

## Commentary

# Expanding the Scope of Research on Military Children: Studying Adversity, Resilience and Promotion in Normative Social Contexts

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In recent years there has been a significant increase in the interest in military-connected children. Cozza, Lerner and Haskins offer an excellent contribution to the growing literature on military children and their needs. Their review highlights the importance of the strengths of military children and the supports needed during times of war. Our commentary builds on their suggestions for further research and methodological work on military children's normative contexts. The belief that developmentally normative settings, if structured properly, can promote resilience and well-being of children is well established in many research literatures, including community psychology, developmental psychology, public health, urban planning, social work, and sociology (e.g., Benbenishty & Astor, 2005). Knowledge created in these fields and many others could be harnessed to expand our understanding of military children and create effective policies to promote their resilience.

Prior research and theoretical conceptions suggest that supportive normative contexts can help prevent negative outcomes related to trauma, war, and community violence (Astor et al., 2011, 2012a, 2012b; Astor, De Pedro, Gilreath, Esqueda, & Benbenishty, 2013; Garbarino, Dubrow, Kosteiny, & Pardo, 1992; Khoury-Kassabri, Benbinishty, Astor, & Ziera, 2004; Schiff et al., 2010, 2012). The long-term value of prevention and promotion fostered by normative contexts has not been carefully explored in the research literature on military-connected children. This alternative conceptual perspective could spur new strategies that focus on settings and systems rather than individuals or families alone. Our commentary expands on this idea and presents a conceptualization of normative settings and contexts that have implications for research, services and policies intended to support the well-being of military children.

### **Expand the Scope of Research to Include Military and Veteran Children in Normative Social Contexts**

The vast variations among military families and the contexts in which they are embedded need to be better articulated and researched. Having a representative, fine-grained view of military families is critical. The ages of the parents, number of children, ages of children, type of military service (e.g., branch, role, and rank), number, frequency and deployment destination can either foster or detract from resiliency. The multiple contexts in which military children develop should also be well represented in research. Certain school systems and community settings may be more supportive than others, and certain states and regions may be more welcoming to military families and their children (De Pedro et al., 2011). These contextual variations could have a serious impact on outcomes for military and veteran families.

In order to have a better understanding of the range of issues faced by military children, it is essential to include studies that focus on normative settings. Empirically documenting the influence of embedded ecological-developmental social contexts (community, military community, family, peer groups, school, religious institutions, sports clubs, etc.) on the risk and resilience of military children would provide a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of military families “in context.” Researchers should gather data on multiple embedded contexts and focus on a much wider range of child-in-context characteristics. This approach could increase the representativeness of future findings (e.g., Astor, De Pedro, et al., 2013; De Pedro et al., 2011) by accounting for contextual variation and draw attention to the important impact that such normative settings have on the development of military-connected children.

### **Better Understanding of Risk and Resiliency in the Historical and National Context**

Understanding and interpreting findings on military children embedded in normative civilian settings should be informed by the historical and national context. Relationships between civilian society and military (and veteran) families and children, and the degree to which military members are honored and supported, vary across time and countries. The ways American society perceives and supports soldiers and veterans of the Iraq and Afghan wars may be different from what happened during the Vietnam era or WWII.

Furthermore, U.S. and U.K. soldiers, who may have fought the same battles in Iraq, may be received and supported differently by their respective societies and communities.

Similarly, national cultural norms at any given historical point in time may impact how normative developmental settings, such as schools and the workplace, respond to military families and children. Children in the U.S. who had parents serve during WWII may have experienced very different community support compared with children of voluntary military personnel employed in Iraq (Astor, De Pedro et al., 2013). These settings may have had a different impact on the children's ability to cope with the stressors of military lives. Being a military family within a civilian society during times of peace may present an entirely different sociological and psychological dynamic than being a military family during popular or unpopular wars.

