

Isolation Matrix: A Tool for Discovery

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"Natty Bumpo didn't have a wife!" The officers in Elective 246 at the Industrial College of the Armed Forces, "Military Family Studies," reacted to this insight with laughter and then some pensive expressions. They remembered the hero of Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales and other such heroes of American literature who had peopled their boyhood reading. They were isolated men, loners, explorers. The women were not complex characters. They were cardboard creatures named for virtues like Honor and Chastity, even though prototypes for heroines abounded in remarkable frontier women.

Today's Natty-Bumpo~~s~~, in the persons of American military personnel, ~~do~~ have spouses who share their potential for heroic stature. Opportunities for meeting challenges above and beyond the commonplace do exist for military family members. Their awareness of the noble dimensions that are possible in their lives can be an important coping skill. Knowledge of their strengths and weaknesses enables military families and their care providers to deal with their omnipresent challenge: isolation. Go to 449

Recognition of the positive, as well as the negative aspects of isolation can be aided by the following matrix. The five families of which military family members may be a part are:

Nuclear Family -- one's spouse and children, if married; or one's parents and siblings, if single.

Extended Family -- one's relatives (who may or may not live close by) and, for a military family, the network of very close friends from one's hometown and from previous duty stations.

Military Unit Family -- the personnel in the specific unit to which one is attached, and their families.

Neighborhood Family -- immediate neighbors plus friends in the community in which one lives, on base and off.

Service Family -- the overall Army or other Service which provides official and unofficial support services to military families.

When an individual has support from four or five of these families, he or she can function well. With only three, he experiences stress. Fewer supports place him at risk.

The vertical axis includes four major types of isolation (that are due to the military setting vs. personality disorders):

Geographic -- physical separation

Social -- at the level of acquaintances, surface recognition

Emotional -- at the level of deep friendships, lasting ties, recognition of one's abilities and thoughts

Cultural -- a catch-all category which includes:

ethnic - foreign born spouses; living overseas or in a new section of our own country

aesthetic - visual and performing arts, education, and intellectual endeavors

spiritual-philosophical - pursuits of a religious and ethical nature

Isolation Matrix
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Kinds of Isolation	Nuclear Family	Extended Family	Military Unit Family	Neighborhood/Community Family	Service Family
Geographic					
Social					
Emotional					
Cultural					

*For practical use, this matrix must be much enlarged.

The Isolation Matrix can be used by a wide variety of participants. The officers and spouses who are students in my ICAF course have found that discussion of the matrix allows them to share insights that would be too personal in other contexts, and it accentuates the complexity of the military family lifestyle. An individual may fill in his or her own profile, spotting strengths and weaknesses. A military unit group, such as the Key Wives in the Cherry Point Marine Corps Air Station Family Readiness Program, can work up a generalized profile which will enable them to pinpoint ways in which they can provide support. They will also find areas which the Service Family or one of the other five families could serve best. Service providers, such as family service/support centers, could do likewise.

Some of the examples of isolation that have been suggested by ICAF students and Key Wives may trigger your own thoughts. The symbols (+), (-), and (+/-) indicate the evaluation they placed on each experience. Some "cures" are added.

Geographic:

- o Husband deployed or TDY; physically absent (-), but if communication is possible (+/-).
- o Lack of phone, newspapers for junior enlisted (-).
- o Living at distance from extended family:
 - (-) if family is supportive;
 - (+) if one joined military to escape bad situation at home
 - (+) if one learns independence.
- o Living at distance from other unit families (-).
- o Lack of sponsor (-)
- o Deployed units leave families behind (-). Cures: visit or tour similar ship; use videotapes, films to show activities at home and aboard ship.
- o Chetto of military housing overseas (-/+).
- o Lack of transportation from base or trailer park to town (-).
- o Fishbowl existence when living on post, no privacy (-).
- o Loss of vistas of one's youth; lack of natural ties with the earth (-). Cures: annual visits "home;" canoeing, hiking, gardening wherever one lives.

