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Sea and Shore Rotation: The Family and Separation

Final Report 1976-1977

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For the past fourteen months, Office of Naval Research, Organizational Effectiveness Research Programs (Code 452), has supported research based at the Mental Health Clinic, Naval Regional Medical Clinic Hawaii, with the approval of Captain Samuel A. Youngman, Commanding Officer. The purpose of the study was to consider the implications of sea to shore rotation upon the military dependent family, more specifically, the effects of deployments or patrols and subsequent reunions upon submariners' wives. The goal was to discern, insofar as possible, what constitutes adequate coping for the successfully managing submariner's wife.

The principal investigator worked within an anthropological framework in conducting the research. The general method of participant observation was employed, in conjunction with a series of seven questionnaires (three of which are directly comparable to those utilized by Family Studies Branch, Naval Health Research Center, San Diego, in their study of aviators and their families). Interviews, both structured and unstructured, were conducted, and two families were seen in cotherapy with the clinical investigator, CDR Donald A. Hazlett, a psychiatrist. Several wives maintained interaction logs in their roles as XO's (executive officer's) wives or COB's (Chief of the Boat's) wives or ombudsmen for the wives of a particular crew. One woman maintained a daily diary of her emotional reactions to the cycling into and out of the home of her husband.

The key approach was that of naturalistic observation in the

homes of submariners. Eight families participated, half officers and half enlisted, all men being stationed on operational FBM submarines. The investigator "lived in" each family for up to nine days, one sequence with the husband home, and one sequence with the husband at sea. Extensive notetaking described the activities of the family, and, more importantly, color videotaping of interaction sequences was effected.

Several significant conclusions can be drawn from the research thus far, although the vast majority of data have not been analyzed. The first conclusion is that physical illness and the husband being at sea are significantly correlated; over 84% of illnesses for the sample tested occurred in the husband's absence. The implications for health care systems appear evident. Secondly, the women regard separation from their husbands as a significant life event which is even more important to them than giving birth to a child (it ranked twelfth in a 75 item listing of life events). These two conclusions were presented in detail in a paper entitled "Periodic Separation and Physical Illness" at the VI World Congress of Psychiatry which was held in Honolulu in late August. The paper will be the basis of a later technical report.

A second paper, "Midlife Crises Among Submariners' Wives," was presented at the Conference on Military Family Research, held in San Diego in early September. Two conclusions from that paper are that submariners' wives undergo a midlife transition between the ages of

30 and 37, substantially earlier than the literature indicates for civilian women, and that many of these women abdicate their traditional roles and associated responsibilities as sources of assistance to other women. Since these wives of relatively senior submariners are frequently refusing to accept these roles, then social services may be required to fill the gap in helpgiving. This paper will also be the basis of a forthcoming technical report.

Other studies have tentatively concluded that Navy wives who are active in wives' social functions tend to manage sea-associated separations better. This research also supports this conclusion and has even found an inexpensive means of ensuring increased wives participation via available videotaping facilities. Hopefully official support of a pilot program might be forthcoming in the near future.

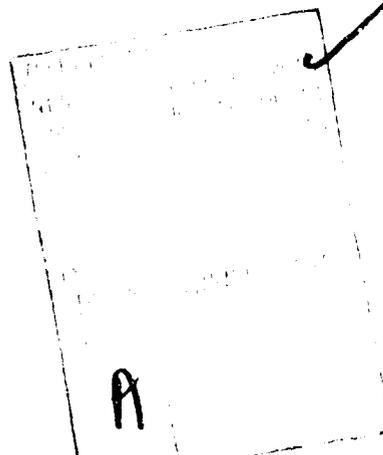
Another conclusion is that the operating cycle of FBM submarines does not coincide with optimum coping for the wife and family. The cycle is too short for the family to stabilize into a routine, either with husband home or husband gone. The emotional cycle fits a basic six week pattern: six weeks to adjust to absence or presence, six weeks to prepare for the opposite state. Thus, there is minimal time for leveling out. This research, however, is in no way attempting to comment upon operational necessities; it may be that the families could adjust even better with simple recognition of their emotional cycling.

One technical report has been issued during this period of re-

search. It was a bibliography of materials relevant to the topic, numbering slightly less than 900 items. Of those entries, only 43 dealt directly with submariners' wives or families and included even fiction in addition to more traditional bibliographic entries. The literature relating to the topic of submariners' wives is not vast.

Several technical reports which were proposed to have been produced by the end of fiscal year 1977 have not. One, discussing the "Senior Chief Syndrome" by CDR Hazlett, has been outweighed by professional obligations to Mental Health Clinic. The second, an analysis of the use of Mental Health Clinic resources by submariners, by CDR Hazlett and HM3 Jerry Devore, has been limited by difficulties in processing data. The third, a presentation of material relating to the Officer/Enlisted distinction, requires substantial revision in order to make it acceptable. It is hoped that this third paper will be forthcoming as a technical report in the coming fiscal year.

The original research proposal and its parameters have been met in the prior fourteen months of research. The following year will be taken up in processing the data further and drawing the evident conclusions. Isolating adequate coping skills and defining same will be a primary consideration.



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