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DIFFERENTIAL VIEWPOINTS: THE MIA WIFE VERSUS THE MIA MOTHER, (U)

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SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA 92152

NAVAL MEDICAL RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT COMMAND
BETHESDA, MARYLAND

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Family Separation and Reunion

Families of Prisoners of War and
Servicemen Missing in Action

EDITORS

HAMILTON I. MCCUBBIN

BARBARA B. DAHL

PHILIP J. METRES. JR.

EDNA J. HUNTER

JOHN A. PLAG

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Differential Viewpoints:

MIA Wife Versus MIA Mother

EDNA J. HUNTER

HAMILTON I. MCCLUBBIN

DOROTHY BENSON

Introduction

The return of American prisoners of war of the Southeast Asian conflict¹ early in 1973 heightened the concern and anxieties of families of servicemen who did not return and who still remained as missing in action (MIA) or possibly as prisoners of war (PW). These families were naturally concerned about the fate of their husbands or sons and anxious about the possibility of a change in their official status to killed in action (KIA) or to a presumptive finding of death (PFOD). The future, once filled with hope, was now clouded with uncertainty. Certainly, this was a critical period for families of servicemen who did not return, and they sought some explanation for these events and some answer to the loss of their husbands or sons.

In the euphoria of Homecoming, numerous MIA families, although elated by the fact that the other prisoners were home, tended to feel somewhat ignored. For some of the MIA wives and mothers, acute grief symptoms resumed when the release came. Moreover, after years of maintaining hope, they now faced the very real possibility that their men might *never* return. However, too many questions still remained and some of these families were not yet ready to make the permanent adjustments imposed by death until they could obtain some satisfactory answers.

1. 566 military prisoners of war were released by North Vietnam during the 60 day period following the signing of the peace treaty on January 27, 1973.

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Benson, McCubbin, Dahl, and Hunter (1974) pointed out that for the MIA wife, the return of the PWs "signaled an inevitable change in official status . . . which meant modification in the family's financial status, a restructuring of the wife's social role, and a decisive placement of responsibility upon the MIA wife for the planning of the family's future." For the MIA mother it meant none of these changes, unless, of course, she was dependent upon her MIA son's income. Nothing really changed for most mothers; they learned nothing new which shed light on the fate of their sons, and they continued to wonder if there was a possibility their sons might still return.

Religion has often been mentioned as a potential, if not real, source of strength in explaining and understanding the loss of a family member (Spolyar, 1973). For some PW/MIA families, religion was a major source of consolation, and the church, as an institution, a reference point in time of need. In other cases, families had reported the feeling that religion, in general, had not supported them, and that religious beliefs had not been a source of comfort and understanding (Hunter, McCubbin and Metres, 1974).

Our observations (McCubbin, Hunter and Metres, 1973) have led us to the proposition that wives and parents in the PW/MIA situation experienced different type of stresses, perceived the situation differently, and had varying approaches to coping with the exigencies of the situation. For the wives, the prolonged absence of their husbands meant facing many of the day-to-day traumas of coping with loneliness, depression, the rearing of children, and planning for the future. At times they appeared overwhelmed by the demands of daily living. Their husbands' absences were real and the impact was felt on a daily basis. Consolation and some satisfaction came from resolving daily problems and planning for a future. For the MIA parent, the stresses of daily living were not as apparent as those experienced by the wives. Parents seemed to concentrate more upon their personal grief and loss and devoted much energy in attempting to explain their loss and in understanding their personal feelings about it. The parents, more than the wives, appeared to be groping for some philosophical, yet consoling explanation for their loss. These observations have led us to hypothesize that religion would have greater value for the MIA parent than it would have for the MIA wife.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is two-fold: (a) to focus upon the role religion played in assisting the MIA family find answers and come to terms with inner feelings and beliefs, and (b) to examine further differences between the MIA wife and the MIA parent, specifically the MIA

mother. Through confirmation of our impressions, we might then be better equipped to plan for continuous services to these families and afford them the differential type of care the situation might demand.

