military gestalt, centric

The current wars in Afghanistan and Iraq represent America's longest continuous combat engagement. By the beginning of 2010 more than 2 million military members had served one or more combat deployments, and more than 1 million of these veterans had already left the military (Council on Social Work Education, 2010, p. 1).

As a result of these conflicts many military service members have experienced emotional trauma, combat injuries, and recurring deployments on an unprecedented scale, placing an ever increasing burden on social work agencies, faith-based organizations, mental health centers, and hospitals as military members and their families seek assistance (Brown & Freeman, 2010).

¹Department of Social Work, Fayetteville State University, 1200 Murchison Road, Fayetteville, NC 28301. E-mail: mmarque2@uncfsu.edu, Telephone: 910-684-0519, Fax: 910-672-1755

²Fayetteville State University

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) has recognized the significance of these facts as evidenced by NASW convening a symposium entitled "Enhancing the well-being of America's veterans and their families: A call to action for a national veterans policy," at their national office during June, 2013 (Pace, 2013). Additionally, the military has responded to the recognized need for more social workers in the military by taking action to recruit new social workers (Malai, 2012).

If one looks back over the history of the United States (U.S.) one can see a country and society utilizing their militia or military in wars, peacekeeping missions and various national security related activities throughout that relatively brief timeframe. If one then looks back through the much longer history of other countries and humans themselves, one can see similar military-like situations of conflict, trauma and often death throughout the history of mankind. The history of the U.S. and its current stature as a country and a global influence dictates the need for a strong U.S. military, if only to fight off a homeland soil invasion as it once did at Yorktown, Virginia. Winning that strategic battle of the American Revolution was integral to the U.S. securing its independence (Grainger, 2005) and freedom.

Freedom is not free. Given the uncertain results of the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the likelihood of such situations continuing (Council on Social Work Education, 2010), with regards to personal safety and national security, the availability of trained and fit for duty U.S. military service members seems increasingly more necessary. Life and death situations and battles are regularly faced and fought on the behalf of all U.S. citizens by the men and women of the U.S. military who have volunteered to take on the dangerous but all too necessary task.

The warzone is a "terrible place filled with blood and tears" (Grossman & Christensen, 2007, p. xii). The experience of war changes an individual's view on such things as safety, relationships and even the meaning and purpose of life (Armstrong, Best, & Domenici, 2005). Wartime service affects not only the service member but also their family (Hoge, 2010). The needs of our veterans returning from war, and their families, has reached the point where social work should advocate for a profession-wide focus on developing and delivering a military social work body of knowledge, skills and abilities. Social work programs are in a unique position to greatly contribute in this area (Rubin, Weiss, & Coll, 2013) and should take an active role in developing and delivering specialized curriculum and instruction aimed at benefiting this vulnerable population.

Grossman and Christensen (2007) indicate that society starts reflecting on what it could or should do for returning veterans once a war has ended. It is suggested that the social work profession, and more specifically social work educators, not wait to react to the need once the current conflict is over but rather be proactive in developing and delivering military-centric curriculum and instruction. A growing awareness of the military becoming an increasingly more legitimate and significant social work practice population is evidenced by the number of social work programs delivering military-related coursework and the Council on Social Work Education (2010) publishing military social work advanced-practice standards.

The social work profession in the U.S. can answer this call by asking U.S. social workers to help their country's military service members and their families in respectfully and effectively coping with the uniqueness of being part of the U.S. military. In the initial publication of the conceptualization of military centric social work by Marquez (2012) it is suggested that the social work profession is well suited to take a lead in developing and delivering programming and services to veterans, military personnel, and their families and can best do so by utilizing a military-centric social work approach which is ever cognizant of the significant influence that the military gestalt has on these individuals.

This paper is intended to acknowledge the potential contributions the social work profession, with specific emphasis on social work educators, can make to individuals as they deal with the unique struggles inherent in being connected to the U.S. military. It results in a call to action of social work educators to take an active role in advocating for and developing social work curriculum and instruction which is cognizant of the unique needs of military service members and other military connected individuals. The discussion about military-centric social work education is presented in an effort to help facilitate the awareness of the potential value of such a mindfulness-based approach to social work curriculum and instruction development and delivery.

Discussion

The comment by Senator Bob Dole to veteran's returning from war clearly state the struggles they will likely encounter:

Coming back from a war is a longer journey than any plane flight home. It would be great if everything just snapped back together, the way it had always been- and if what happened in Tikrit stayed in Tikrit, for instance-but the truth is, returning from war, is much more complicated than that.

Digesting what you saw and what you missed, and relating to your old rules can be tough, even with terrific support. It feels unfair, considering the personal sacrifice. But fair or unfair, returning home is rarely what you imagine it will be (Armstrong et. al 2005, p. 1).

The thoughts and feelings that Senator Dole's comments evoke can be used a starting point for the helping professions, including social workers, as they seek to fully grasp the psychosocial implications of the military gestalt.

