Military Wives: A Distinct Subculture in the United States

By Amber Haney

Punk, hippie, and party are all examples of distinct subcultures within the mainstream of the United States. What criteria are being used to determine if a group is indeed a type of culture? It could be said that the style, language, or behavior of a certain social group classifies it as a subculture or even as a counterculture. Some of these groups are easily distinguished, but what about those various groups that are hidden? Many groups exist because of the commonality of the members. Others exist because of the function they serve. Culture serves as a frame of reference for an individual, it teaches an individual how to live and function, and it provides answers to questions. Culture ensures a group's survival by creating and fostering values and beliefs that enable it to thrive. Using this definition, it is no longer as difficult to understand military wives as being a subculture.

Experience is necessary to gain insight into different situations, different beliefs, and different lifestyles. The military culture is often stereotyped and misunderstood. Danielle Milano recounts her experience as a military wife and mother of a two year old. She has been married to her Air Force officer husband for four years now. They lived in Las Vegas for three of those years and are currently trudging through Vince Milano’s second deployment.

How do you define military wives as a culture?

It is a different atmosphere, especially on base. Most of us are away from our friends and families. It is more of an instant bond on some levels because we are all in different stages of the same life. Our husbands are working a lot and gone a lot. They have a very dangerous job and we are left to take care of the rest. For the most part, we are all just trying to be good, supportive wives. It can be nice because we all understand and we can talk to each other about things we may not discuss with people outside the military. We bounce thoughts, ideas, and questions off each other and are able to learn and also help one another.

What do you feel is the motherhood culture?

I think it's just that sense of responsibility and common goal of raising a healthy, happy child and using the support of each other to do that.

Do you identify with this culture? Do you identify with other moms?

I definitely am a military wife. I believe in the military and the work they do, and I try and be supportive. I feel the emotions that come with deployments and other training sessions and even just his hectic work schedule that takes him away from me, from us. I identify with other moms in many ways. At the same time, I am more like a single mom in many ways. I have stressors and responsibilities that other moms do not because their husband is physically with them.
What does it mean to you to be a military wife? A mother?

I guess to me it's just doing my best to give Owen what he needs. To teach him the values and ideas we have - the ones we were raised with. I also want him to see both sides of things. I have to be mommy and daddy and that's ok. I just want him to have both influences and since Vince isn't here as much as we'd like, that responsibility falls to me. As far as being a wife, I think there is a little more pressure on base to have everything taken care. It sounds more like a 60's housewife when I verbalize things, but that's not really how it is when it's happening or how I feel about it. I don't know if I'm explaining this well. I take care of everything. I don't want him to come home to a messy house after working like he has. I don't want him to have bills that aren't paid when he gets home from a training series. I don't want him to have to worry about the cars or anything else. I want to make sure he has clean uniforms, that his bags are packed, that he has good dinners, that he is comfortable and can just relax when he's home. He doesn't get to do much of that.

Is there a mommy club? Do you feel a part of it? What does it mean to you?

My kid has been screaming and getting his diaper changed all day. I don't really want to sit and talk about yours. I want to talk about other things. I want to just be me for a second. I love Owen. I love being his mom. Sometimes, I just want grown-up talk. This is another reason why it's more difficult when Vince isn't around. I'm in mommy mode 24/7. I think Vince's friends talk about other things more than mine do. I mean they talk about sports and whatever else. It's not completely about their children and families. I am interested in those things and want to know about their lives, but I also want to have other things to talk about. Sometimes, I just feel like, in being a mom, that gets shut off sometimes.

Within the mainstream culture, individuals are able to identify with underlying subcultures. This identification can be a product of various criteria such as language, religion, and even personality traits. When identification occurs using group affiliations, it is called social identification (Bankanicl, 2009). The construct of military wives is a more specific example of such social identification. Danielle expresses her concept of what the cultures of military wives and motherhood are. Her thoughts capture the principles encompassed in commonly accepted definitions of culture. Attitudes, beliefs, values, and the similarity of environments and experiences are all shared by this group of women. They have a commonality that binds them. Danielle's understanding of her surroundings and her self-identification within the subculture allow her to further explore an aspect of her identity and to make differentiations between her culture and the mainstream U.S. culture.
Do you feel different from mainstream United States culture? How do you feel different from other moms?

