

SHORT REPORT

Soldiers and their families in the Slovak Republic: a report on quality of functioning from the empirical perspective

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The article presents the problems that military families face nowadays, since the Slovak Armed Forces became fully professional. I provide a brief definition of the professional soldier's family (military family) and its structure, and then introduce the problems that the Slovak Armed Forces have to solve in order to eliminate two sources of stress.

The first source is the impact of the professional soldiers' job on their families and on the fulfilment of basic family roles. The second source of stress is the impact of the families on the fulfilment of soldiers' duties at work. These two phenomena present in the Slovak Armed Forces were measured with a questionnaire distributed among 416 respondents. Its results confirmed that the impact of the soldiers'

profession on fulfilment of their basic family roles and the impact of the military family on soldiers' performance at work (especially their mobility and career) raise serious problems that military families need to face.

I conclude by emphasizing that these problems can be eliminated with the help of a high-quality and complex system of social security for professional soldiers and their families, which could be implemented through social work in the armed forces and built alongside the development of the professional armed forces.

KEY WORDS

soldiers; military family; quality of life

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BACKGROUND

If we want to solve the problems of military families, i.e., the families of professional soldiers, we have to define the military family and specify the approach used to investigate this social phenomenon. The family is a basic social group representing a particular unit within the society (Potocarova, 1998). The objectives of a particular family may or may not correspond with the objectives of the society as a whole. This depends mainly on the social level and social behaviour patterns (roles) which are accepted and recognized in the family. The social foundation of the family is based on the relationships between people as the expression of their interpersonal needs, and not as the expression of the society services. The complexity of the society's whole structure is reflected in the family. The family must be considered not only as a social group but also – as it is included in various social processes (from economic to biological-reproductive) through its basic functions (Mozny, 1999) – as a social institution. The family itself has its own laws and principles of functioning that are limited by the applicable laws of the society. That is why the family becomes an institution although it is – by its nature – more of a formation of an individual's natural personal life.

The current prevailing concept of the family is that the family is a complex and multi-faceted social phenomenon, based on two types of horizontal relations and one vertical type of interpersonal (human) relations (Havlin, 2015). The horizontal relationships include relationships between husband and wife (parents) and relationships among children. Vertical relationships include relationships between parents and children.

There are various definitions of the family. Sociologists define the family in two ways: in a broader way as the so-called multi-generational family which includes – in addition to the parents and children – also other relatives, and in a narrower way as the so-called nuclear family comprising only parents and children (see: Szczepanski, 1968; Marusiak, 1964; Blaha, 1968; Sopoci & Buzik, 1995; Bauman, 1966; Polonsky & Matis, 1997). The most frequently reported basic characteristics are the following:

- The family is a socially approved form of permanent coexistence;
- It consists of individuals related to each other by bloodlines, marriage or adoption;
- Its members usually live in the same house;
- Its members cooperate with each other within the socially recognized distribution of roles, with the emphasis on the education and nutrition of children;
- The greater is the mobility of family members, the weaker are family ties, and the smaller is the in-

volvement of the family in the process of maintaining its social position, as the defined social roles of its members are not fulfilled;

- Mental disorder of one family member disturbs the whole family;
- Nursing services and care for elderly relatives are provided in every type of society as a part of family relationships;
- In all civilized societies, incest (sex with blood relatives) is forbidden.

A family is a small social group different from marriage, which has the following basic functions: biological-reproductive, social, economic, and emotional. Its members follow stable behavioural patterns which are not only defined by personal and emotional relationships between them but are also formed by a broader structural system and the level of development. The family was and always will be the subject of institutionalization, and it has the characteristics of strong formalization (Grzegorzewska, 2013).

The family is the fundamental social unit. It is formed by informal relations (love, relationship between two people) that become formalized through marriage. Families are established even without formalizing the relationship (official marriage; Janicka & Liberska, 2014). Man and woman live in a specific relationship as unmarried partners or as same-sex couples (two men or two women) living in a specific relationship as registered partners (Striezenec, 1998).

The military family is a specific type of family – a multi-generational family, and a professional soldier's family – and a specific type of professional soldier's family: the family of a military professional who was deployed (Piotrowski & Królikowska, 2012).

When defining the term “military family”, on the one hand we have to take into account the fact that the family is significantly impacted by the execution of the military professional's occupation (accelerating or slowing down the performance) and by the military itself (Piotrowski & Pich, 2010). On the other hand, we have to take into consideration the fact that this type of family not only has all the general characteristics of a family but also fulfils its basic functions.