From a research point of view, in the current literature there is little acknowledgment of the importance of cultural, national and historical contexts for military children. We propose that future military child studies include, both in their conceptualization and methods, an integration of the national context and historical timeframes related to war and peace. Future research could include the exploration of the social-political civilian attitudes towards wars and military families over time. Studies that carefully examine overall attitudes, support, and relationships with military families in multiple countries could further our theoretical and practical understanding of risk

and resilience surrounding military families. Most importantly, it will allow researchers to explore commonalities and dissimilarities across time, nations, contexts, and ages. Without the variables of time and history included, it may be difficult to find consistency in outcomes over time and may lead to erroneous conclusions attributed to military families rather than to the socio-economic-political transactions between civilian society and military families.

### **Better Understanding of Normative Settings that Promote Resilience**

Appreciation of the potential promotional role of normative settings, such as schools, could guide research to identify and study settings that proved to be supportive and promotional to military children during times of war and peace (Astor & Benbenishty, 2014; Astor, De Pedro, et al., 2013; De Pedro, Esqueda, Cederbaum, & Astor, 2014). There may be schools and communities that are welcoming to military children and support them by providing informal and formal resources. In others, the rich experiences of military children and families may contribute to their non-military peers in the wider community. For example, there may be many schools and communities that positively harness the resilience of military students to strengthen the school community as a whole (e.g., Astor et al., 2012a, 2012b; Astor, DePedro, et al., 2013; Astor, Jacobson, Benbenishty, Cederbaum, et al., 2012; Astor, Jacobson, Benbenishty, Pineda, et al., 2012). Better understanding of how these thriving civilian and military communities are structured, their personal and

organizational practices, and their social views toward each other could provide important lessons for less welcoming and supportive civilian environments that do not have those attitudes and practices (Lester & Flake, 2013).

### **Military Children Embedded in Normative Contexts: Implications for Practice and Policy**

Research that recognizes the importance of normative settings for military families and children should inspire the development of preventive strategies, policies and systemwide changes aiming to enhance awareness and the supportive environment and responses of the social settings of military children. Many current programs propose to help military children and families cope with the stressors of military lives. Programs such as Families OverComing Under Stress (Project FOCUS) have shown evidence for promoting resilience and positive outcomes. Far fewer efforts have been invested in developing approaches that seek to change the normative settings that promote resilience and well-being among military families and children (for an exception see Garcia, De Pedro, Astor, Lester, & Benbenishty, in press). Such efforts could help identify contextual resources that facilitate positive changes on the community level. The theory of change for these programs is likely to include links among awareness, attitudes and resources allocated to military children in a normative setting, such as school, that promote children's feelings of being welcomed, understood and supported, which in turn lead to

positive outcomes of better coping, lower risk behaviors and higher well-being (for examples of studies exploring these issues see Gilreath, Estrada, Pineda, Benbenishty, & Astor, 2014).

To date, little research has been done on the effectiveness of policies intended to bring resources to communities and how those community or school resources support positive resiliency in specific military communities. Both the recent Institute of Medicine reports (Institute of Medicine, 2013) and *The Future of Children* special issue ("Future of Children," 2013) mention the importance of schools and communities, and even recommend policies. Yet aside from a handful of studies and several reports to Congress (Chandra et al., 2010; Kitmitto et al., 2011), there are few empirical studies documenting existing school and community intervention strategies (De Pedro, Atuel, et al., 2014; Garcia et al., in press). Evidence supporting the effectiveness of increasing resources to military-connected communities and schools is an important gap to address.

Providing more community and school resources (not just evidence-based programs) is also a strategy employed by the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) public school partnership grants (<http://www.militaryk12partners.dodea.edu>). This is one of the largest federal grant programs designed to help public schools and civilian communities provide more resources to military students. In a similar vein, the Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC) is one of the primary organizations to provide curriculum, workshops, and training supports for civilian

public school districts. For instance, MCEC is providing training to help implement a school-wide "Student 2 Student" program designed to help create a school environment that is supportive of transitioning military students (see <http://www.militarychild.org>).