I absolutely feel different. I think we appreciate each other a lot more. I see how hard Vince works and I appreciate that. He has a sense of what I do as well. We are really lucky to be a family and to have each other. That makes up for the random holidays and birthdays missed. We have all of the same problems. We have relationship issues and stress. We are raising a two year old. That’s pretty stressful. We have financial stress and student loan payments just like any other young couple. I think we have other problems as well that many people don’t face. Vince is away a lot. Even when he is home we don’t get to spend much time together. He works nights, so he comes home after I’ve gone to bed usually and then sleeps during the day. I love when he brings his friends over. It’s nice to just sit and drink a beer with them and watch football. I miss my friends at home and it’s nice to have friends out there, to just be normal. I don’t have leftovers and it makes them (and Vince) happy. He thinks it’s cool and makes him feel good. I think it’s different because his job is so dangerous. I mean it’s not like he’s away on business and sitting in an office in Boston a few days here and there throughout the year.

Right now, he is somewhere in Afghanistan (I don’t know where exactly) and could be attacked at any time. He is the one that deals with the front lines kinds of things, so he will get hurt first if anything happens. As a mom, I have to do everything. If something breaks, I can’t wait for him to come home and fix it. I have to, or have to hire it out. I put together toys. I take out the trash. I get the oil changed. If I get lost driving in Las Vegas, I have to find my way home. It’s not like he can come and get me so I can follow him.

I handle all of the money, all of the doctor appointments. I’m the one who has to protect my child when and if I allow workers into my home. I am the one teaching Owen about things on a daily basis - taking care of him, playing with him, disciplining him, loving him. I can’t get sick because someone has to take care of Owen and Vince just can’t, as much as he’d like to, he just can’t. We don’t go on dates alone. It is always me, Vince, and Owen. Sometimes it’s kind of like being a single mom only I do have a husband. I do have someone who loves us and supports us and provides for us. Being home, I look at Kelly (Danielle’s 21 year old sister) who is a single mom, but she has my mom. My mom is actually doing a lot of the raising of Valerie. If she needs something or wants something, she goes to my mom. I can’t just ask my mom a question or show her something. I have to rely on myself and those around me.

Krista has a lot more freedom and can go out and do things whenever she wants because there is always someone she trusts there to babysit. It can be last minute. I don’t have that. Even now, being home, I don’t have a car, so it’s difficult to get things done (when I want to and how I want to). I do get to do some things without Owen now. I can go to the grocery or to the doctor and I do have people I trust to watch him. I have to plan that all out though. I can’t just say, “Oh, honey, I want to go pick up some chips or whatever I’ll be back in fifteen minutes.” It is planned out, very structured, when I leave him at my parents or when I take him with me. I’m not trying to complain at all. This was our choice and I’m honestly very lucky to have the life I do. I’m just pointing out some of the differences I see. On the positive side of all of this, I am there
with my child. I don’t have to put him in day care or leave him with someone. I can take him with me.

Sometimes it is hard. He’s two, but at the same time, he’s used to it. He is learning a lot about things. He is learning behavior I want him to learn. I have time to sit and teach him his colors and his letters. I get to be the one to discipline him the way I choose. No one else is telling my kid “no” or spanking him or letting him get away with whatever he wants. I get to give him a bath and put him to bed every night. These things don’t always happen. I don’t have to work. I get to be the one running my household. I don’t have to depend on my husband for everything. I am not docile. It has definitely taught me a lot about myself. It gives me a sense of myself. My priority was to graduate and establish myself in my career (practicing medicine). I always thought that kids could wait. I’m so grateful that’s not what I’m doing right now. I still want those things someday, but I wouldn’t be able to be this type of mom if Vince wasn’t in the military.

When did you become aware of this?

Oh, it’s definitely been a process. I never had this lightning bolt of “Oh, wow, how lucky am I,” or “Oh, I’m so different.” I see things as I go and I’m constantly learning and being shown more. All of the thoughts and feelings I have come and go (just like anyone). I mean, I’m not super wonderful. I’m not made of steel. I hurt. I get sad, lonely, angry, frustrated. I take things for granted and so on, but for the most part, I realize I get to choose. I am not a victim. I can be positive and happy and grateful more often than not. So, I mean sometimes I feel different, sometimes I don’t. I don’t know.