Methodology

During the summer of 1973, less than five months subsequent to the return of the PWs from Southeast Asia, staff members of the Center for Prisoner of War Studies² attended three of five one-week religious retreats for PW/MIA families to observe and document how these families were responding and adapting to a critical period of transition. The retreats gave the staff an opportunity to explore with both the MIA wives and the MIA mothers their needs and concerns and to assess the value of the religious retreat for both populations.

In attempting to evaluate the value of the retreats and to document aspects of family adjustment, information was gathered through questionnaires, personal interviews, and through participation in both religious-type group discussions and the more traditional discussion groups which focused on the problems of adjustment and on the feelings and responses to the stresses of being an MIA wife or parent. The wives' and parents' groups were usually held separately, although, on a few occasions, the groups were combined. The traditional discussion groups were monitored by psychologists, a psychiatrist and social workers, with ministers also in attendance. The religious groups were headed by the members of the retreat staff, who were primarily members of the clergy. The families had the opportunity to attend either or both types of groups, depending upon their particular interests and concerns. Given the fact that both *behavioral science* and *religious* inputs were available at the retreat and that both types of service were to be afforded, it is assumed that the way in which the families distributed themselves between the services which were offered would be an index of which type group experience they valued most. Our primary sources of data for this paper were threefold: (a) a pre-retreat questionnaire which attempted to measure expectations and interests, (b) a post-retreat questionnaire to measure satisfaction or fulfillment of expectations, and (c) group discussions. Completion of the forms by participants was on a voluntary basis and, therefore, not all attendees completed both questionnaires. The findings from the questionnaires reported in this paper are based upon the responses of the 148 MIA wives and mothers who completed *both* the pre- and the post-forms.

2. Staff members who attended the retreat were Dr. Edna J. Hunter, Dr. Hamilton I. McCubbin, Dorothy Benson, and Philip J. Metres, Jr. Two staff members were present at each of the three retreats attended.

Profile of the Family Members

During the five one-week retreats, approximately 1300 PW/MIA family members, representing about 400 families, attended the sessions. Of those MIA family members attending sessions 1, 3, and 5 and completing both pre- and post-questionnaires, 83 (56.1%) were MIA wives and 65 (43.9%) were MIA mothers. All branches of the military service, as well as civilians, were represented. There were 76 (51.4%) wives and mothers representing Air Force families, 41 (27.7%) from Army families, 19 (12.8%) from the Navy families, and 2 (1.4%) from civilian families. On the average, these families had experienced long separations extending over a period in excess of four years. For the MIA mothers, their sons had been missing for an average of 58.4 months, and for the MIA wives, the average absence had been 49.1 months.

Results and Discussion

Reasons for attendance. Did wives and mothers come to the retreat for the same reasons? Their responses on the pre-retreat questionnaire

TABLE 1. A Comparison of the Reasons Given by MIA Wives and MIA Mothers for Attending the Retreat¹

Reason	MIA Wives %	MIA Mothers %	χ^2
Vacation	74.7	41.7	15.9 ***
Chance to get away and think	73.5	73.0	NS
• Opportunity to work on personal feelings and concerns	62.2	72.9	NS
Meet and talk with other PW/MIA families	60.2	86.9	12.2 ***
Get family closer together	44.1	50.0	NS
Obtain counseling	41.5	71.0	12.4 ***
Obtain answers to unanswered questions	36.6	58.3	6.6 *
Opportunity to plan future	32.1	36.4	NS
Chance to talk about own personal experience	31.3	47.4	NS
Opportunity to work out adjustment problems of other family members	26.3	33.3	NS

1. Based upon responses given at the time of registration, prior to participation in retreat activities.

*** $p < .001$

* $p < .05$

indicated that, for the most part, both groups came for many of the same reasons — for a vacation, for a chance to get away and think, for an opportunity to work out personal feelings and concerns, and for a chance to talk with others in similar circumstances (see Table 1). Certain reasons, however, were given more emphasis by one group than by the other. For the wife, the opportunity for a vacation appeared to be significantly more important than it was for the MIA mother. The mothers, on the other hand, attached much more importance to the opportunity for talking with others, obtaining counseling, and finding answers to unanswered questions.