Some specifics resulting from the military profession prevent some of the family members, or those who guarantee the fulfilment of the family's basic functions, from, in fact, fulfilling some of those functions all together or at least not without problems. In order to determine these specifics, the term “military family” must be defined (Karasiwicz, Lewandowska-Walter, Godlewska-Werner, & Piotrowski, 2012).

Various approaches to solving this problem will enable even greater differentiation of the military family. The military family can be defined in two basic ways (approaches): a broader aspect and a narrower one (Janicka & Liberska, 2014).

From the a broader perspective, the military family is defined as a group of people comprising relatives living in a given family, where at least one of them is a professional soldier. Because this family includes several generations (parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins), it can be defined as a multi-generational military family.

From the narrower perspective, the military family is defined as a social group which includes relationships between a man and woman, and between parents and children. The fact that at least one of the parents is a professional soldier partially modifies these relationships. Even though this group of people linked by marriage, bloodlines or adoption live in the same household and cooperate in accordance with mutually and internally defined roles, the fact that at least one of the parents is a professional soldier significantly impacts the performance of the basic family functions. The family understood in this way may be specified as the professional soldier's family (Polonsky & Matis, 1997).

The professional soldier's family, as one of the family types, may be further differentiated as follows:

- From the point of view of achieving the level of professionalism (the level of identification with the military occupation, the level of adaptation to the military environment and the level of drill), the professional soldier who is a parent in this family: the military professional family or the professional soldier's family.
- From the point of view of the number of parents in professional service: only one parent is a military professional, either a father or a mother (the sign of further differentiation, i.e., gender) or both parents are military professionals (Martinska, 2007).
- From the point of view of professional service duration of one or both parents: the family of the professional soldier who has just started the career (this can include a specific type of family of a professional soldier who has just started the career, i.e., a cadet family), or the military professional family (a long-serving professional soldier, who has gained the qualities of a military professional and the family either accepts this status or at least does not reject it).
- From the point of view of the army type or military professions: the family of an airman, the family of a member of the air defence system, the family of a military doctor, etc.
- From the point of view of deployment: the military family not deployed or the family of a soldier deployed in a military operation and military mission (Piotrowski, 2011).

The above-mentioned aspects imply that the specific type of the military family understood in the strict sense – i.e., the family of a professional soldier – is a military professional family and the family of the military professional deployed (in action). We

admit that every military professional family will go through a period when the military professional will be deployed in a military mission (military deployment cycle). That is why a military deployed family is only a temporary category indicating only the current status.

Nowadays, a new term is established for the specification of a military veteran family, the military professional family (parent) who has participated in missions several times. Special attention should be paid to these families as the deployment of the military professional in the mission and their subsequent return from the mission significantly impacts fulfilment of the basic family functions. This influence must be eliminated or compensated by social programmes. However, this requires a change in thinking about compensation (Piotrowski, 2012).

Compensation should not be considered only an objective of the given social programme for mitigating the impact of professional service on the professional soldier's family. It cannot be regarded as a charity provided by an employing military organisation only if they want or can provide it. If the compensation does not become a part of every process provision in the armed forces, it will lack a creative character, which means that it will not induce inventiveness (creativity). It means that the compensation will not enable the development of creative thinking in every member of the military family professional or the military professionals themselves. If this is the case, the compensation will not enable the development of fluency (the number of ideas), flexibility (the diversity of ideas), originality (the originality of ideas) and elaboration (the ability to further develop original ideas and implement them; Piotrowski & Kubacka, 2015).

Scientific research is necessary in order to understand the mechanisms behind functioning of work and personal life of professional soldiers. It is necessary to pay attention to those issues. It is in this context that the headquarters of the armed forces of the Slovak Republic adopted a research project concerning the professional soldiers' family, which was implemented by the Department of Psychological and Sociological Activities, Personal Office in Liptovský Mikuláš and the Department of Social Sciences and Languages, Armed Forces Academy of General M.R. Štefánik in Liptovský Mikuláš. The research project is internally structured around two research problem areas implemented in independent consecutive phases.

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

METHOD

The first research area, which became the first phase, focused on measuring the impact of the family on

pursuing a career in the military. The main objective was to gather data for an empirical analysis that would allow one to measure and describe whether and to what extent pursuing a career in the military (the specific characteristics of the military profession) is determined by (positively or negatively) and dependent on (to what extent: strongly, weakly, not at all) the family.

In order to obtain relevant information, a questionnaire method was used. The questionnaire consisted of five parts which represented the most important areas related to work when pursuing a career in the military: 1. Mobility and Housing; 2. Work Performance; 3. Qualification; 4. Physical and Emotional Load; and 5. Military Regime.