What are the traditions of this culture? Do you follow these traditions or “old ways”?

I’d say the traditions would just be having your husband serving and being a housewife and mother. I think traditionally the family lives on base and even if they face deployment, the family stays on base. We are following some of that. My education and career goals are on hold for now. I am a stay-at-home mom. I want to have everything taken care of so Vince doesn’t have to look at it or worry about it when he is home. He can just relax and play with Owen.

What traditions do you follow with regard to holidays, foods, religious practices, festivals, family structure, or career?

Well, last year at Christmas time Vince was deployed and he was training for Thanksgiving. We just have everything on other days. We don’t usually get to spend the holidays with our families, so we try to keep everything as close to that as possible. A lot of other families do that as well. It’s more of a community thing so it becomes a norm. Vince is such a family guy. I love that. It’s helping Owen in the long run as well I think. He is seeing that the holidays are more about that family time and togetherness. I always make a lot of food and make a big deal out of Thanksgiving and Christmas. It’s what Vince and I were both raised with and that’s how we want to raise Owen. Some of the single guys on base don’t get that. I like it when Vince brings his buddies home for dinner or when they can come to our house for the holidays. We are like a big family and it’s nice to be able to give those same feelings to the guys that are missing their actual families.

Where did these traditions come from? Why are they important?
Most of the traditions we follow came from my mom and grandmas. Vince (or his mom) will tell me what they ate or what they did that was special and we incorporate it all in. It is so important for us. It gives us a sense of normalcy. It’s about that cohesion for us. We get to learn more about the traditions and customs of our families. We get to have those conversations and I think it wouldn’t be that way if we were home. It brings us closer. I get to do these things and it gives me satisfaction and a sense of confidence. Our moms would be doing the cooking and decorating and entertaining if we were home. We would be the ones traveling and dealing with a small child out of his element and away from home in a stressful atmosphere (for a kid). It provides comfort and stability. We are together and it feels really good to be there in that moment with my family. These are the values we have and what we want to give to Owen.

Prejudice arises from the overgeneralized characteristics of a group and the stigma associated with them. Often people show disdain for what they do not understand. However, there are times when this disdain is a reaction to conflict or competition. Stereotypes are not necessarily based on personal experience with an individual or with a group, but they can help us to navigate and to understand future experiences.

Did you learn any stereotypes about the mainstream U. S. culture? Where did this come from?

I guess just about what it meant to be a wife and mother in general. I had that belief that a family is traditional and that they don’t like or accept any unconventional families. I don’t know that we’re unconventional though. I mean all of this really seems normal to me most of the time. This is our life, this is what we know.

Did you learn any stereotypes about your own culture?

I hear all kinds of things about military wives. They are lazy. They don’t do anything all day. They are cheaters. They are after the money. There really aren’t a lot of good things that are said about women in and around the military. I also read an article written by a military wife. She was in line at a grocery store behind a civilian woman who was behind another military wife checking out. She was young and kind of messy looking, like her hair or whatever (the one checking out). She was asked for her ID and on base we use our military IDs for everything. I haven’t needed my license at all. So, she just used that. Well, they were at an off base store and the clerk asked her for another ID. So, she looked a little further down the line of cards and gave him her license. No big deal, it was just habit for her. The civilian woman turned around and was talking to the third in line (she didn’t know that woman’s husband was in the military too). She started complaining about “all of these military wives” and how they are just “gold diggers looking for freebies from the government and that’s the only reason they are married. Why can’t they even take care of themselves?” (because of how the young woman was dressed). She just went on for a while. Well, the woman she was complaining to had been married to her Navy husband forever and she was a journalist with her own income and she informed the woman about it. Ha ha. Then she wrote the article. I’ve gotten comments like that before, about being out for something free, that being the only reason I married Vince, those kinds of things.
Have you found any of these to be true? False?