Perhaps the wives, who had to cope with the practicalities of raising the children, pursuing a new career, or establishing a new lifestyle, had already come to terms with themselves and their future plans, while mothers were still struggling to come to terms with their feelings about their loss. In other words, wives were asking, "How do I cope since it appears he will not return?"; while mothers still asked "Why did it happen and what are the chances of his return?"

TABLE 2. *Differences in Expectations of the Retreat*¹

Statement	MIA Wives %	MIA Mothers %	χ^2
I believe this experience may affect my future	47.0	77.1	13.2 ***
I expect this to be a religious experience	50.0	74.2	8.6 **

1. Based upon responses made at the time of registration.

*** $p < .001$

** $p < .01$

Expectations of the retreat. From the responses given at the very beginning of the retreat, the wives and mothers appeared to differ significantly in their expectations about what impact the retreat would have upon their lives (see Table 2). The MIA mother, more than the MIA wife, expected the retreat would be a religious experience and that the experience would indeed have a profound effect on her future.

The reasons the groups gave for attending the retreat and their expectations concerning the retreat could be expected to affect their desires to participate in the various activities offered there. This was found to be true. The groups differed significantly on their expressed

TABLE 3. *A Comparison of Interest Shown in Various Activities by MIA Wives and MIA Mothers¹*

Activity	MIA Wives %	MIA Mothers %	χ^2
Recreation for self	92.4	90.6	NS
Recreation for children	92.3	51.4	24.9 ***
Discussion with other persons in same situation	91.5	91.2	NS
Discussion with other family groups	84.0	94.7	NS
Spiritual counseling	72.7	78.7	NS
Family counseling	70.7	60.0	NS
Legal counseling	70.7	44.2	8.0 **
Opportunity to be alone	70.0	62.8	NS
Personal counseling	69.7	62.0	NS
Financial counseling	68.8	41.9	8.3 **
Child counseling	68.0	13.9	28.5 ***
Career counseling	59.7	28.2	10.3 **
Educational counseling	58.4	30.8	7.9 **

1. Based upon responses given at the time of registration, prior to actual knowledge of what activities might be available.

*** $p < .001$

** $p < .01$

interest in particular activities, as shown in Table 3. Both expressed a high degree of interest in recreational activities, group discussions, and spiritual and personal counseling. Of course, the wives more frequently reported interest in recreational activities for children and child counseling, as might be expected, since few of the MIA mothers had young children with them at the retreat. The largest differences between the groups were with respect to the MIA wives' significantly greater interest in legal, financial, educational, and career counseling. These differences seem to reflect the wife's emphasis upon the "here and now" and preparation for the future. She wanted to know "how?", not "why?". One particular wife commenting on why she chose to come to the retreat stated, "I hope to be able to take stock of my situation as an MIA wife and formulate some concrete plans for my future." This statement was in sharp contrast to the MIA mother who answered the same question with, "I want to be given an answer to my family's concern about why God has seen fit to take a wonderful man, our son, away from us. My only response thus far is to tell them we can never question God's ways, but I need more convincing answers."

Differential Viewpoints: MIA Wife versus MIA Mother

Group discussions. The group discussions confirmed many of our earlier observations. For the MIA wives, the prolonged absence of their husbands meant coping with constant loneliness, and they reported being frequently overwhelmed by the vicissitudes and demands of day-to-day living. Consolation and support seemed to be directly related to the assistance they needed to cope with the demands of life stresses and the realities of the absence of their loved ones. The MIA parents, rather than emphasizing the struggles with daily living, dwelt on their attempts to cope with their personal grief. They reported spending hours recalling the past, and the severe emotional shock about their son's casualty seemed heightened by their efforts to recall his growth and development, their interactions with him, guilt over things not done, with an overall pattern of reminiscing about the times they had spent together.