A DoDEA partnership consortium called Building Capacity in Military-Connected Schools is an example of a program aimed to provide resources to public schools. Eight civilian military-connected public school districts and a university-based team have pursued a regional strategy to increase a wide range of supports and resources with the goal of enhancing the capacity of civilian schools to support military-connected students (see <http://buildingcapacity.usc.edu>). This includes professional development to educators; placing graduate-level social work, psychology and counseling interns in schools; highlighting and supporting local resources and best practices (both evidence-based programs and grass roots efforts); linking military supports (e.g., the school liaison officers and non-governmental agencies supporting military families) to the school community; and adapting existing school-based, evidence-based programs to respond to military-connected students (Berkowitz, De Pedro, Couture, Benbenishty, & Astor, 2014; Cederbaum, Malchi, et al., 2014; De Pedro, Esqueda, et al., 2014; Esqueda et al., 2014; Gilreath, Astor, et al., 2014). Currently, evaluation of these approaches is underway using an array of analytical methods to explore different levels of contextual change. Initial results suggest a reduction of risk behaviors for military and non-military children in the consortium (for examples

see Astor, Benbenishty, Wong, & Jacobson, 2013; Benbenishty, 2013).

Studies also need to explore the impact of policies that directly impact military-connected children and the normative settings in which they develop. Over the past decade considerable policy efforts at the national, state and local levels have focused on supporting military students in public schools and civilian contexts. One important nationwide policy that needs more research is the expansion of the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children (<http://www.mic3.net>). Military families and the organizations representing them, such as the Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC), have spearheaded the compact (Esqueda, Astor, & De Pedro, 2012). Military families brought forth the compact because there was little consistency or flexibility by civilian school districts to accommodate issues of transition experienced by military children. The goal of the compact is to urge more uniform state policies that ease the transition of military students from one state to another. These policies include the transfer of academic grades and educational awareness of teaching staff about military families for all schools in each signing state. The compact includes not only children of active duty members of the uniformed services, National Guard and Reserve on active duty orders, but also children of veterans who are medically discharged or retired for one year. The compact has been adopted by almost all states. Studies exploring the efficacy of this massive policy effort are needed.

Another evolving policy change with potential implication

for millions of veteran and military-connected children and families is the inclusion of a “veteran and military identifier” in public records, such as emergency cards that parents complete when registering their children for school. MCEC, DoDEA and other military organizations and scholars (Astor, De Pedro, et al., 2013; Cozza, Haskins, & Lerner, 2013; De Pedro et al., 2011) have been advocating for this type of policy so that community, state and school resources could be distributed according to local needs and circumstances. An anonymous identifier could enable public school districts and civilian communities that are not aware that they have military students to be eligible for grants, Impact Aid funds (<http://www.militaryk12partners.dodea.edu/impact.cfm>), and to marshal community and district resources to schools with higher concentrations of military students. It could also help identify schools with only a small number of military students who may feel isolated or invisible compared to their peers in communities with many military children. Currently, several states have passed laws requiring districts to include an identifier (<http://www.militarychild.org/student-identifier>) and more states are considering it. Several members of Congress have also included such language in bills and policy recommendations. Policy research evaluating the impact of these laws on services provided is needed.

### **Military Children Embedded in Normative Contexts: Implications for Research**

Conceptualization of resilience and risk among military children

as an outcome of interaction of individual and family variables embedded in multiple nested contexts has many implications for research. Awareness of the effects of contexts has implications for including context variables both in the conceptualization and the measurement in research. As discussed, one example is the attention to national, regional and historical contexts as explaining variability. Further, appreciation of nested contexts may also entail the use of multi-level analytic approaches that try to identify what components of variability in children's resilience and risk are attributed to personal, family, and setting (such as school and neighborhood) characteristics. For instance, the authors are currently examining to what extent military-connected students' risk behaviors could be explained on the basis of their demographic and military characteristics (e.g., number of deployments) and the school-setting variables and district-level features (Atuel et al., 2014; Cederbaum, Gilreath, et al., 2014; Gilreath et al., 2013; Gilreath, Estrada, et al., 2014). The focus on military-connected students in normative settings, rather than in treatment settings, has many implications and opportunities for research. Studies comparing military-connected students with their peers in the same classes help identify commonalities and differences among students in the same setting. It can help ascertain, for instance, whether the cumulative stresses of military life are expressed in more risk behaviors compared with non-military peers, or perhaps, military students are more resilient than their peers given all the challenges they face and