I cannot even tell you how many stories Vince will come home with. Some of these guys have really horrible wives. There is quite a bit of cheating. There is quite a bit of cheating in general. It happens a lot overseas. It is really disgusting and sad some of the things that have happened to some of the guys Vince works with and is friends with. For the most part, all of the women that I personally talk to regularly are very busy. They aren’t lazy by any means. They are constantly couponing, writing blogs, taking the kids here or taking them there, sharing recipes, cleaning their homes. I mean they handle the home life while the husbands make that a possibility by handling work and safety. And, with the article one, the author pointed out that this woman had no clue what someone else was going through. She could have been raising small kids alone because her husband was deployed and she was worried about him. She may not have had time to put on makeup and fix up her hair.

Values are the standards used to judge the desirability of characteristics, beliefs, and values (Bakanic, 2009). The meaning that is attached to these ideas, according to a symbolic interactionist perspective, is how society creates structure (Bakanic, 2009). These ideas, being held as truth, are then used to label one’s self, as well as others. Labeling theory expresses this in terms of deviance. However, it can also be applied as an explanation for some of Danielle’s thoughts and feelings.

What did you think about this? How did it make you feel?

Like I said, I don’t feel amazing all the time, but it doesn’t generally get to me. This job makes Vince happy. We chose this as a couple. I don’t feel like it makes me any better than any other wife or mom, but I don’t feel it makes me any worse. I don’t like it when people assume things about me or Vince or our family. I don’t want to be judged the way I am sometimes. I guess I’m happy that I can feel that appreciation for and from my husband and that I know I am doing my best as a wife and mother. I don’t feel sorry for myself. I don’t sit around and cry with a bottle of wine on Valentine’s Day because Vince isn’t here. We decided a long time ago those things weren’t necessary or important for us. This is our life - the life we chose - and we just make it work the best we can, so I guess I feel acceptance as well.

Did your perceptions of yourself change? What about the group?

I never really thought I’d be the mommy type. I’ve always had more fun hanging out with my guy friends and watching a game and drinking some beer. I don’t think I had a very clear idea of what a military wife did. I bought into some stereotypes. The more Vince and I discussed this way of life and the more we live it, the more I respect others who do it, the more I admire them. I feel better about myself. I feel more capable. I see what others do and how strong they can be and how they help other people. I love my roles and wouldn’t trade them for anything. I always joked I’d be the mom that would say, “Bring mommy her martini.” Ha ha, it’s just not like that. I love the time I spend with Owen and appreciate the personality he’s starting to show. I always thought I was meant to be a take-charge career woman and if my husband stayed home, that would be great. I could never do that now. I’m so glad I don’t have to.

Have these perceptions changed as you got older?
I do believe some of this is just getting older. I think some of it is actually living it and having more experience. I am not as selfish as I was at one time. My priorities have definitely changed. I have a clearer idea of who I am, what I want, and how to get it. I appreciate my mom more. I think that a lot of young women go through this as they get older. A lot of it has to do with being forced to do things. Like I said, my mom just does things for Kelly and Val. I didn’t have that. If it was going to get done, I had to do it, so I think I have more of an understanding of what goes into everything.

The acknowledgement of her identity within and as a product of this group and how her perspective (of herself) has changed is comparable to the labeling theory (Bakanic, 2009, p. 57). The perception of the action or behavior is based on how the majority views it in relation to their norms. Labeling something as deviant can perpetuate similar behaviors and reactions. The appraisals become significant. Applying this theory to Danielle, it would seem that once this aspect of her life was accepted it became part of her identity, thus, changing her reactions to others and changing the reactions of others to her. The reactions of others toward Danielle are important in an additional way. Looking glass self is another concept that helps to define our identities (Bakanic, 2009). Self perception is based on social referencing and appraisal. Individuals conduct themselves in conformity with what they think the social norm is and how they believe others view them (Gecas & Schwalbe, 1983). Using the idea of the looking glass self, it can be hypothesized that positive experiences should increase Danielle’s self esteem and that negative experiences should decrease her self esteem.

Have you ever been treated differently because of this?

