

## Conversations with the Experts

### Military Families and Work-Family Conflict



Shelley MacDermid

**Bio:** Shelley M. MacDermid Wadsworth is a professor in the Department of Child Development and Family Studies at Purdue University, where she also directs the Military Family Research Institute and the Center for Families and serves as Associate Dean of the College of Consumer and Family Sciences. Dr. MacDermid holds an M.B.A. in Management and M.S. and Ph.D. degrees in Human Development and Family Studies from The Pennsylvania State University. Her research focuses on relationships between job conditions and family life, with special focus on military families and organizational policies, programs and practices. Her research has been published in scientific journals including the *Journal of Marriage and Family* and the *Academy of Management Journal*, and has been funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, the Henry A. Murray Center, the Department of Defense, the state of Indiana, and the Lilly Endowment. Dr. MacDermid serves on the editorial boards of the *Journal of Family Issues*, *Family Relations*, *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, and the *Journal of Family Theory and Review*. Dr. MacDermid's research has earned awards from the Groves Conference and Gamma Sigma Delta. In 2005, Dr. MacDermid was named a fellow of the National Council on Family Relations, and in 2006 she received the Work Life Legacy Award from the Families and Work Institute. Dr. MacDermid recently served as the civilian co-chair of the Department of Defense Task Force on Mental Health, and currently serves on the Psychological Health External Advisory Committee to the Defense Health Board.

#### An Interview with Shelley MacDermid

by Judi Casey and Karen Corday

**Casey:** How and why did you become interested in military families?

**MacDermid:** Like many aspects of my career, it was accidental. I had always had an interest in civilian work and family issues, and through the course of that work I met folks who worked for the Department of Defense and became aware of the many programs and policies for military families. About 10 years ago, some colleagues from Purdue and I wrote an application for funding from the DOD to study military families. It has sustained my interest since; it's been a real privilege to do this work.

**Casey:** What was the focus of the first grant?

**MacDermid:** The first proposal was written for the Office of Military Community and Family Policy, which is part of the Secretary of Defense's office. They have a strong interest in putting policies and programs in place to allow people to pursue their military careers and a successful family life at the same time. Their title isn't work-life, but this office is very much about work-life, along with other areas such as housing, recreation, and education programs.

**Casey:** Tell me about the purpose and mission of the Military Family Research Institute?

**MacDermid:** The Institute's mission has expanded since it started, but the passion for military families and their issues continues. The original mission was to conduct research on outcomes of interest to the military, including job performance, satisfaction, and retention. We did work on relocation, the role of libraries in military communities, child care and the subsidy structure, organizational commitment and retention, and deployment and reunion, always with an eye to informing policies and programs.

In recent years, the research has honed in on the effect of deployment on military families; we are now specifically focusing on the reintegration and reunion period and what makes it more or less possible for people to recover from deployment smoothly. We also have an interest in mental health and the infrastructures to support mental health in military families, as well as family diversity. That includes everything from nontraditional military families to families dealing with an injured member.

**Casey:** Can you discuss a few significant research findings?

**MacDermid:** As I've reviewed the academic literature, I've noticed that work-family conflict as perceived by spouses really does appear to matter to how they view their families' continued involvement in the military. Military work has the potential to generate a lot of conflict; even when you're not deployed, in a time of war, every job has a heavy workload and potentially unpredictable and long hours. Spouses who really feel the conflict are more likely to resist continuing involvement with the military, and are more likely to encourage their spouse to end their service at the next available opportunity. That's a real work-life issue; if we don't want a draft, we want the military to be successful at recruitment and retention.

**Casey:** What are some of the effects on spouses and children?

**MacDermid:** I think the single generalization that it's important to make about military families is that they are models of both resilience and vulnerability. The longer someone serves, the more likely they are to be someone for whom the lifestyle is well-suited. The longer people stay in, the more there is a population that is self-selected for continued service. You'll see many examples of families who are resilient, resourceful, and adaptable. Many people talk to me about how military folks can go anywhere in the world and strike up a conversation and begin to develop relationships with people around them because they are so practiced at it. They know how to make transitions and do logistics; the data suggests that military families have many strengths. Of course, they are also people who do very difficult and dangerous work, and in many cases, people who are deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan experience significant trauma. That combat-related trauma is very challenging for families; some people develop symptoms and do not recover in a timely way, which can impact the stability of marriage and interfere with parent-child relationships. We do know that most people do fine; they come back from deployment, experience a period of readjustment, and don't need clinical help.