need to overcome. Furthermore, such studies can help identify interaction effects and reveal whether certain school climate characteristics have more impact on military students or on their peers. For instance, perhaps school belongingness is a more important resource for military students who are struggling with many transitions, compared with their peers (De Pedro, Astor, Gilreath, Benbenishty, & Esqueda, 2013).

There is an emerging opportunity for such studies. There are efforts to include a military identifier in anonymous state and national surveys used for surveillance and monitoring of children and adolescents in a range of behavioral and mental health issues. For instance, since 2013, the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS, <https://chks.wested.org/>) has included a military identifier as part of the respondents' demographic information. This identifier opens opportunities to examine a large and representative sample of children and adolescents in California (Gilreath, Estrada, et al., 2014). Research is underway to explore the differences between military-connected children and their non-military classmates in the same schools and communities on a wide range of issues, such as experiences of safety, school belongingness, community support, connectedness to the school, positive well-being, teacher-student relationships, school victimization and perpetration, risk behaviors, such as smoking and the use of illegal substances, suicide ideation and health and physical activity. Such a database can help explore important demographic and contextual transaction questions

about the settings in which military children live and grow.

In addition, over 10 states are now integrating a military identifier into their administrative educational databases. This policy effort will create a huge amount of data on how public schools are serving military children and whether there are gaps in social-emotional supports, educational services, and achievement. Research agendas exploring these large-scale databases with millions of students in normative settings are needed.

Moreover, there are enormous untapped opportunities for research on military children using well-established, ongoing national and regional surveys and indicator systems. We urge our research colleagues in psychology, public health, social work, medicine, public policy, sociology, and education to work together to include such a military identifier in a range of important surveys such as the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System, Monitoring the Future, and Add Health. Civilian researchers may not yet think of military families as a diversity group in our society. If researchers from multiple disciplines included a military child or family identifier in their own studies, our knowledge of military families in context would grow tremendously. This would be a relatively inexpensive way to increase knowledge in multiple fields exploring different ecological contexts. Federal funders and private foundations could facilitate interdisciplinary research by requiring and urging a military identifier, similar to how issues of ethnicity, religion, age, gender or region are often included in surveys and studies of various diversity

groups.

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### **Content**

The *Report* provides a forum for scholarly reviews and discussions of developmental research and its implications for policies affecting children. The Society recognizes that few policy issues are noncontroversial, that authors may well have a “point of view,” but the *Report* is not intended to be a vehicle for authors to advocate particular positions on issues. Presentations should be balanced, accurate, and inclusive. The publication nonetheless includes the disclaimer that the views expressed do not necessarily reflect those of the Society or the editors.

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### **Procedures for Submission and Manuscript Preparation**

Articles originate from a variety of sources. Some are solicited, but authors interested in submitting a manuscript are urged to propose timely topics to the lead editor (slodom@unc.edu). Manuscripts vary in length ranging from 20 to 30 pages of double-spaced text (approximately 8,000 to 14,000 words) plus references. Authors are asked to submit manuscripts electronically, if possible, but hard copy may be submitted with disk. Manuscripts should adhere to APA style and include text, references, and a brief biographical statement limited to the author’s current position and special activities related to the topic.

Reviews are typically obtained from academic or policy specialists with relevant expertise and different perspectives. Authors then make revisions based on these reviews and the editors’ queries, working closely with the editors to arrive at the final form for publication.

The Committee on Policy & Communications, which founded the *Social Policy Report*, serves as an advisory body to all activities related to its publication.