Competence, Risk, and Resilience in Military Families: Conceptual Commentary

Ann S. Masten

Abstract This commentary highlights conceptual themes in the opening section of this special issue on military families in relation to a new synthesis of developmental systems theory that emerged from developmental, ecological, and family systems theory, as well as developmental psychopathology and risk/resilience frameworks. Articles in this special issue draw on these concepts to characterize and guide the burgeoning research on military families. This perspective emphasizes that multiple dynamic systems interact across levels to shape individual development, as well as the function of families and military units. Developmental timing is important for understanding how challenges of military life may impact individuals and families. Cascade effects are noted, where stress experienced by one family or service member can influence the function of other individuals or larger systems. Capacity for resilience is distributed across systems, including families and cultures, as well as resources or supports provided by military organizations to foster adaptive responses or recovery. These systems include schools and educational programs that play key roles in fostering and supporting resilience for children. Overall, developmental system concepts have considerable utility for guiding research with military families, particularly in regard to promoting resilience. Moreover, lessons learned from military families and programs may have much broader implications for many other nonmilitary children, families, and organizations that share similar goals and challenges.

With the shift to an all-volunteer force and more than a decade of war on multiple fronts in the aftermath of 9–11, there is growing focus on the well-being of US military families and their vital role in supporting military capabilities (Maholmes 2012; Park 2011). Additionally, there is growing recognition that many of the issues and solutions for military families are not unique, but hold important implications for other American families (Masten, in press). Concomitantly, there is a burgeoning science on parents and children in military families focused on understanding and supporting their success in the context of often difficult challenges. Much of this new research is guided by concepts at the heart of a new synthesis of developmental systems theory (Zelazo 2013) that emerged over the past five decades in multiple disciplines concerned with human adaptation and development. This new synthesis encompasses system concepts from developmental science (Lerner 2006), ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006), biological systems (Lickliter 2013), family systems theory (Goldenberg and Goldenberg 2013), developmental psychopathology (Cicchetti 2006), and risk/resilience frameworks (Masten 2013). The articles in this section draw on many of these core concepts to characterize and guide contemporary science on military families and their children.

Development in Dynamic Systems

In developmental systems theory (DST), individual development emerges from the interaction of many

A. S. Masten (✉)
Irving B. Harris Professor of Child Development,
Institute of Child Development, University of Minnesota,
51 East River Road, Minneapolis, MN 55455, USA
e-mail: amasten@umn.edu

systems across multiple levels over time (Zelazo 2013). The interactions among genes, neurons, experience, and context shape individual development over the life course. Parents and children shape the development of each other. Military service members are influenced by their families, peers, commanders, and cultures and in turn influence their contexts. Individuals are embedded in social systems (e.g., families, peer groups, classrooms, military structures) that are embedded in even larger systems (e.g., military branches, communities, schools). Paley et al. (2013) delineate the influence of these multiple-system dynamics with exceptional clarity in their article in reference to military family life and specifically in regard to deployment. They describe and distinguish the influence of both family-level systems and broader ecological systems on current research about military families.

Developmental timing is a key feature of DST underscored by all three of these articles. The same experience can have very different impacts on the individuals involved depending on when in development it happens. Thus, the timing of separations and reunifications in military families will matter. For example, there is growing evidence that stress in a pregnant mother can alter development in the fetus with lasting effects on health or brain development (Shonkoff et al. 2012). Very young children are sensitive to the effects of separations during the period when attachment bonds are forming. Older children and teens better understand the meaning and future significance of adverse life experiences. On the other hand, older youth have more coping capabilities than young children and may experience a sense of pride in a parent's service and self-efficacy from helping the family. Paley et al. (2013) underscore several issues of developmental timing in their review, including the effects of stress on development and separations on attachment.

Milburn and Lightfoot (2013) focus on adolescent children in military families, with a particular focus on the developmental tasks, vulnerabilities, and strengths of this age group. Adolescence is a period marked by changes at many levels, from biological changes related to puberty and brain development to changes in social relationships and school contexts. It is widely viewed as a period of both vulnerability and opportunity, when there are surges in risk and capabilities (Dahl and Spear 2004; UNICEF 2011). Developmental tasks long associated with the second decade of life include adjusting to pubertal changes, sorting out identity in multiple domains (sexual, spiritual, cultural, etc.), forming deeper friendships, exploring romantic relationships, completing secondary schooling, entering the work force, and otherwise preparing for early adulthood. As Milburn and Lightfoot articulate, life in military families could pose numerous challenges and opportunities for adolescents undertaking these tasks. Moving, for example, can disrupt friendships, education, or extracurricular activities, including sports, with potentially lingering effects on psychological well-being and prospects for college. Yet, moving may also provide interesting new friendships or learning opportunities, a fresh start in exploring new identities, and enlightening exposure to diverse cultures.

Adolescents also have much better cognitive abilities and emotional awareness than younger children and therefore apprehend a good deal more about the potential risks and consequences of deployment for their families. Milburn and Lightfoot review the evidence that adolescents may be more sensitive to some of the stresses associated with military service, particularly during and following deployment.

The capabilities of adolescents compared to younger siblings can be a double-edged sword. Adolescents often have more aptitude for solving problems, helping their parents, and coping with challenges. As a result, adolescents may be an important resource in the family. At the same time, if they become too stressed or burdened with responsibilities, their own age-typical explorations may be curtailed and the risks for behavioral or emotional problems may rise. Thus, it is not surprising that the evidence on "risks" for adolescents in the military remains mixed. On the whole, most adolescents in military families, like most other adolescents, appear to weather the storms in their lives well, yet clearly there are some risky situations and some individuals who are more vulnerable. Further research is needed to refine the evidence on developmental timing in terms of risks, vulnerabilities, and protective influences for adolescents, as well as other younger children in the military.