Being part of the military changes the service member. Not only because of the conflict related experiences but also the adjustment to the military gestalt. While the term culture is insufficient in conveying the entirety of the military gestalt it is a term and concept that most people understand. Even given some differences based on the branch of the military, the military is a culture in and of itself. The one constant thread throughout all military branches is the ever looming reality of death of one's self or one's fellow service member. Regardless of the service members primary peacetime function they all have a function related to war. The function could be direct contact with the enemy or one of support of the warfighter. At some point in their military service many are likely to be trained in some form or fashion to be able to be a fighting service member should the need arise.

Therefore, regardless of the branch of service an individual enters being military means the possibility of entering into a warzone with the ultimate potential of having to kill someone or be killed themselves. While this scenario appears to be extreme and unlikely for most, the reality is that we can't predict the level of war that we enter because there's always potential for war to escalate beyond the bounds and scope of its given theater. This reality indicates that all service members have the potential for being put into harm's way.

This potential danger to all service members permeates the entire military system which includes not only the service members but military related staff family friends and related others. The never ending threat of death is a fundamental component of the military gestalt.

Culturally-Centric Education

The question at hand is if culture plays a role in education does being connected to the military mean that the individual has unique cultural variables that should be addressed in educationally preparing social workers to competently work with those individuals?The U.S. military has a culture of its own and Botha (2010) indicates that culture centered learning has merit.

Fong and Furuto (2001) relate that social work has been a leader in advocating for culturally relevant programs and policies. However, Petrovich (2012) indicates that universities have not developed or delivered the curriculum needed by social workers to serve the veteran population. Additionally, Afrocentricity has been marginalized in social work curricula (Pellebon, 2012).

The concepts of Afrocentric education affords the opportunity to think about the value of having culture centered education. If there is value in culture centered education it can be extrapolate that other cultures, such as military, could benefit from culturally-centric educational programming. Military-centric social work education is a culture centered educational approach to preparing military and non-military social workers to be able to understand and work effectively with the military population. The education of social workers to effectively address the needs of veterans and their families is not a new endeavor as evidenced by the Jacobs (2009) statement that "Smith College School for Social Work (SCSSW) was founded at the end of World War I (WW1) to train social workers to assist returning veterans and their families" (p. 453).

To be centric one must focus on the specific given content and not be distracted by thoughts or situations. The concept of mindfulness fits well with centrism. Germer, Siegel, & Fulton, (2005), state that people are generally distracted about what is happening in the moment and that mindfulness, while referring to several things including the psychological process of being mindful of something, can help one focus on the current task at hand.

Relative to education, Schoeberlein (2009) indicates that it helps teachers to focus, improve critical thinking, and have a better understanding of motivational and engagement factors of the student. Social work and education practitioners have tried to improve their mindfulness-based teaching skills (Crane, Kuyken, Williams, Hastings, Cooper, & Fennell, 2012).

Cervero, (1988) indicates that in order to better understand an unfamiliar situation, professionals mentally change an unfamiliar situations into familiar one through a process called reflection-in-action. Like mindfulness, Zeichner & Liston (1996) indicate that there are various conceptualization of reflective teaching but they all stress the importance of the teacher being aware of their own personal thoughts and understandings. That is, mindful of thoughts and understandings that may influence their teaching. This is the essence of military-centric social work education.

Military Gestalt

In the original conceptualization of the military gestalt, Marquez (2012) states:

Military life and combat are inextricably intertwined. In that combat effects all facets of military life and its constituent parts and partners, it follows that addressing issues related to military combat should take into account more than just the combat experience and its obvious implications.

There are so many variables at work that it is difficult to define and understand all the little pieces and parts along with their relationships and implications as well as the numerous factors yet to be known. For purpose of this discussion, this myriad of "all things military" including the functions, processes, and human elements related to combat is what is refer to as the "military gestalt".

The military gestalt, while a unified whole, it is more than just a sum of its parts, more that ethos, more than culture. It is a system of interdependent factors and processes centered around combat which make it unique from all other human systems. Utilizing a military centric social work approach would allow for a planned change process responsive to the subtleties and nuances of the military gestalt, as well as demonstrating the awareness and recognition of the existence of the gestalt which differentiates military life from civilian life. (p. 962)

Social Work

Social work recognizes that individuals are integral parts of human systems and that the use of the person-in-environment construct, an ecological model (Zastrow, 2007), can help in effectively addressing the individual's issues. More specifically it is the entire environmental context that the individual exists in, including their individual culture that social workers take into consideration when they are assessing and intervening. The person-in-environment construct fits well with considering the implications of the military gestalt when addressing the needs of military service members and their families. Social work clearly has significant potential to help military families (Pryce, Pryce, &Shakleford, 2012).