This isn’t because they knew Vince was in the military, but the first time Vince was deployed and I was flying home, I had Owen and Ruby (Danielle’s dog), two carry-ons, and a diaper bag. Owen was fussy and Ruby was barking. Someone bumped into me while I was carrying Owen and almost knocked us over. I look really young, and they just looked at me with disdain, like I was 12 or something (I get that a lot). People don’t know. I wouldn’t have been in that situation if Vince wasn’t going overseas. I obviously did not want to be traveling that way as much as they didn’t want to be traveling with me given the circumstances. It was unnecessary to be yelled at, talked down to, and bumped into without an apology. I have had people make snide comments about me. We were driving home from Vegas when I was pregnant. We went into the gas station and Vince was outside waiting for me. I didn’t see him and walked toward the car. One of the women working there who was outside on break said, “What a shame” (I was really huge at this point). Vince yelled out to me, “Oh honey, did you get everything you needed wife of mine?”

The woman looked confused and shocked. When I’m out running errands with Owen, people will make comments or give me dirty looks. I get a little upset, not sure why the ring or checkbook with both of our names on it doesn’t clue you in, but I’m sorry my husband can’t be here with me so you know I’m married. He’s just a little bit busy right now. People assume that I got pregnant and Vince joined the military and I married him to get benefits. It is really insulting and ridiculous. I’m not sure why it’s anyone’s business. I don’t want Owen to be seeing and hearing these messages. Other times,
people who find out that we’re a military family thank me. I mean, I guess it’s nice to know that Vince is appreciated, but at the same time, it isn’t necessary. It is his job. It is what makes him happy. That’s what we do. I don’t like the attention.

Was this a positive or negative experience? How did it make you feel?

For the most part, they are usually negative. It usually just makes me angry. I don’t like people stereotyping me or trying to make me feel badly. I have nothing to be ashamed about and they don’t know what it is like to be in my shoes. I guess it makes me feel a little more separated and leery of people. I don’t want to let people into my world as much. They don’t understand.

Generally speaking, anger is a response to pain (emotional or physical) and fear. Danielle’s reaction to these negative situations may be expressed as anger but could be a sense of hurt. She is, at times, judged and she is privy to stereotypes and to the actions of those who hold them. Danielle expressed stereotypes of motherhood that are often based on traditional values such as marriage, adulthood, and protestant work ethic.

For example, the woman at the gas station seemed to value being a married adult first and then having children. Along with those values, she also seems to value the protestant work ethic in that she expresses pity (an affective attitude) over seeing someone young (or not an adult) expecting a child. The pregnancy is not seen as a joy to this woman because she seems to feel that Danielle is a deviant, and further, that she will not be able to work and support herself alone. This may be a projection (by Danielle and the author), as this woman did not directly express that these were her beliefs, but it is easy to point out the many underlying thought processes or cognitive attitudes often used to categorize and to store information and attached meanings (Bakanic, 2009). These cognitive processes have functions in our society. The value expression function serves to define and defend morals and values of the society and could be used to label what the woman at the gas station was attempting. By showing her disdain, she may be attempting to protect and secure the values in which she believes, in this case, marriage. The construct of Danielle’s identity is influenced by her surroundings. Identity and the ideas an individual believes about himself or herself are created by cognition as well as through experiences with others who are part of the culture and with those who are not part of the culture. Hence, personal beliefs change one’s perspective in other areas of life as well.

Do ever feel like you want to hide this aspect of yourself? Why or why not?

I don’t feel like I have to hide the fact that Vince is in the military, but I don’t broadcast it either. I don’t want special treatment. It’s a job. I’m a wife, I’m a mother, and I’m a person. Vince is a husband, a father, and a person. He changes at the airport so he isn’t flying in uniform because they will upgrade him to first class. He doesn’t need to be in first class. He needs to get home to see his family. That’s his priority and mine as well. Most of the people we know are like that. It is what it is. I definitely don’t expect anything because I’m a military wife. It’s a part of who I am, not all of who I am. I’m not going to fall on my sword because of my husband’s job.

Have you ever experienced a feeling of us versus them?
I don’t know if it’s necessarily that kind of feeling. I know there have been times when people didn’t understand or I knew they couldn’t and I needed the support of other wives. There have been times I’ve needed some of the resources the military offers us, and I have taken comfort in those supports. There have been times I’ve been labeled or judged and it’s made me feel separate from people. I don’t know that it’s that clear-cut though, like there are just two separate categories. Sometimes I feel like it’s us (my family) against the rest of the world (outside the military), but it’s when my head isn’t right or when I’m feeling judged in some way. I don’t know if that answers the question or makes sense.

