

# Embracing Parallels in Clinical Work

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The military is a team sport, not an individual sport, and the lowest echelon of this team is the two-person team. In this team, each member strives to look out for others, whether in combat or in garrison. The term, ‘I’ve got your back’, becomes not simply a figure of speech, but a manifestation of military culture. While the specific nomenclature can sometimes differ by service branch; battle buddy, shipmate, wingman, guardian, or simply brother/sister, these are byproducts of the fixed, collective, and ‘we’ based military collectivistic culture. Military culture dictates that the group’s goals be placed ahead of personal goals. To this end, success is measured by group achievement. This is in stark contrast to the fluid individualistic ‘I’ based stereotypical Western civilian culture that is predominant in the United States. Civilian culture often emphasizes individual achievement and self-reliance. Even further, from a career standpoint the profession of arms is not simply a job or occupation. The military teaches you first to manage people, then ideas. For service members, managing big ideas, policies or campaign strategies is reserved for senior military leaders. Prior to embarking on such endeavors, junior military leaders’ success is predicated upon effectively managing the wellbeing and development of their subordinates. This is a stark contrast to the civilian world where you could be highly successful in your career field and never actually manage people. Because of these stark differences, many have suggested that there is a large gap or divide between military and civilian cultures. The following model further illustrates these differences. Using *parallels* by connecting two like items are a potential way for clinicians to help bridge this gap between military and civilian culture (Bongioanni, [2023a](#)).

## Defining Military Culture

What is the difference?

### • Military Culture: Collective

- ‘We’ Culture
- Fixed
- The group’s goals placed ahead of personal goals
- Learn first to manage people, then ideas
- Success is measured by group achievement
- Work is life (Profession-some call it a vocation)



Military/Civilian  
Gap or Divide?

### • Civilian Culture: Individualistic

- ‘I’ Culture
- Fluid
- Emphasis is on individual achievement and self-reliance
- Learn first to manage ideas, then people
- Success is measured by individual achievement
- Work is job (Occupation)

(Bongioanni, 2023b)

## Understanding Parallels within the Framework of a Multicultural Counseling Orientation

Because we are speaking about cultural differences, it is important to first see military and civilian culture within the framework of a multicultural counseling orientation. The Owen and colleagues’ (2011) model notes that a multicultural orientation has three domains:

- Cultural Humility: Ability to maintain a personal stance that is nonjudgmental and other oriented.
- Cultural Opportunity: Moments in session when a counselor can address and focus on a client’s cultural identity.
- Cultural Comfort: Ability, through humility, to engage a client’s various cultural identities.

Missed **cultural opportunities** are ultimately **missed opportunities** to improve your client’s outcome (Owen, Tao, Leach & Rodolfa, [2011](#)). Parallels can therefore provide potential opportunity windows to fill the framework of multicultural counseling competence when working with service members and veterans.

## Understanding Parallels Relationship to Implicit Military Culture

The military has both explicit and implicit cultural components. Explicit elements can include hierarchies, ranks, uniforms, missions, occupations, organizational structures, jargon, terms, and demographics to name several. Implicit elements include intangibles such as the values and guiding ideas that encompass the warrior ethos. Connection to this warrior culture is heavily implicit and lasts long after a service member departs the service and extends into their veteran identity. This is an important factor in understanding why parallels can be a cultural opportunity. “The elements of military culture that may be the most powerful and enduring just because they are implicit and intangible and cannot be shed along with the uniform (List, Lebowitz, Gray, & Nash, [2016](#)).” Arguably, many clinicians focus on surface level explicit aspects when trying to create cultural opportunities and miss the deeper implicit aspects.

## Why Use Parallels?

As noted, a parallel can be seen as anything in life that is similar in comparison. Some may say that a good parallel has interwoven components of a metaphor, analogy, or allegory. The technology field calls these ‘spin-off’s’, or

something that is originally designed to support a specific purpose in a specific setting that was later discovered to have a generalized benefit outside the domain for which it was originally intended. Even biology has the term ‘exaptation’ to describe a trait that is co-opted for a purpose other than that for which it had originally evolved. Others may see parallels simply as ‘re-framing’, a skill often used in psychology to help clients see their situation in a new light or perspective. The methodology of using parallels to achieve more positive therapeutic outcomes for service members and Veterans is currently mainly anecdotal and has not been tested in research or empirically proven. However, we can look to significant research that shows establishing a better therapeutic alliance leads to improved outcomes as likely guides for this model (Johnson et al., [2018](#)).