The second research area which formed the second phase focused on measuring the impact of pursuing a career in the military on the family. The main objective was to provide data for an empirical analysis that would allow one to measure and describe how pursuing a career in the military impacts one's personal and family life, and how strongly it influences the basic family functions, i.e., biological-reproductive, economic, emotional and socio-educational. In order to obtain relevant information, a questionnaire method was used.

The questionnaire consisted of four parts. Each part focused on a specific family function through which it was possible to analyse a family as a complex system and describe it as a whole. Family structure was covered by the following functions: 1. Biological-reproductive; 2. Economic; 3. Emotional and 4. Socio-educational.

Data collection for both parts and phases was carried out via the network of the armed forces of the Slovak Republic. The sample size was defined by a quota selection using information on the type of forces, rank, and gender. The sample included only professional soldiers with families. Out of 732 questionnaires sent out within the system of the armed forces of the Slovak Republic, 551 (75.30%) questionnaires were returned, out of which 130 (23.60%) questionnaires were discarded, i.e., the final sample included 421 respondents who participated in the first and second part and in both phases.

With respect to its scope, the report included only selected statistical indicators which significantly characterized mobility, hosting or reproductive and economic family functions.

RESULTS

This part was analysed with six questions. The first question concerned the opinions of the professional soldiers and their families regarding commuting during the working week and commuting as a consequence of various courses and training (see: Table 1 and Figure 1). Professional soldiers commuting during the working week and professional soldiers commuting during the working week and weekends made up 25% of the whole sample.

The majority (three quarters) of the professional soldiers thought that separation from their families was not a very convenient way to lead a family life, and up to 87.80% thought that this way of family life was not suitable for other members of their family. Participants consistently said that from the point of view of their own families, commuting during drills and training was seen in an unfavourable way, i.e., the mean was 2.56 ($SD = 1.39$) on a 5-point scale, showing that the family members found their absence at home to be inconvenient.

The second question concerned the respondents' opinions on the anticipated reaction of the family to a relocation due to reassignment. The results showed that 27.40% of professional soldiers expected that their families would offer full understanding and support in the event of reassignment to another squad, and 59.50% of respondents said that their families would respond by looking for solutions to avoid the reassignment order (see: Table 2 and Figure 2).

CONCLUSIONS

The issues that the families of military professionals face are very complex. Stress experienced by the soldiers and their families is worth further examination (Piotrowski, 2011). The important issues relate to the soldiers' attempt to balance their family and profes-

Table 1

Opinions on commuting (assessment scale: 1 = definitely yes, 2 = probably yes, 3 = neutral opinion, 4 = probably not, 5 = certainly not)

Commuting	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
Commuting during the working week is not convenient for me	1.97	1.34	416
Commuting during the working week is not convenient for my family	1.60	1.01	416
Commuting during drills and courses is not convenient for me	2.82	1.39	415
Commuting during drills and courses is not convenient for my family	2.56	1.39	413

