Making Meaning of Service and the Military Experience

In “Does Deployment to War Affect Public Service Motivation? A Panel Study of Soldiers Before and After Their Service in Afghanistan,” Morten Brænder and Lotte Bøgh Andersen’s exploration of the effects of deployment on public service motivation (PSM) makes clear that the long-term effects of 11 years of sustained combat on service members, their families, and the communities where they live is finally starting to be seen as something that cannot be relegated to traditional military community players. In this vein, I applaud the effort to apply the construct of PSM within the military community context.

Research connecting PSM and other indicators of civic and social connectedness is important because of the belief that public service of any kind begets prosocial benefits such as increased trust and valuation of the public good. Although there are unique challenges that face modern-day military families, the annual Military Family Lifestyle Surveys conducted by Blue Star Families highlight some very valuable, if intangible, benefits to being affiliated with the military lifestyle—pride in service, connection to a greater cause, satisfaction with the contribution to the public interest, development of civic virtue, and personal growth and development of resiliency.

In Brænder and Andersen’s study, the use of a panel design provided the ability to pre- and post-test the subjects, allowing for the examination of both dynamic and cross-sectional facets of the issue. However, in this case, service members are likely to go through several phases during redeployment and reintegration (elation, disappointment, fear, exhaustion, for example). Because attitudes in the immediate aftermath of any deployment will be somewhat erratic as service members are exposed to new challenges during reintegration, long-term attitudes toward service likely will not have solidified for at least a few months after the deployment. Given these circumstances, a second post-interview, given at least six months after redeployment, would be beneficial in gauging the more lasting effects of deployment on PSM. Additionally, another later post-test would help further examine the effects of multiple deployments. A follow-up study might also include questions about the soldier’s future career or service plans.

If one adheres to Frederickson and Hart’s stance that “[a]long with the commitment to correct principles, public servants must genuinely care for their fellow citizens” (1985, 548), it is problematic that compassion declines yet public interest concern increases following a deployment; this is an area ripe for further examination. According to Frederickson and Hart’s conceptualization of patriotism, you cannot have concern for the public interest if it is not predicated on a genuine caring for others and their plight. It would seem, then, that concern for the public interest would have to depend, at least in part, on one’s ability to feel compassion toward others, as “a patriotism of benevolence” (Frederickson and Hart 1985) requires that concern for the public interest involve concern toward those around them, even those to whom they are not directly connected. This disconnect between the two dimensions could be partly explained by Brænder and Andersen’s supposition that service members might resort to nebulous goals and abstract motivations for serving when their immediate reality is less than rewarding—the idea that one has to believe in something, in some cause greater than oneself, in order to continue to function within a war zone.

The concept of social capital would suggest that the complex, informal networks and relationships that are developed through the deployment experience (building trust, reciprocity, shared sacrifice, and cooperation between service members, for example) are cohesive experiences that bind service members together. However, it is up to the larger society to help these service members make meaning of their sacrifice after they return. While it can be argued, as Brænder and Andersen do, that the decrease in compassion during a deployment is a self-defense mechanism for service members to distance themselves emotionally from the harsh realities of a wartime situation, this
kind of emotional detachment, should it continue after redeployment, has serious negative implications for their ability to reintegrate into society. Another concern is that if service members ultimately do not believe in the mission's merit, the leadership that sent them there, or that the public is meaningfully engaged to some degree, it could cause them to see society as less worthy of their service and their fellow citizens as less worthy of their compassion.

These findings also apply to the national dialogue on the civil-military disconnect. The cumulative (and long-term) effects of deployment on service members—not just PSM but also mental health, ability to reintegrate, relationship satisfaction, employment, and continued civic engagement in their communities—are all largely dependent on the successful interaction of the service member and their family with their local communities. Requisite services provided by governmental outlets such as the U.S. Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs cannot and will not bridge the gap alone. Brænder and Andersen's results point to the importance of external validation from communities and non-military-affiliated citizens in reassuring service members that their public service matters and is valued by the larger population. To this end, a recent study by the Strategic Studies Institute (Wong and Gerras 2010) revealed that external validation was related to lower stress levels in army adolescents. The analysis showed that, among other things, adolescents' belief that their friends, teachers, and community members thought that their parent was serving a worthwhile cause helped predict lower levels of stress during a deployment.

While there is a wide array of initiatives available to service members aimed at successful redeployment and reintegration into their communities, including those mentioned by the authors, I believe that is focusing on a very limited slice of the life cycle of a service member. To truly address the issues presented in this study, which I believe are both retaining service members' PSM levels as well as keeping them connected to the citizens they serve, a systemic call to action is needed. I join others such as Admiral Mike Mullen, former chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and General Stanley McChrystal in calling for a national service, broadly defined as military service, service with the Peace Corps, AmeriCorps, or within federal, state, or local agencies, and/or nonprofit organizations. Service toward the public good, in concert with others, builds trust and connectedness, resulting in healthy civil society. Such service can support a strong national defense—both our active-duty population as well as our transitioning veterans.

References

Join Public Administration Review on Facebook to find out more about issue updates and upcoming calls for papers