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Is Anyone Listening?

It is difficult to regard this work as a “book.” “Excerpt” or perhaps “paper” would be more appropriate given its length and depth. As a scholarly work, standing alone as published, it fails utterly. It is as though the author and publisher carved up the parent dissertation and research into segments without regard to established format, hoping no one would notice. To exacerbate the problem of length, much of what the author says in her preface, introduction, body of the work through footnotes, and conclusions are repetitious. Where’s an editor when you need one?

Quibbles about format aside, the work does attempt to present the voices of a segment of the military community that gets little or no attention from either the military as a working establishment or academia, that of the junior enlisted Army wife. Unfortunately, only three stories, drawn from multiple interviews over several days, are presented. While these three women do cover a variety of situations, they are also too few to present a good overview of the plight of these women as a whole. While not stated, it is likely that all three women are white, two of the three have children, all the husbands are stationed in remote areas, and none live on base where services designed to assist military families can easily be accessed. The ages do represent a variety, although the specific age of one, “Dana”, is never specified. However, extrapolating from the information given, speculatively she is under 21. The second, “Jennifer”, is apparently 17, having married when she got pregnant at the age of 16. The third wife, “Toni”, is 33.

In military parlance, “junior” means the very lowest ranking enlisted personnel, E-1 through E-3. This means income is quite limited, and opportunities for employment of spouses are often slim to non-existent. Further exacerbating the situation of married junior enlisted personnel is the presence of children, usually infants or toddlers, and frequently more than one. Childcare on base normally has long, long waiting lists, and spouses must have transportation to not only drop off and retrieve those children that do get enrolled, but to go to and return from work, should they manage to procure some sort of employment. Even for those families who manage to get into family housing, such housing is often distant from other base facilities such as commissaries, exchanges and childcare facilities.

Military pay is not high at any rank, and there are unique problems military families must deal with in addition to a severely limited income in the lowest grades. Deployments, particularly in combat situations, frequent moves making it difficult for spouses to establish any kind of career pattern, distance from a support system or families and probable lack of similar women in the area with whom to establish supportive friendships, lack of sufficient child care, normally extremely young parents in the lower grades, uncertain working hours for the military spouse and other stressors make it difficult for junior wives to manage. Additionally, most junior families must find housing off-base, most of which is very expensive, and often substandard. A great many end up living
in trailer parks, some of which are good, many of which are not.

This reviewer spent many years in the Navy, and the military hierarchy is well aware of the difficulties of the military life. Many improvements in treatment of families, additions to facilities and programs have been instituted. However, a chronic shortage of funds, extreme shortages of manpower concomitant with a serious increase in mission requirements have had tremendous negative impacts on efforts to help these families. The pay structure was originally designed for young, single males who were expected to live aboard ship or in barracks, and not to support families. While some argument can be made that the junior enlisted person makes approximately as much, if not more, as he/she would make in civilian life given the normal level of education, youth and inexperience of the average soldier, this does not take into account the unique military factors.

Harrell’s preface and introduction are primarily written to her entire dissertation, and the information regarding this particular segment is more or less thrown in to explain why three short stories are supposed to equate to a book worthy of serious study. Whether she addressed some critical questions and issues in her larger work is unknown. However, this reviewer is left wondering how much the author actually knows about the Army and how it functions. She states she chose to focus on the Army because she is “the daughter of an Army officer and therefore familiar with the culture and the language.” But she fails to include any information on actual Army policy, programs, facilities which might exist, and efforts the Army makes to assist families. She is also apparently under the impression that all branches of the Armed Forces are much the same in the areas surrounding military families and the military members themselves; they are not. Any work purporting to present an overview of the junior enlisted wife should be put into context of the environment in which that wife exists, whether that particular wife is knowledgeable about programs and policies which might be available to her or not.

Harrell also appears to be unable to distinguish Army policy from policy established from above. She includes a tragic account of an abortion performed due to a severely deformed fetus with a significant portion of its brain missing. The bereaved wife tells of the Tri-Care (the currently existing medical system) medical team telling her she couldn’t have an abortion, but offering to provide her with a Chaplain when the child was born, helping her pick out a coffin after its inevitable death, and telling her the helpless infant would be hooked up to tubes and wires to keep it functioning as long as possible before it died. She obtained an abortion outside the system. While a true horror story, it should have been noted that the abortion policies of the military are a result of Congressional action, not the Army.

There are many odd gaps in the presentation; the three wives and the author all comment upon the presumed “snobbishness” of higher graded enlisted and officer wives, but in fact strict adherence to non-fraternization regulations makes any socializing involving the military members impossible, and age and education are often factors as well. Additionally, there is no mention of the extraordinary levels of domestic violence within the military community, not only within the junior grades, but all the way up. This is a major focus, yet warrants no acknowledgement, even in a footnote. Granted, the three wives included may not suffer from domestic violence, but to fail to even touch on the subject is passing strange, since Harrell’s stated purpose is to show what life is like for junior Army wives in general, extrapolating from her three examples. She also fails to include any stories of wives whose husbands are stationed overseas. Many young soldiers are posted to Germany for instance, and bring their families with them, although they may not have authorization to do so, and the wife, who may be as young as 14 is left to cope in a foreign country with no language skills, no money, and no support system at all.

Finally, while Harrell repeatedly states certain facts about the plight of junior enlisted families, she offers no solutions nor does she examine possible courses of action.

A more expansive work about junior enlisted wives could have great value, both for scholars and for military and Congressional policy-makers. It is a sadly neglected area of study, and deserves far more attention. Unfortunately, this book is not of interest academically or professionally due to its woeful lack of useful analysis, incompleteness and failure to present a good sampling. On the plus side, however, it is extremely interesting reading simply to get a small (very) sampling of some junior enlisted families’ difficulties and lives.

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