Have you found ways that your culture has worked to your advantage? Disadvantage?

I mean people and businesses will, over perks or discounts or whatever. If it is like a well known thing or whatever, we will use it, but I don’t feel like just because he serves I should get a discount on getting my hair done or whatever. I don’t expect anything like that. He brings home a paycheck, but at the same time, there are those advantages. I don’t know if I’m explaining the distinction well. My dad works at Timken, he gets a discount on his cell phone and at AAA and things like that. Obviously, he uses it. I guess that’s what I mean by a discount. I’m not just going to walk in somewhere and be like, “Hey, my husband is overseas can I have this free?” There are many resources available to us through the military that make our lives easier. So, that’s an advantage as well. I guess some of the disadvantages would just be the judgment and things people say and do. Sometimes it is hurtful and gets to me.

Attitude has much to do with levels of stress and resiliency. In the ABC-X model of stress (in which A is a stressor event, B is the meaning attached to the stressor, C is the resources that are available, and X is the product or the crisis), sometimes the only factor that can be changed is an individual’s or a family’s perspective. Danielle asserts that it is being positive and continuing to live life that helps her while Vince is away. Also, maintaining a sense of gratitude is a necessity for her.


Everything has changed. I went from being a college student a half hour from my hometown, very small hometown, to being a wife, mother, and living in Las Vegas. It’s a little bit different. I am definitely more confident. I feel more pride and respect for the military. I take care of things when they need done. We have a steady income that provides what we need. Those are the obvious ones. There have been other changes throughout our marriage. I mean I’ve had crazy thoughts. I’ve had loving, sane thoughts. I’ve had probably every emotion possible. I have established a routine that works for us where we are right now. In a year, that will probably change too. It really is just a process, just a relationship with its ups and downs, just parenthood.

What are your goals? How have these been influenced?

I really want to finish school and be a doctor. These goals have been put on hold for now. I want to be a good wife and mother. These have been shaped by our life, our environment, and our home lives growing up.

What do you get to do?
I get to do so many things. I really and truly am blessed. All of the things with Owen, all of the times I spend with Vince when we are able to just enjoy time together, all of it is what I get to do.

Do you ever feel selfish? Do you ever feel guilty?

Of course I do. There are times I miss Vince or just want him home. I feel like I’m being whiny or ungrateful. I feel guilty that I get to spend so much time with Owen and he doesn’t. I feel guilty that I know him so well and Vince doesn’t get that relationship I do.

How do you balance and keep your own identity?

I guess just by watching t.v. and reading what I enjoy when I can. I still keep in touch with my friends and I spend time with the wives and girlfriends of Vince’s friends when I can. Making dinner for the single guys Vince is friends with helps too, because then we all just hang out. It helps too that when he has been deployed I have gone back and worked at the restaurant just to be doing something to stay busy and stay social. There isn’t really one thing that I can say is me. A lot goes into my identity, you know? I’m a mom and a wife. I’m a daughter, a sister, a friend and on. All of it makes up who I am.

Cultural pride?

I am absolutely proud of Vince and what he does. I am proud of our country. I am proud of myself. I am proud of Owen. I love my life and my family and I wouldn’t change it.

What options and resources do you have available to you?

Oh my goodness, we have so many things to help us. There are loans that are offered if you want or need them. There are support groups and magazines. We can find chat rooms on the web, and on base there are different programs. We have a day care and we get spousal privilege which just means that we will get hired before a civilian at like Starbucks or wherever on base. Oh, and we get surveys sent to us that ask about how we feel, how we handle the deployment, what we’re stressed out about. Those kinds of things. The military does want us to be happy and really wants to take care of us. I get to choose whether I will stay on base while Vince is away. That’s why I don’t have my car. They will pay for my housing if I leave, but I would have had to pay to ship my car and household stuff. They don’t necessarily want you to leave base, but they allow it. When we moved houses the last time (on the same base but to permanent housing), they moved everything and came in and unpacked it all and got it set up for us. That was nice because I was really pregnant at the time and it would have just been too much. Vince wouldn’t have had time and I really couldn’t have done it. There are a lot of women on base too. That helps a lot. We just kind of share what we know. It helps because if I don’t understand something or am just trying to figure it out, someone has already encountered it, so I can ask them questions and know what to do and likewise they can ask me.