Family participation. As the retreats came to a close, the families were questioned to see if the activities they had previously indicated interest in were the same ones they had actually taken part in during the retreat. For the most part, this was true. As could be expected, from pre-retreat expressed interests the wives took significantly greater advantage of recreational activities for themselves than did the MIA mothers. When the retreat began, the wife group had also shown a much higher degree of interest in legal, financial, educational and career counseling than the mothers had. However, the expected differences between the groups did not show up in the post-retreat

TABLE 4. *Activities Participated in by MIA Wives and MIA Mothers*¹

Activity	MIA Wives %	MIA Mothers %	χ^2
Recreation for children	85.7	20.4	45.6 ***
Recreation for self	85.7	66.7	5.5 *
Opportunity to be alone	73.0	55.6	NS
Spiritual counseling	71.4	57.1	NS
Family counseling	49.2	26.7	5.5 *
Child counseling	47.6	9.3	17.2 ***
Personal counseling	34.9	28.6	NS
Legal counseling	14.5	17.8	NS

1. Based upon responses given at the close of the week-long retreat.

*** $p < .001$

* $p < .05$

TABLE 5. Differences in Feelings about the Retreat Experience¹

Statement	MIA Wives %	MIA Mothers %	χ^2
I felt completely free to discuss my problems	76.9	87.8	NS
I made new and lasting friendships while here	64.1	87.8	8.2 **
It was a deeply religious experience for me	55.4	79.2	6.9 **
Most of the questions I came with have been answered	47.5	64.3	NS
I feel this has been the start of a new life for me	32.8	53.3	4.6 *

1. Based upon responses given on the last day of the week-long retreat.

** $p < .01$

* $p < .05$

reports. This finding is perhaps a function of the fact that in some instances these offerings were not available, or not adequate, and not necessarily because the wives did not participate in them.

A comparison of the responses of MIA wives and MIA mothers showed that the two groups did indeed have varying reasons for attending the retreat, as well as different expectations of what such an experience might offer to them. Moreover, their expressed interest in activities differed at the start of the week, and those differences were reflected in the activities they had actually participated in during the week. It appeared that a "fulfillment of prophecy" phenomenon may have been operating. In other words, what a wife or mother "expected" to derive from the experience in some way affected the way in which she felt she had benefited from it (see Table 5). Two of the more important reasons for coming to a religious retreat for MIA mothers were to meet and talk with other PW/MIA families and to obtain answers to unanswered questions. By the end of the week the MIA mother, more than the MIA wife, felt she made new and lasting friendships, and that most of the questions she had come with had been answered.

It seemed from the discussions that the mothers had been more isolated socially than the wife group since the casualty of their family member. Therefore, the retreat was a more unique situation for them,

since it offered an opportunity they did not ordinarily have – a chance to meet and talk with others, in a similar situation, who understood their needs and feelings. As the retreat drew to a close, one MIA mother stated, "I came with no particular problem – just heartache and some frustration – frustration stemming from conditions I cannot change. I carry away some new friendships and a renewed acceptance to let the Lord work in his own mysterious ways."

The MIA mother expected that the experience would be a religious one, and that it would have an effect on her future. Post-retreat responses did indeed show that the retreat experience had been perceived as a deeply religious experience for the MIA mother, and that she felt it was the start of a new life for her more often than did the MIA wife. The MIA wife, on the other hand, came to the retreat seeking recreational activities for her children and herself and the opportunity to be alone; thus, for her, it served as a much-needed vacation. Her responses showed that she was more interested in personal counseling than was the MIA mother, especially counseling services which would perhaps aid her in coping with everyday affairs and taking practical steps for the future. The practicality of the MIA wife is perhaps reflected in the departing statement of one who said, "We will never be the same as when we came if we remember a little and practice a little of what we have been given," adding that her goal was "to go forth and live a fruitful and giving life."

It should be pointed out that because these particular wives and mothers chose to attend a religious retreat they may not be representative of the entire MIA mother-wife group. However, since attendance did not depend upon financial commitments on the part of those who attended, and because the sponsors emphasized to the families the retreat experience was there "to do with as their desires commanded", perhaps those who attended were more representative than one might have expected.