### Potential Parallel Application in Clinical Work

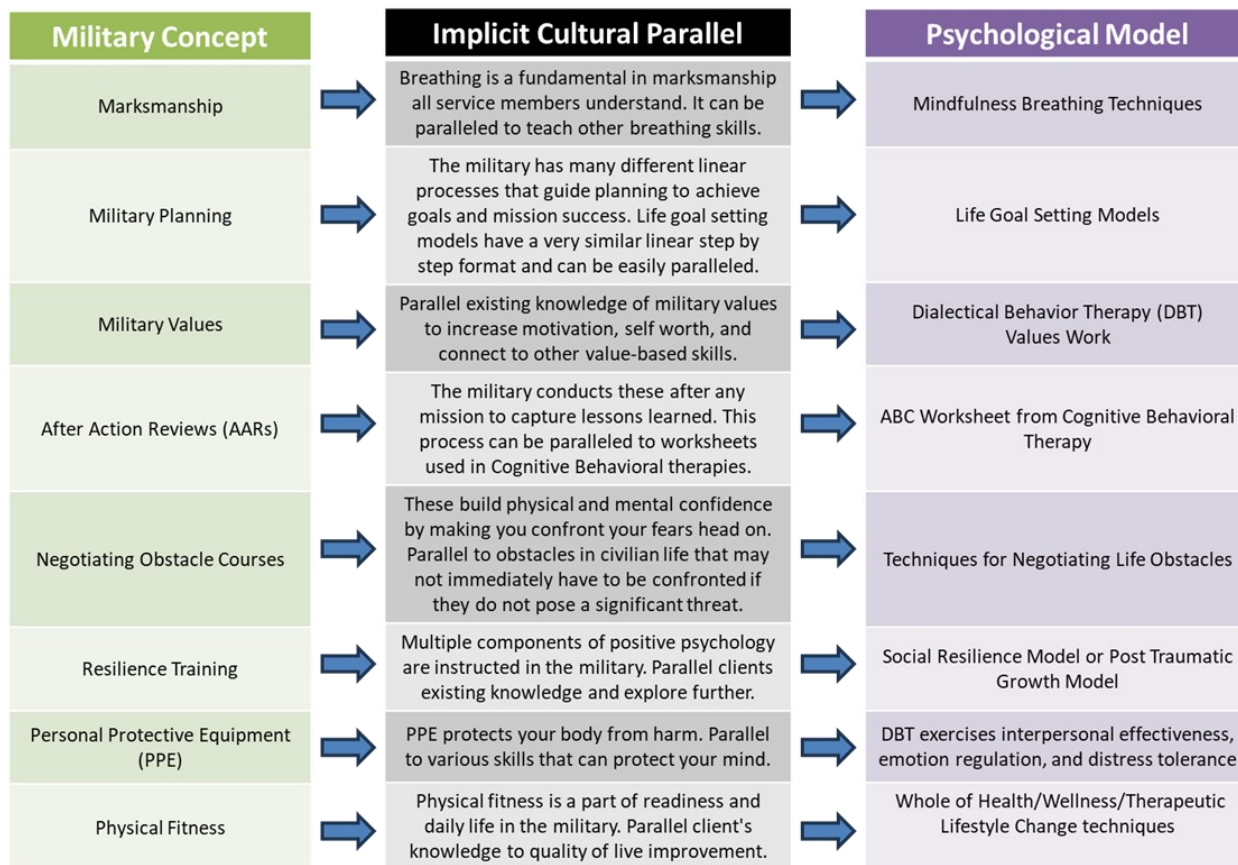
There are many different types of parallels that can be conceptualized by taking an implicit military cultural concept and connecting it to a psychological model. The best parallels have clear therapeutic goals, can be easily summarized, and are applicable with a variety of populations of service members and veterans no matter what era they served or if they served in combat or peacetime. Below are some potential examples of parallels and their applications to clinical work:

### Opportunities for Further Parallels upon Separation

Upon separation, the service member who has now become a veteran, is severed from the collective military culture and the bond of the two-person team. While this bond can never be re-created, it can be re-connected by encouraging a veteran to engage in further implicit parallels that help re-establish a sense of connection and community and that somebody or something ‘has their back’. Some possible further parallels upon separation might be:

- Joining a Veterans Service Organization (VSO)
- Engaging in a sport/athletic pursuit
- Joining a student veterans group
- Volunteering to help in your local community
- Staying engaged with family/friends
- Thriving in your vocational/professional career
- Involving yourself in veteran community advocacy
- Focusing on your favorite hobby/pleasurable activity
- Staying active in a church/religious/spiritual community (Bongioanni, [2017](#))

## Examples of Potential Parallel Application in Clinical Work



## Best Practices when Using Parallels

Before using a parallel, a clinician should determine if leveraging parallels is appropriate for the client they are working with. A culturally competent intake form and process can help determine this. Some key factors to determine might be:

- Does the service member or veteran highlight their military experience as one based in positive or negative thoughts/beliefs/emotions?
- ‘Time Effect’: Are they recently separated, or did they separate 50 years ago?
- Based off the service member or Veterans traumas or experiences, does the parallel need to be further modified so that it does not become a trigger?
- Will using the parallel ultimately *create a cultural opportunity* to build *trust* and *connection*?

The military is an insular world. Collective warrior cultures typically stay exclusive to their community and are often mistrustful of outsiders. Because of the military/civilian gap or divide, many service members and veterans often feel lost in an individualistic world. “Isolation kills and emotional pain can only be processed in the community.” (Bobrow, 2015 p. 39). Parallels provide an avenue for connection and can further enable a service member or Veteran to find purpose, even in an individualistic world.

## Parallels Built Connection & Trust

As we have seen, a parallel can be a way to reframe what the service member or veteran already knows in order to educate them about a psychological model. The best ones leverage implicit experiences as cultural opportunities and show the clinicians military cultural competence, ultimately improving the clients clinical outcome. They can help build **connection and trust**. Clinicians should encourage service members and veterans to embrace parallels as a way to reconnect with the collective ‘we’ based culture that is lost, particularly when one separates from the service. It is likely not possible to fully recreate in civilian life the same battle buddy, shipmate, wingman, guardian, or simply brother/sister that the military brings. However, what is fully achievable is finding parallels that can create a similar sense of trusting connection, where somebody or something is telling you consistently: ‘I’ve got your back’.

**About the Author:** Mr. Bongioanni is a licensed mental health counselor who also works for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. He is also a senior leader in the U.S. Army Reserve. His professional interests include human behavior, applied psychology, and military cultural competence. The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, the U.S. Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

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