
REVIEW

Veterans Studies: Special Issue on Military Caregiving

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Editorial for special collection.

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I am pleased to serve as Guest Editor for this special issue of the journal and I'm grateful to the journal's Chief Editor, Dr. Mariana Grohowski, for her enthusiastic support throughout the process. As is the purpose of special issues of any journal, this one draws attention to a specific topic. Unfortunately, it is an area that is under-researched in the scholarly community, namely, the challenges associated with spousal caregiving to veterans and currently serving service members. In all fields of social science, inadequately researched areas result either in the perpetuation of ignorance, or insufficient levels of understanding. Both outcomes are unhealthy for the functioning of the academy whose purpose it is to research and seek to explain the social world around us. Additionally, areas that are poorly researched give rise to a situation where there exist little meaningful findings for policymakers to draw upon. As a consequence, well-intended policies may not be best suited to meet the needs of recipients. The authors of this body of articles do a good job of identifying problems and exploring solutions to them, and in a manner that is policy relevant. This special issue also allows members of the scholarly community to display solidarity with those who have been affected by conflict.

My interest in the topic of spousal caregiving emerged during qualitative research for a book I was writing on policing and combating terrorism. My participants were former police officers in the Royal Ulster Constabulary GC during the Northern Ireland Troubles and who had sustained serious physical and psychological injuries in terrorist attacks. Their injuries were comparable to those sustained by military personnel who served in the recent conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq (single, double and triple amputees; facial disfigurement; severe burns; hemiplegia; monocular blindness; and mild and severe forms of PTSD). As a result of interviewing officers in their homes, I became aware of the dedicated role officers' wives had performed over the course of decades. To provide a degree of perspective, some officers

had been injured when the United States was engaged in the Vietnam War. Whether a caregiver to an injured police officer in Northern Ireland or a soldier injured in either Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) or Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), the role is similar and life-altering for the carer. Regrettably, what both caregiving groups share is the lack of scholarly recognition of the nature of this role. Importantly, then, this addition of the journal allows light to be cast on what caregivers do and the challenges they confront.

Let us briefly broaden the discussion. It was only on 21st August 2018 that a major step was taken by the United Nations (UN) *vis-à-vis* victims of terrorism: it observed the first "International Day of Remembrance of and Tribute to Victims of Terrorism." This Day of observance followed the General Assembly's adoption of Resolution 72/165 (19 December, 2017). In terms of this issue, what is significant about the Resolution is its reference to the wider family unit which violence has impacted upon. It refers to the 'suffering caused by terrorism to the victims and their families' and the need for the "human rights of victims of terrorism and their families" to be respected. In doing so, the UN is providing important political leadership to the international community but, of course, it is the responsibility of the nation state to formulate and implement policies to address the victimhood of its citizens. Developments at the level of the UN inform us that there exists a wider political framework of relevance within which the focus of this issue of the journal can be set.

The articles featured here draw readers' attention to different aspects of caregiving; there is also reflection on various ways of supporting caregivers. That caregivers deserve recognition at all levels is the authors' common denominator. The caregiver dimension is examined both in the veteran context as well as that of currently serving military personnel. April Cobos' piece considers the challenges experienced by spousal caregivers to recently retired service members and active duty service members. She points out

that there is little research done on the experiences of caregivers for those suffering PTSD. Many soldiers confronted life-threatening situations whilst deployed in OEF and OIF, and that re-deployment increased the likelihood of exposure to trauma. She also makes us mindful that military personnel had to contend with associated trauma such as seeing their comrades badly injured, hospital visitations, attending the funerals of those fatally injured, and being present at memorial services. In situations where these factors have a psychologically detrimental effect on victims, spouses and other intimate family members are to the fore in providing care – picking up the pieces and setting about the task of familial reconstruction. Cobos ends by making the point that available research can help improve the quality of support accessed by service members and their families and promote early intervention.

Corrine Hinton looks at spousal caregiving through the lens of intimate partner violence (IPV). It is acknowledged that rates of IPV are difficult to determine but the author's research agenda is informed by the fact that violence of this kind occurs. In some cases, caregiving is a long-term experience, possibly for the duration of a marriage. Where marriages are durable, this amounts to a very long time. On the basis of my own research I am sensitive to Hinton's point, as I have worked with former police officers whose wives have cared for them for what is now 48 years. In such cases, matrimonial bonds can be tested to the full but when they remain robust, healthy intimate relationships are central to a victim's recovery. She recommends that statutory bodies work with caregivers so they can better access support resources.

The role of eLearning in assisting individuals who provide care for veterans, or those presently in service, is examined by Precious Goodson. She argues that family caregivers are in much need of support not least because they have to cope with the stress of realizing that perhaps there “may never be an end-date for the unpredictable behaviors associated with...mental or cognitive conditions.” She indicates how this electronic medium can assist caregivers in sharing their experiences to the end that they learn how best to handle situations and formulate effective coping strategies. The

author also makes known how caregivers are susceptible to depression as they shoulder more familial responsibilities. Although disheartening, this is nonetheless the reality of many military caregivers and one that deserves acknowledgment. Goodson views eLearning as an important aid to caregivers.

Rosellen Roche, Joel Manzi, and Katelyn Bard point out that in excess of 1.7 million US veterans and nearly 1 million active military personnel received treatment in a US Veteran Affairs or Military Treatment Facility mental health program in 2018. The authors indicate the high volume of need in relation to professional support which, in turn, encourages us to speculate as to the much larger number of family members who, in one way or another, are affected by this too. They argue that spouses of military personnel encounter unique difficulties related to caregiving. Spouses often struggle to manage complex diagnoses in a military member. These, for example, can relate to a Traumatic Brain Injury but accompanied by “skepticism of treatment options, fear of repercussions in the workplace, and fear of medication side effects.” However, they make the point that these difficulties are compounded when the caregiver is herself a member of the military especially if occupying a position of command. The emergence of stress, anxiety and depression, resulting in mental fatigue, are not uncommon mental health conditions. These authors are correct in their claim that the findings of their work on the mental health needs of serving female military personnel, who also function as wives and mothers, offer significant insight for US veteran support services. This article, like the others, focuses our attention on the everyday realities of spousal caregivers. These are so easily overlooked as they are, by nature, private actions conducted most often within the home.

Finally, it is hoped that this special issue will stimulate interest and generate further research in the area of spousal caregiving – there is much hard work to be done by the academic community to the end of improving awareness and deepening understanding at all levels.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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