Military centric social work.The Council on Social Work Education (2010) defines military social work as involving "direct practice; policy and administrative activities; and advocacy including providing prevention, treatment, and rehabilitative services to service members, veterans, their families, and their communities." (p. 2).

Marquez (2012) states:

Military-centric is defined and operationalized as all processes, thoughts and actions being military gestalt-informed. Military centric social work is further defined and operationalized as viewed from an ecological perspective where the warrior-in-combat zone construct is reflective of the person-in-environment construct and thusly suggesting a good fit with social work. For the purpose of this study, military centric social work is a concept as opposed to a formal theory or strictly defined area of social work practice. It is less a matter of a set of discrete and unique components specific to effective and efficient social work intervention with the military gestalt and more of a framework to guide the process of developing, refining and delivering that set, while being constantly mindful of the military gestalt. (p.966)

Military-centric social work education. The concept of military-centric social work education is one of simplicity similar to that of military-centric social work, which is being mindful of the military gestalt as one goes about delivering social work services or developing social work curriculum and instruction. It is the mindfulness of the existence, not necessarily all the specific content, of the influences of the military gestalt while delivering or explaining the content at hand.

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) indicates the need for specialized military social work education for student and professional social workers and reports that the Institute of Medicine (IOM) suggests that each professional discipline needs to develop appropriate education for their disciplines to effectively work with the military and military connected populations.

Significant issues that need to be addressed when educating this population are that deployments may interfere with the students' ability to complete coursework and/or the program in a timely manner and, as Jones (2013) suggests, that in social work education, there must be collaborative emphasis on the sensitivity of the complex nature of issues such as post-traumatic stress. Additionally, many student veterans have returned from a war zone and been exposed to very traumatic experiences (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). When exploring social work field practicums, their experiences and needs must be considered. Social work educators must ensure that the veterans are part of the planning when seeking field placements. These educators need to build on the veterans' strengths, explore resources, and determine their needs and challenges to adequately prepare them for the field experience. A supportive and informed social work field education team is critical for the veterans' success.

Given that "schools are reflective of the societies that develop them." (Asante, 2007, p. 170), it could be inferred that a society that cares about its military service members and their families will have educational programming that reflects the needs and experiences of the military population.

The concept of military-centric social work education is an attempt to contribute to the development and delivery of curriculum and instruction that helps civilian or military-connected social work students and professionals be better prepared to work with the military and military associated populations as well as address some of the unique education needs of the military or military-connected populations.

Implications for Social Work Practice

Military social work appears to be becoming a specific field of social work practice as evidenced by its increased presence in social work education programs.

The Council on Social Work Education (2013) indicated that there were 482 baccalaureate programs and 219 master programs which were accredited by CSWE. There were also 73 doctoral programs that were members of the Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education (GADE). There were six Master's programs offering certificates in military social work and 21 Master's programs offering a concentration in the area of military social work. There were a total of 877 Masters of Social Work students in military-related field placements.

Military social work, as a field of practice and research, is critical to our relevance as social workers, to the advancement of new career options, and our leadership among the helping professions. This does not mean that we endorse war or aggression, but rather that we extend meaningful help to those who have been affected. This is a moment in history when we can reassert our central influence as a pivotal healing profession in the midst of wartime and in the aftermath by promoting a vigorous social work research agenda and appropriate training to effectively prepare military social workers. (Council on Social Work Education, 2010, p. 2)

Conclusion

A fundamental pursuit of social work is that of a "just society" (Suppes & Wells, 2003, p.6). In that justice is socially defined (Barusch, 2012) it seems more than reasonable that U. S. society and, more specifically the social work profession, can view effectively providing social work services to veterans, military personnel, and their families as advocating for social justice.

The growth of military related social work education programming indicates the desire for military social work-related curriculum and instruction. It appears that the profession has recognized the need for delivering culturally-centered education to social workers with regards to working with the military population. However, given that the field is in many ways still in its infancy there is still the need for the development of a sound knowledge and skill base relative to military social work. The profession should take an active approach in developing the content to serve this population as well as the social work education professionals should take on the role of developing and delivering effective military-centric curriculum and instruction.

This call to action of social work educators is being made because now is the time for them to start to diligently address the educational needs of social workers involved with military service members and other military-connected individuals. American society has missed previous opportunities to proactively address the needs of her returning veterans and their families. The profession of social work as a component of American society has another opportunity to help these individuals who have made direct and indirect sacrifices on behalf of all the citizenry of the U. S.. Appropriately meeting our professional responsibility to help these individuals, calls for going above and beyond existing standards and for a deliberate and intense focus on developing the body of knowledge and interventions which are truly effective when applied to the military gestalt. Social work educators and institutions are positioned to take a lead in this area. Utilizing a military-centric social work education approach to curriculum and instruction development and delivery could foster a learning experience reflective of the subtleties and nuances of the military gestalt, which suggests improved outcomes with regards to social work with military and military connected populations.

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