**Casey:** What are some of the other unique work-family challenges of military families?

**MacDermid:** On the active duty side, they move quite a bit, although the rates at which they move and the rates at which civilians move are now more similar; civilians move a lot more than they used to. But, to the extent that they do move quite a bit, it's very challenging for spouses, and it's difficult for spouses to develop any sort of career trajectory, unless they have a supremely portable job. On the Guard and Reserve side, you have situations in which employees have to repeatedly leave their civilian employer and then return to them. When a Guard member is deployed, his or her spouse may need to change their health care provider to the military system and then change again when the service member returns; this can be disruptive. During a combat deployment, the family at home is anxious; their service member has a dangerous job and is gone for long periods of time. When you're serving on active duty, it's a 24-7 responsibility; you're never really off-duty. That is a big challenge; it's important to understand how that commitment is different from the commitments made in many parts of the civilian world. If you're enlisted, your employee needs to know where you are at all times; most civilians are not on such a short leash.

**Casey:** What additional research is needed?

**MacDermid:** We are really trying to understand the patterns of adjustment following a return from deployment. We have a lot of snapshots and ideas, but we don't have a lot of data. People are telling us that they come home, they feel good, and they stay feeling good, which is not what many of the predictions have been—many predicted roller coaster periods of adjustment or a honeymoon period that tapers off. We're just trying to document the diversity of experiences and determine what predicts changes in direction. There's more diversity in people's paths of adjustment following deployment than we had anticipated, having read the literature. I am interested in the fact that the percentage of Reserve soldiers who have psychological problems three months after returning from deployment is higher than when they first came home, and the rate in increase is double that of active duty soldiers. We need to develop an understanding of why it goes up so much; my hunch is that people are trying to get help and are unsuccessful at getting it. If you don't get help early, it's harder to address the problem later. There's also little information on military kids and their experiences—it's hard to get access and this is hard work to do, and so our knowledge base is quite limited.

**Casey:** What can employers do to support military families?

**MacDermid:** Employers may not realize that there's an enormous amount of penetration in their workplaces of people who are affected by military deployments. There are many people in your workplace every day who are thinking about military issues. An obvious sub-population are families of people in your workplace who are or have been deployed—Joe in Accounting is deployed, his family is still at home, and they probably have some needs that they didn't have when Joe was living with them. Employees and their families appreciate it when employers top off their military salaries to match their civilian salaries or allow family members to keep their health insurance so they don't have to lose their doctors during deployment. However, there many other possible situations, such as employees who are parents whose children are deployed. These workers may be interested in an affinity group or even just messages of support for their service. Parents, especially, are not primary targets of the military's supportive programs and they can't hold military ID cards, so they can feel a little orphaned.

Following departure from military service, hiring and rehiring veterans is great, but it's important to retain them beyond the legally required period. This can be challenging; service members may return to a job with different ideas about their careers, and employers have continued to change during the course of the employee's deployment. But, employers can work with the employee to keep them on the job, which is a commendable thing to do and in almost every case, will turn out to be a worthwhile thing to do.

Employers tend to view service members and veterans through a disability lens; they will often immediately think of post-traumatic stress disorder or a physical injury. My sense is that this is not the right lens to start with, and that people would do better to think about working with service members and veterans from a perspective of diversity. If we think about the things we have learned to value as we work with people who are ethnically different from ourselves, we have learned to cherish differences, ask questions to learn about perspectives and experiences, and value the unique skills and abilities that diversity brings. Those lessons translate well to working with service members and veterans. When we work with people whose experience intrigues us but we don't understand it well, we often betray our stereotypes when we ask questions and sound judgmental. Veterans who have returned from deployment and gone to college often tell me that their classmates want to know if they killed anyone. That's not exactly the best conversation starter! The tools we have learned from using the diversity lens will stand us in good stead when working with service members and veterans.

**Casey:** How may the current administration's interest in military families bring their concerns/needs to the forefront?

**MacDermid:** There has already been an impact in the sense that Michelle Obama's expression of commitment to military families has meant a great deal to these families, particularly spouses and kids. She appreciates and recognizes their service, and has taken the time to meet with military families and learn about their experiences, and this has been powerful. Both the Obamas and the Bidens are interested in military families and are working together to strategize about this issue. My sense is that they are still learning and thinking about how they can have the greatest impact. I've talked to folks from both of their offices, and they are asking good questions and reading, learning, and thinking. I think they'll be active in trying to make a positive difference. I feel glad for military families; they've been working hard for their country, and they're tired. To have someone stand up and explicitly recognize the work they are doing is very gratifying.

People have many different perspectives about the war. I think Vietnam taught a lot of people that the war and the warrior are not the same thing. Over the last 10 years, I've learned that I have a lot of blind spots and stereotypes about military workers and issues, and I've gradually recognized them, processed them, and put them into perspective – but I'm sure there are some I've missed. I've had 10 years and lots of contact with military workers; most people do not have this benefit! Because many people feel a deep-seated moral concern about the war that can interfere with their ability to be supportive of military families. Helping people think through and consider this is very important. I've also heard people say thing like, "They signed up for this. They knew what they were getting into, so they don't deserve our help or concern." That's a hard-hearted perspective, but there are people that feel that way. This is one way in which the First Lady's actions have been helpful; her expression of support is not tied to the war. I will say that military folks are sometimes dubious that anyone can support one without the other. If someone says, "I hate the war but I appreciate you," there's a piece of them that feels rejected, because they've had to buy into their mission. It doesn't mean we shouldn't try to help warriors even if we have misgivings about the war.