The above summary of resources available to military wives is not exhaustive regarding the support available to military wives. They provide each other with guidelines and structure as well as emotional and, at times, physical support. The attitudes and beliefs that Danielle expresses are those of other wives as well. She continues to learn and grow in this role along with the other women in her subculture. Danielle was
hesitant to participate in an interview at first because she previously had not been conscious of her position within a subculture. However, as she answered questions and thought about her responses, it became clear to her that she was a member of a subculture. She was able to see where she shared values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors with this group, as well as differences between the mainstream culture and her (e.g., her sister).

I have known Danielle since we were children. I have seen how her life changed since she met Vince and, more specifically, since they married and moved to Las Vegas. Her personality has not changed drastically (as she made reference to her past experiences and past friend preferences), however, she has grown. She has grown as an individual, as a woman, and as a wife and mother. She has adopted a slightly different set of values and priorities. These were described briefly when she expressed her love for motherhood. She was driven to be a successful doctor and she was well on her way to achieving that dream. Now, she is driven to be a successful wife and mother. Danielle has often talked about the women she has met and about her life on base. I am proud of her, perhaps, in a way, similar to how she is proud of Vince. She was able to spend some time at my house while we discussed these aspects of her life and of her newly acquired cultural identity.

My awareness of military wives and mothers has increased greatly. I have felt the difference between mothers and myself in the past. There is a bond present within that culture that I do not share. It is apparent in many of the aspects of the culture. I value my time and freedom. I do not know all of the baby jargon. I don’t necessarily enjoy sitting and talking about children and the really cute things they do. At times I do, because I do care about my friends, but there is a difference for moms. They all seem to share the same attitude; one of admiration and gratitude for their child. There is a sense of identity stemming from the role of mother.

Danielle definitely expressed this and I have witnessed it in other scenarios and conversations with her. It is a wonderful thing to witness. I was more unaware of what life looked like for her on base. I knew she had friends about which she spoke with high regard. I knew she was alone most of the time (without Vince) and that she carried out most of the household responsibilities. I, for some reason, did not fully conceptualize the degree to which this affected her daily living and how critical the support from her social group was. She doesn’t talk about the military (with her civilian friends) very often. There is exclusion about that aspect of her. “You wouldn’t get it” seemed to be the unspoken sentiment. I can compare this to a social group to which I belong. This social group helped form my identity and offered the support of friends with whom I share a common bond and goal. There are aspects of this subculture that I can share with others, but “They don’t really get it.” I hadn’t considered these components of my own cultural identity in this manner before my interview with Danielle. Upon completing the interview, I felt a sense of pride. I had believed some stigmatizing stereotypes about this group of women. I don’t believe I held the same respect for this culture as I do now. I did not see them as the strong, innovative, and highly capable women they are. Additionally, I felt a renewed sense of gratitude. Not only gratitude for Danielle, for her family, and for those in the military, but also for my life. I gained a sense of comfort in knowing that we all are right where we are supposed to be, and, despite
any differences in environments, we can help and learn from each other.

Studying culture and diversity is important for various aspects of life ranging from day-to-day living and functioning to understanding the variables that form identity. Specifically, when examining military wives as a culture, it is imperative to understand the issues they face and the supports that are already in place. From a helping professional’s standpoint, this knowledge is essential for devising effective treatment plans. There are several phases of deployment that may cause a stress pile-up. Depending on how these are navigated, a crisis may occur and the family unit may stop functioning at an optimal level. It is important to understand how much of a woman’s identity is comprised of the military (or of motherhood). Too much of any one aspect creating a sense of self and purpose could cause issues with codependency, with enabling behaviors, and with crisis events occurring when changes happen. Many women may face challenges when carrying the bulk of responsibilities for daily family life. They may build resentments, or face loss. These issues and many others need to be navigated from a cultural standpoint when one works with women from this subculture.

References