Family of the armed forces member

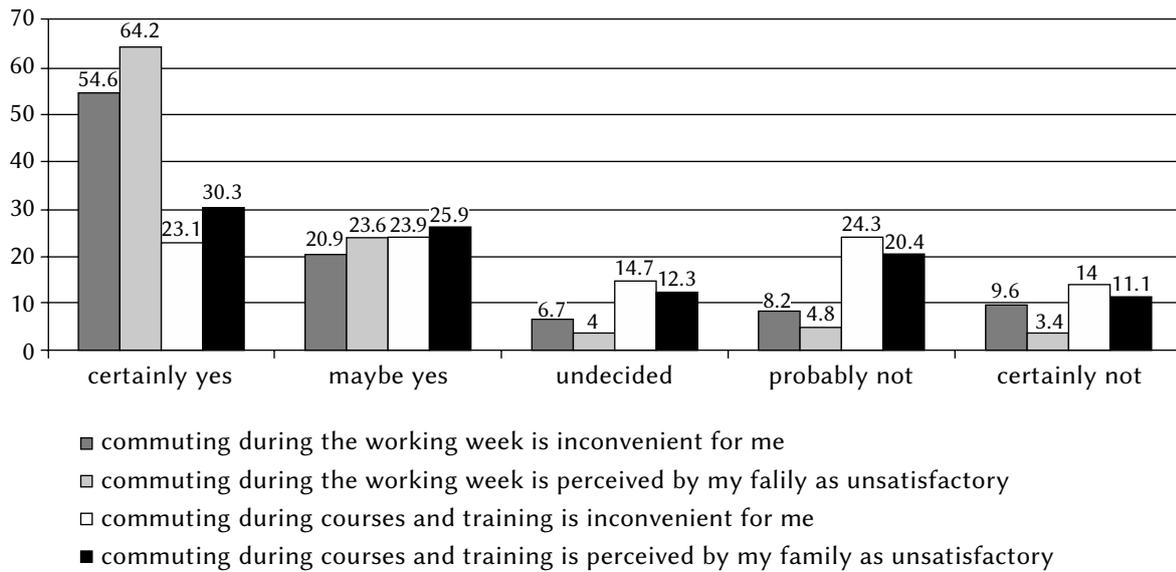


Figure 1. Opinions on commuting (in %).

Table 2

Professional soldiers' opinions on the family response to the need of moving (assessment scale: 1 = definitely yes, 2 = probably yes, 3 = neutral opinion, 4 = probably not, 5 = certainly not)

Opinions on family response on moving	M	SD	N
They would understand and support it	3.61	1.33	415
They would not be thrilled but they would accept the fact	3.08	1.40	412
They would try to dissuade me and search for possibilities how to avoid it	2.54	1.30	412
They would not agree and there would be no support from their side	3.12	1.30	411

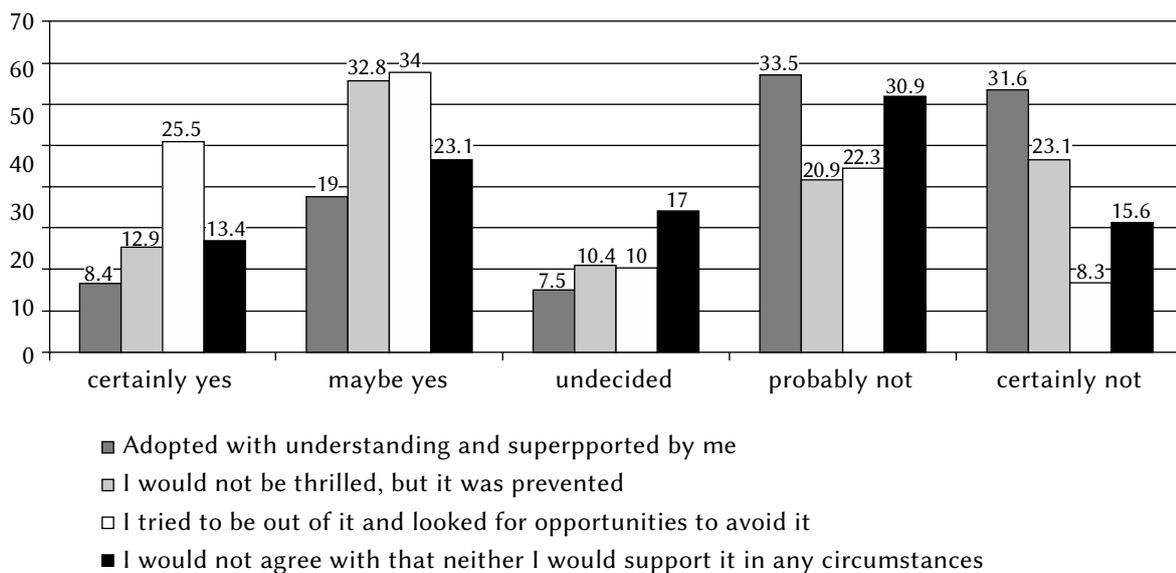


Figure 2. Opinions on the family responses to moving due to re-assignment to other crew (in %).

sional roles, which, in consequence, will benefit their families (Piotrowski, 2007). Self and identity of the soldiers might be analysed in association with professional and family roles (Oleś, 2011).

Theoretical reflection on the military family should become the basis for practical measures in the defence sector, focused on complex social care for the members of the Slovak Republic armed forces and their families. Such interventions were positively evaluated in other studies (e.g., Heyman et al., 2015). Mapping the needs and interests of the military families should become the objective for social work in the armed forces, as even those families are not free of issues such as the necessity to socialise (consolidating one's social group and becoming a part of the army community and the whole society), financial problems and worries about survival and social security of the family (Hofreiter, 2006). The situation of children in those families should also become the focus of interventions (Alfano, Lau, Balderas, Bunnell, & Beidel, 2016). I have indicated possible approaches to defining such complex social phenomena in the armed forces of the Slovak Republic. Those approaches might be applied in other societies and in other uniformed services.

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