**Casey:** Can the new FMLA requirements help military families?

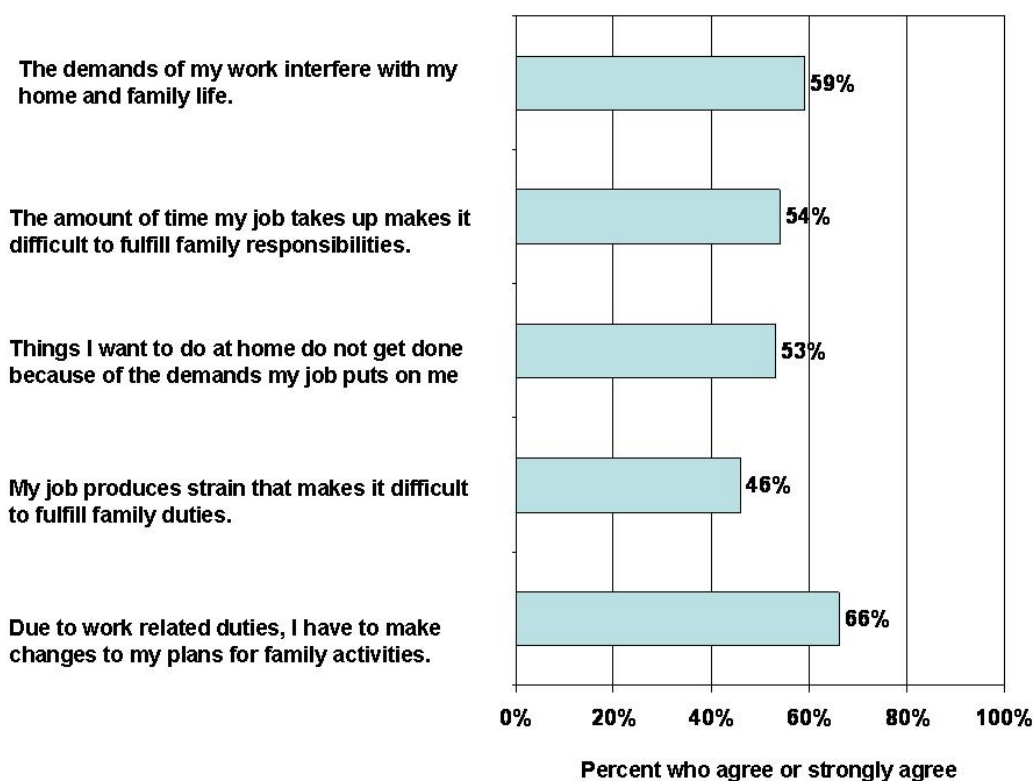
**MacDermid:** I hope so. The most important change is that service members who are injured can get care from their families, but I also think that it's important that these changes acknowledge the work that military families

do before, during, and after deployment. I pushed hard for job-protected time off soldiers and family members after deployment to reconstitute their families. It's important work that needs to be done, and if it's not done, it's hard for families to move forward and function. I hope employers can find ways to administer this time that doesn't make them crazy and still provide access to their employees that need this time.

**Casey:** Anything else?

**MacDermid:** Military work is extreme work, so their work-family challenges are really very severe. What the military does to try to support families constitutes extreme support,. They have the same challenges as civilian workers and then some besides. It's an interesting environment in which to consider work-family issues—how do you put supports in place that will allow people to survive and thrive in their job and want to stay? The military is a wonderful example of making change in many areas. Military child care went from being embarrassingly awful to being a model; this is a lesson to the rest of us. During this war, they have created a whole infrastructure for meeting needs of a large population over a large area, and parts of that will work very well and parts will not, but it's all very instructive. Civilian employers can learn a lot from the military – and vice versa!

### Work-Family Conflict of Married Soldiers



**Source:** Source: Durand, D. B., Burrell, L., Stetz, M., Castro, C. A. (2003). *Work/family conflict issues for soldiers and families*. Department of Psychiatry and Behavior Sciences, Walter Reed Army Institute of Research. Retrieved from <http://www.dtic.mil/dacowits/briefings/WorkFamilyConflict.ppt>

The Sloan Work and Family Research Network appreciates the extensive support we have received from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation and the Boston College community.



E-mail: [wfnetwork@bc.edu](mailto:wfnetwork@bc.edu) - Phone: 617-552-1708 - Fax: 617-552-9202

[www.bc.edu](http://www.bc.edu)

*The Sloan Work and Family Research Network is funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation*