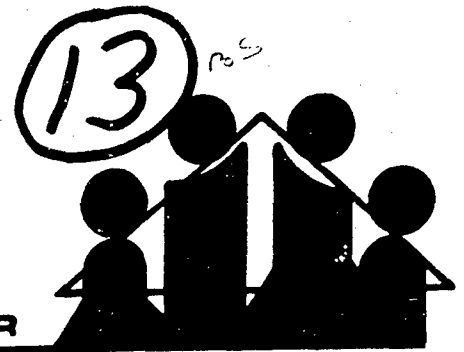


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**FAMILY ADJUSTMENT TO GEOGRAPHIC MOBILITY
MILITARY FAMILIES ON THE MOVE**

EDNA J. HUNTER
RON SHELDON

REPORT No. TR-USIU-81-06 ✓
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FAMILY ADJUSTMENT TO GEOGRAPHIC MOBILITY

Military Families on the Move

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INTRODUCTION

The military family has a unique mobile lifestyle, unmatched by any other population group. The following review of the literature on geographic mobility points to both positive and negative aspects of mobility for the military family unit. The authors were able to find but one study performed in the 1940s; six studies were reported in the 1960s, and ten investigations were carried out in the 1970s. Thus, it would appear that mobility for military families, although an important stressor, has been given minimal attention by researchers.

Of the sixteen studies reviewed, the majority emphasized the negative aspects of geographic mobility rather than the more favorable attributes of mobility. Major areas covered were: mobility and its effects upon children, mobility and the military wife, mobility in relation to marital and family adjustment, and support systems for the mobile military family. Of great importance and concern in any review of mobility in the military are the related topics of father absence and transcultural experiences.

MOBILITY AND ITS EFFECTS ON CHILDREN

Children in military families experience a unique developmental process that is applicable only to that population. In addition to mastering the normal developmental tasks, the military child experiences added stress due to geographic mobility, transcultural experiences, transient father absences, and early retirement of the father. According to Shaw and colleagues (Shaw, Duffy, & Privitera, 1978), geographic mobility for the preschool child (that is, birth to six years of age) is not particularly disruptive. If the family is able to provide a supporting emotional framework in which the child can develop, there may be no emotional disturbances, in fact.

Military children live from Spain to Turkey and from Ethiopia to Norway. Nonetheless, one study conducted in the mid-1960s indicated that school and mental health services were lacking for the 130,000 mobile military children in Europe. Personnel workers such as nurses, counselors, psychologists and speech therapists were in short supply (Bower, 1967). Also teachers in the European communities indicated they lacked contact with professionals and federal agencies in the United States which could have enhanced their teaching methods. A dispensary physician was the only person available to help emotionally troubled children and youth. Professional help and community resources should be available, according to Bower, to the mobile military family, just as they are for military families in the continental United States, since children overseas or in in foreign cultures have even greater needs.

Baggett (1979) found that military children and adolescents have difficulty adjusting to geographic mobility. Moving overseas places added demands on a child, and he may react in diverse ways. He may withdraw, or, conversely, he may become aggressive, fighting with other children. Or, he may grieve upon losing his familiar neighborhood and peer groups, just as though someone who was very close to him had died. A number of suggestions have been made to help the military child adjust to mobility, such as:

- . Be sure the child is told he is leaving the United States for a foreign country to prepare him.
- . Let the child complain or grieve about moving or having been relocated.
- . Unpack belongings and make a home quickly in the foreign country.
- . Parents should themselves be accepting of the move and emphasize the importance of family unity during the transition.

Another study of the 1960s (Gabower, 1960), showed that military children's disruptive behavior was not a consequence of moving per se, but a reflection of parental attitudes directed towards the child. Parents of children with behavior problems were

less active in helping the child prepare to move, in helping the child find new friends, assisting the child in joining activities, helping the child keep in contact with the father who was absent, and searching out psychiatric help for the child and family members (Gabower, 1960).

A similar study found parental attitudes to be a significant factor in the mobile child's ability to adjust (Pederson & Sullivan, 1964). The comparative histories of 30 "normal" military children and 27 disturbed military children from the Child Psychiatry Service, Walter Reed General Hospital, showed a significant difference between the two groups in relation to parental attitudes on two variables: (1) the acceptability of mobility, and (2) identification with the military. Mothers of normal children scored higher on both variables than mothers of disturbed children.

Disruption of social and emotional continuity may cause the mobile military children to develop more behavior problems than non-military children. A study conducted at the Child Guidance Clinic in the San Diego area indicated that sixty-three percent of the military children, opposed to thirty-six percent of non-military children, had behavior disorders (Kurlander, Leukel, Palevsky, & Kohn, 1961).

On the other side of the coin, military children tend to develop an expectation of mobility in a lifestyle in which this is a norm. The child over time comes to terms with his mobile situation and adapts to it. Children also have little difficulty in adjusting to father absence. The authoritarian orientation of the military household is reflected in the child's behavior. Also, the military child typically has a secure socio-emotional existence. Factors providing security for the child include a stable, close family circle. Lyon and Oldaker (1967) provided psychological services for two years to military dependents and found that the military lifestyle is marked by homogeneity of the group. Of 1,200 first- to sixth-graders enrolled in a military elementary school, they discovered no serious psychological maladjustments.