The information derived from both the questionnaires and the discussions seems to indicate that the MIA wives were not necessarily looking for philosophical or religious explanations of the loss of their husbands. Rather, they sought guidance in coping with the stresses of daily living. Conversely, the MIA mothers were really asking a fundamental question: Why my son? Such a question could be answered through religious reference. For both the MIA wife and the MIA mother, the experience had offered the opportunity to discuss freely their personal problems and frustrations in a setting that provided an emotional climate which allowed them to do so. The combined expertise of religious leader and behavioral scientist made it possible to

approach both the "how" questions of the MIA wives and the "whys" of the MIA mothers with guidance which seemed to offer alternatives and benefits for both groups.

Conclusions

The findings in this study in terms of the participants' evaluations of the retreats, appear to support the views of Westling (1973) and Berger (1973) that religious retreats with competent clergy and behavioral science personnel can provide valuable assistance for the PW/MIA families in coping with their unusual situations. Chaplain John W. Berger in a presentation entitled, "A Pastoral Concern for POW/MIA Families" (1973), pointed out that the retreats for PW/MIA wives in which he participated during the years 1971 and 1972 "served a purpose, benefiting those attending at a time when there was a need." The period during the summer of 1973, in the months immediately following the release of prisoners, also appeared to be a critical time of need for these same families. Chaplain L. L. Westling, Jr. (1973), in a manual for those who minister to PW/MIA families, also pointed out the value of retreats for these families, stating:

Chaplain-organized retreats which included competent psychological leadership of the staff were commendable in dealing with and in some cases interrupting anticipatory 'grief work.' Hostilities were allowed to surface and to be examined for what they were and guilt and self-accusation were reorganized. Rage was redirected into appropriate rather than self-destructive directions. Many personal evaluations were made at such events. The application of this mode of ministry is highly recommended for wives whose husbands are deployed on recognized high-risk assignments.

In other words, he viewed the religious retreat as beneficial for military families experiencing routine military separations, as well as for families in the PW/MIA situation. Whether or not the perceived benefits persist over time for either wives or mothers is another question which cannot be answered by data from this study. However, the findings of this study appear to support our previously stated hypothesis that religion is a greater source of consolation for the MIA parent than for the MIA wife. When interpreting the statistics and the differences found to exist between the groups, however, we must realize that we have only looked at these families at one

specific point in time when the wives and parents may have been asking two different questions. This does not mean that the wives may not have asked the same questions the parents asked at another point in time. In short, we should not interpret these statistics or these findings as static or permanent.

It may be that adjustment falls along a continuum, and that needs or concerns may shift along this line, even over a period as short as one week. For example, at the beginning of the retreat, one MIA mother in the group was emotionally torn about the loss of her son; it was only after having discussed and reconciled this loss through religious reference that she was then able to channel her emotions and efforts towards the pragmatics of coping with daily stresses. She came to terms with her grief and loss in the religious group; in a discussion group with the behavioral science personnel, she was then able to focus upon her guilt about neglecting the family because she had devoted so much time to thinking about her lost son. Assuming that the normal grieving process occurs in varying stages, any program put forth to assist families adjusting to the loss of a family member should be designed to benefit the bereaved in whatever stage the family member may be at any particular point in time. Observations made throughout the sessions also appear to point up the importance of cooperation between the disciplines of the behavioral science counselor and the religious counselor, with a view towards offering a wider range of services, tailored to individual needs which can answer both the philosophical "whys" and the pragmatic "how" questions of grieving wives and parents.

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of religion in helping the families of servicemen missing in action find answers to their questions and come to terms with their inner feelings and beliefs. The responses on pre- and post-retreat questionnaires of 83 MIA wives and 65 MIA mothers were compared to determine whether or not religion had a differential value for the wife than for the mother. Statistically significant between-group differences were found for reasons given by the wives and mothers for their attendance at the retreat, their expectations as to what benefits might be derived from the retreat, their preferences as to type of activity participated in during the retreat, and their overall feelings about their experiences at the retreat when it had ended.

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