Social:

- o "Caging" of wife, association with neighbors or unit wives forbidden (-).
- o Very young children, especially if no \$ for child care (-).
- o Lack of skills in making friends, especially true of those who grew up in small town (-).
- o Cabin fever, often climatically induced (-).
- o Difference of lifestyles (between member and extended family, unit families, or neighborhood families) (-/+). Comment: military families often outgrow a provincial background, come to value differences.
- o Strident separation of officer and enlisted families (-).
- o Failure by Commanding Officer (CO) to initiate whole unit activities which would help families identify with the workplace, mission, and each other (-).
- o Isolation of very senior and very junior personnel unless seniors initiate and assist (-).
- o Unit family is by chance, not by choice (-).
- o If unit is large, anonymity may result (-).
- o Military families seen as lower class by locals (-).
- o Social isolation of wife when husband is deployed (-).
- o Increase in number of working wives leaves less time for socializing outside of family unit (-/+).
- o Sense of immediate common bond with other military families (+).

Emotional:

- o Companionate marriage style strengthens a couple, but may isolate them from natural support groups (+/-).
- o Reliance on nuclear family due to frequent moves (+/-).
- o Some military personnel of the lone hero variety exclude spouses and children from their world (-).
- o Differentiate between creative solitude (+) and loneliness (-).
- o Lack of continuity in location, hours of duty, roles, etc. requires great emotional flexibility. An individual may grow to this challenge (+), or may decide not to invest in order to avoid hurt upon separation (-).
- o Lack of family or close friends nearby to validate individual (-).
- o Loss of unconditional love of grandparents and cousins due to distance (-).
- o Development of intense friendships with unit families due to common experience (+).
- o Lack of knowledge of normal emotional rhythms common to given military assignments (e.g. submarine wives' syndrome) (-).
- o Failure by unit CO to value family's role in readiness and retention (-).
- o Refusal by some to be more than sociable (i.e. will not risk vulnerability, admission of hardships because it might hurt career) (-).
- o Failure to know immediate neighbors (-).
- o Strong ties to past unit or location may preclude investment at new post (-).

- o Lack of frequent contact with other military families (-).
- o Lower rank families feel like outsiders in the military community (-).
- o Co-location of military family support services (+)

Cultural:

- o Reliance on television families as "knowns" wherever one moves vs. active cultivation of new friends (-).
- o Continuation of one's own traditions and artistic pursuits as link with past and future (+).
- o Double culture shock for foreign-born spouses to U. S. military community (-).
- o Culture shock of living overseas and re-entry (-/+).
- o Loss of common class ethics or behavior, sense of being different from others (teens, whether spouses or children, feel this intensely) (-/+).
- o Difference in cultural background (racial, ethnic, or educational) of neighbors or military unit families (-/+).
- o Change in living conditions from that of one's past (rural \longleftrightarrow urban; density of housing, climate, location) (-/+).
- o Lack of representation for military families on governing bodies (e.g. School Boards) (-).
- o Lack of cultural opportunities for participation or attendance (-).
- o Lack of understanding of military family traditions (-).
- o Lack of religious faith (-).
- o Non-valuing of military profession by others (-).

The predominance of negative factors is common to a first listing; problem areas are more rapidly identified than positives or "cures." The next step in the use of the matrix is to focus on a specific area, looking for positives that were overlooked in the first general delineation.

For example, at pre-deployment briefings one might hear a wife say, "Deployments give me time to really concentrate on my job or to pursue some long-term projects." A husband might admit that he enjoys his time at sea, and though he misses his family, he does not experience the daily friction between his two commitments. A wife might recognize that her self-sufficiency grows when she is responsible for finances, repairs, and child-rearing. Both might see that the deployment is a growth opportunity for all members of the family, an experience that their civilian counterparts probably do not have.

Where negatives remain, the task is to think of preventives or cures. One of the most productive exercises for pre-deployment briefings is to brainstorm ways to keep the person leaving emotionally present even if physically absent. This problem-solving can take place on all levels, from the personal family level to the military unit and Service levels. Although many suggestions that have grown out of such meetings could be shared here, part of the value is the ownership generated by coming up with solutions tailored to the needs of one's own family, unit, or command.



Military families can live lives with heroic dimensions. They explore new domains, both geographic and emotional. They are often alone. Their terrain is full of peaks and pits with very few plateaus. The military lifestyle offers the opposing possibilities of greater success or greater failure than are common to most of their civilian peers. "The environment most conducive to human development is one sufficiently changeable to pose constant challenges, but not so severe as to prevent successful response." Use of the Isolation Matrix will help families and their care providers meet the requirements for Arnold Toynbee's ideal environment.