Family Systems and Stress

One of the fundamental tenets of family systems theory is the idea that the function of the family as a whole can be affected by stresses or strains on individuals or dyads within the family (Goldenberg and Goldenberg 2013). Stress experienced by a deployed service member could affect the caregiver at home, which in turn may disrupt parenting quality. Conversely, child problems or family stress at home can lead to worries or performance issues in a deployed soldier. Managing stress, particularly for children, is a central task of family life. Thus, families can generate, mediate, or mitigate stress. Paley et al. (2013) summarize the limited evidence from military families on these processes and interventions designed to address stress in families.

The interdependence of well-being in families and service members has motivated the military to strengthen its supports for families, with the goal of moderating these effects. As a result, a profound transformation is evolving in the perspectives of military organizations concerning family roles and the value gained by supporting family life through economic, social, and cultural strategies (Masten, in press).

The "spill over" of stress across family members also can happen across other system levels. Problems at one level can spill over to other levels, with consequences for military units.

These are examples of what have been termed *cascade* effects (Masten and Cicchetti 2010). However, it is also important to keep in mind that there can be positive cascades as well. This is the implicit or explicit goal of many interventions, both in and outside the military, to foster a positive cascade effect among members of a family or unit, with the hope of spreading effects among system levels, leading to greater overall effectiveness.

Risk and Resilience in Military Families

Risk and resilience can be conceptualized at different system levels, including an individual, a family, or a military organization. Many kinds of threats can disturb a system, and when systems are interconnected, a threat to one system can disturb the function of many other systems. In massive trauma events, like natural disasters or terrorist attacks, many systems are threatened at the same time (Masten and Narayan 2012). Risks also have cumulative effects such that a deployment in the context of other stressors or multiple deployments would be expected to have greater effects than an isolated risk factor.

Resilience refers to the capacity of a system to withstand or recover from significant disturbances and continue to function effectively (Masten 2011). The capacity for resilience in complex systems is distributed; for example, a young child's capacity for resilience depends heavily on the function of caregivers. Similarly, the capacity of an adult for resilience will depend on both internal functions, such as self-regulation and thinking capabilities, and external resources, such as the support of close relationships or community services. Cultural traditions and practices also contribute to resilience. Paley et al. (2013) describe multiple ways that military culture and community afford support and resources to families, particularly for families stationed on or near military posts. Many of the articles in this special issue indicate signs of a much more deliberate effort by the U.S. Armed Forces and related organizations to build capacity for resilience in service members and their families through added resources and support that are strategically timed and targeted to promote positive outcomes.

The Role of Schools

Schools have been implicated in multiple ways for risk and resilience in child development (Masten and Motti-Stefanidi 2009). School mobility is one of the most common risk factors experienced by military children, although some aspects of moving are seen as positive by military children and families (Esqueda et al. 2012; Park 2011). School is a central context for human development in most societies, where children at risk for many different reasons—from homelessness to loss of a parent—can find supportive and competent adults, nutritional and medical assistance, extracurricular opportunities and activities, and a context dedicated to fostering human capital. In disasters, school personnel often take on the role of first responders and afterward, resuming school is a powerful image of normalization and recovery in devastated communities, for children and adults alike (Masten and Narayan 2012).

In their article on military children and school, Astor et al. (2013) discuss how school environments could promote the capabilities and foster the resilience of military-connected children. They note the paucity of evidence and need for specific research on school effects for young people in military families. In recent years, the Department of Defense Educational Activity (DoDEA) and the Military Child Education Coalition, working with State and Federal agencies as well as schools and families, have launched a number of programs designed to improve academic success and adjustment of military children in school. These efforts include the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children, aimed at improving transfer of credits, access to educational opportunities, and graduation rates, and the Student 2 Student program that aims to facilitate the process of starting in a new school.

Evidence also is needed on the long-term impact on education and human capital of the DoD early childcare programs operated on many military basis/posts. These programs are considered a model for quality childcare (Philips and Floyd, in press). Given that quality early childhood education has a high return on investment, these programs might be expected to foster later school achievement and life success. The DoD is still working on the issue of how to provide similar quality access to quality early childcare for the many military children not living in or near bases or posts.

Closing Comments

Theoretical concepts highlighting the dynamic nature of development and adaptive responses to adversity have gained considerable traction in recent research on military families. There is greater emphasis on strengths and resilience as well as developmental timing and cascades across system levels. These concepts appear to be quite useful, although their staying power remains to be seen. Research explicitly testing the utility of developmental system concepts and models is needed. In particular, experiments to

promote success and resilience in military children and families, ideally with randomized control trials comparing different strategies, would provide compelling data on the utility of these frameworks and any refinements needed for better application in military or civilian contexts. Certainly, strength-based models have considerable appeal to stakeholders, especially to family and service members. Investigators who study military families also could make a more powerful case for the broad utility of their science, since many other children and families in the United States and elsewhere share some of the challenges of military life, such as school mobility, separation from parents, and coping with loss or injury in a family member. Lessons learned with the help of military families and organizations have the potential to inform developmental theory and the design of interventions to promote resilience for civilian children and families, as well as families of service members.

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