There are also positive aspects of mobility. Internationally mobile military children benefit socially and educationally when in another culture. They develop valuable skills, according to Rainey (1978), such as public relations and language acquisition. Increased proficiency in these social and educational skills are the result of answering phones, conducting public activities, obtaining food and lodging when the family is traveling, translating business letters, and entertaining the host countries' family members during social activities. Of course, there is also the opportunity for learning a foreign language, which might not be so readily available in the United States.

MOBILITY AND THE MILITARY WIFE

The military family, and especially the wife/mother, is susceptible to the potential stresses of mobility which are inherent in the military lifestyle. Wives of military personnel often feel alienated as a result of mobility and even develop personal, marital, and parent-child relationship problems. Based on a random sample of 200 Army wives, McKain (1973) addressed the problem of alienation in wives who exhibited poor identification with the military and failed to integrate into the social life around them. Typically mobility was perceived by these alienated wives as a negative and disruptive experience for them and their families. Conversely, McKain found that the wives who were not alienated adapted to the frequent moves, and involved themselves with new friends and utilized community support systems more readily than did alienated wives.

Developing a career is fraught with difficulties for military wives, who often have difficulty in obtaining suitable employment (Finlayson, 1969). Although service wives can avail themselves of many volunteer opportunities on base, they are at a decided disadvantage in securing meaningful employment. Due to frequent relocations, the military wife loses out on benefits, salary increases, and seniority on the job. Also, lack of uniformity in

state licensing and certification requirements necessitate frequent requalifying for employment. Moreover, employers tend to discriminate against these wives due to their highly mobile lifestyle. In past years the military community expected the officer's wife, especially, to be a volunteer, not an employed individual, but this situation is rapidly changing, and she is no longer as willing to pack up and move each time her husband receives orders.

MOBILITY IN RELATION TO MARITAL AND FAMILY ADJUSTMENT

Approximately one-third of any particular military base changes its personnel every year. Overall, however, satisfaction with the mobile military lifestyle does not seem to be particularly troublesome for couples in their early thirties, according to Wilson (1977) although it may become so as children grow older. In fact, in regard to marriages, they report high marital satisfaction, but less satisfaction with friendships since couples experience difficulties maintaining ongoing friendships due to frequent moves. However, the mobile military man was found to be satisfied with his career; moving usually means one more step up the success ladder.

Other investigators have focused specifically on the problems engendered by mobility, pointing out that the military family's economic security is undermined by mobility (Marsh, 1970). Often moving costs are greater than the allowances for moving; thus, families must borrow to cover the additional costs. At times there is a delay in monthly pay due to the loss of finance records during transfers. Frequently the family is separated temporarily during a move, causing the family to incur additional expense in supporting two households. Family characteristics, such as number of children, children's ages, and family resources have been cited as the major determinants of the severity of problems resulting from family disruptions during moves. Sometimes if a military family wants to join the husband they must pay their own expenses (Condra & Barnard, 1978).

Moving has been viewed as a family disruption which increases feelings of anomie (McKain, 1976), and the family which is most likely to experience the largest amount of family problems as a consequence of moving is the family unit in which the wife/mother feels alienated from society and the military community.

SUPPORT SYSTEMS AND THE MOBILE MILITARY FAMILY

A review of past research shows that the Red Cross assisted military families experiencing mobility (Daniels, 1947). At the end of World War II, that organization actually participated in helping to transport 60,000 British women, married to U.S. military men to the United States. The problems these war brides experienced generally fell into three categories: (1) problems arising out of the military setup in which they found themselves, and (2) problems arising out of the personal and family relationship, and (3) fear of leaving home, country, and facing new social adjustments in an unfamiliar culture.

The Department of Defense (1977) recognizes that moving day, and the days leading up to the move, can be the most disruptive period in the life of a military family. Unfortunately, even where supports are offered, mobility often makes for discontinuities. For example, children seen in military psychiatric clinics sometimes are unable to complete therapy because the family must move or (White, 1976). Parents sometimes postpone treatments for physical or psychological problems of family members immediately prior to a transfer or reassignment. Thus White (1976) concluded that long-term therapy was not advisable for the mobile military family, and that short-term crisis therapy was the ideal psychotherapeutic modality for treatment of military children.

CONCLUSION

In summary, there are mixed reports on the disadvantages and advantages of mobility for the military family. Positive aspects

of mobility are obtaining cultural experiences in conjunction with educational knowledge. The family unit, in many instances, becomes more unified, and with each move the serviceperson advances in his/her career. On the negative side, the effects of mobility on the military family are that children and adolescents may not be able to adapt quickly to the strange new environment. Limited educational services, limited community resources, less occupational opportunities for the spouse, separation of the family during the transfers, limited monetary funds during the moving process, and the family's having to adapt to frequent moving of household items, and adjusting to a new social/cultural environment, make it difficult for the mobile military family.

Measures to insure a less stressful mobile military life would be to provide sufficient financial assistance to cover moving expenses, to have available support systems which include psychological and educational services both Stateside and abroad, better employment opportunities for spouses overseas, allow more families to accompany their serviceperson spouse overseas, and, of course, to eliminate unnecessary moves. Since mobile military serviceperson are performing an immeasurable service to their nation, and their families are part of that commitment, the military organization, it would seem, has a responsibility to provide the necessary socio-emotional and economic resources during their compulsory transiency.

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