

2021

## **Military Spouses' Lived Experiences During Reintegration After a Noncombat Deployment**

Trenye Black  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

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Walden University  
2021

Abstract

Military Spouses' Lived Experiences During Reintegration After a Noncombat

Deployment

by

Trenye Black

MS, Nova Southeastern University, 2014

BA, Ashford University, 2010

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

General Psychology

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## Abstract

The reintegration of a military service member into family life after a deployment can be exciting, but the reintegration process can also prove difficult. The difficulties associated with reintegration can be compounded when there is lack of acknowledgment of challenges faced by military spouses. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of military spouses following the reintegration of military personnel returning from noncombat deployment. In-depth face-to-face interviews were completed with 9 military spouses. The resiliency model of stress, adjustment, and adaptation was used as the conceptual framework to provide understanding for factors common in the life of a military family. Moustakas data analysis method was followed for inductive data analysis, and 8 themes emerged from the data: (a) initial feelings about reintegration, (b) military spouses' and community expectations of reintegration, (c) issues with the military personnel upon reintegrating, (d) coping strategies during reintegration, (e) access to services on base during reintegration, (f) support from spousal service member, (g) experiencing resiliency, and (h) to deploy or not. The implications for positive social change include providing a better understanding of military spouses' lived experiences during reintegration after a noncombat deployment and bringing awareness to the stressors and barriers that correlate to the social and emotional well-being as a result of noncombat military deployment.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to all military spouses, whether active duty, retiree, reservist, or veterans, Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, and National Guard. I understand and admire the selfless support and sacrifice you make as you stand next to your service member while they commit themselves to protect and serve our country. I understand and empathize with the countless, seemingly forsaken, times things do not go as planned: missed special occasions, childbirths, or emergencies. I have been a part of the military community for 18 years and married to the Navy for 15 of those years. A special thank you to the military spouses who volunteered for my study amid a global pandemic. I salute you!

This dissertation is also for all my fellow teen moms and dads. I parented my oldest daughter when I was just 17. I was a senior in high school and had yet to experience what would eventually develop into my vigor, virtue, and strength. I did not make excuses. Instead, I found a genuine reason to push. You have choices. Just like me, you have the opportunity to create the life you want. Never allow anyone to dictate your future because you are a young parent.

Lastly, but most importantly, to my sweet mother, who passed in 2009. Through your love, I found strength. Not a day goes by where I do not think about you. I am so thankful that I embraced your traits of perseverance, grit, and tenacity.

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## Table of Contents

List of Tables .....	v
Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study.....	1
Introduction.....	1
Background.....	2
Problem Statement.....	5
Purpose of the Study.....	7
Research Question .....	7
Conceptual Framework for the Study.....	8
Nature of the Study.....	9
Definition of Terms.....	12
Assumptions.....	13
Scope and Delimitations .....	14
Limitations .....	15
Significance.....	16
Summary .....	17
Chapter 2: Literature Review .....	19
Introduction.....	19
Literature Research Strategy.....	19
Conceptual Foundation .....	20
Literature Review Related to Key Variables and Concepts.....	22
Overview of the Military .....	23



Military Deployment.....	24
The Effects of Reintegration on Military Spouses.....	27
Coping With Reintegration.....	30
Social Support.....	33
Summary.....	36
Chapter 3: Research Method.....	38
Introduction.....	38
Research Design and Rationale .....	38
Role of the Researcher .....	42
Methodology.....	45
Participant Selection Logic .....	45
Instrumentation .....	46
Procedure for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection .....	48
Data Analysis Plan.....	49
Issues of Trustworthiness.....	50
Ethical Procedures .....	52
Summary.....	53
Chapter 4: Results.....	55
Introduction.....	55
Setting.....	55
Demographics .....	56
Data Collection and Management.....	57

Data Analysis .....	58
Evidence of Trustworthiness.....	60
Results.....	61
Theme 1: Initial Feelings about Reintegration.....	62
Theme 2: Military Spouses and the Community’s Expectations of Reintegration.....	64
Theme 3: Issues With U.S. Military Personnel Upon Reintegrating .....	66
Theme 4: Coping Strategies During Reintegration.....	68
Theme 5: Access Services on Base During Reintegration.....	69
Theme 6: Support From Spouse Service Member .....	70
Theme 7: Experiencing Resiliency .....	72
Theme 8: To Deploy or Not.....	75
Discrepant Cases .....	76
Summary .....	79
Chapter 5: Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations.....	81
Introduction.....	81
Interpretations of the Findings .....	82
Theme 1: Initial Feelings About Reintegration .....	83
Theme 3: Issues With U.S. Military Personnel Upon Reintegrating .....	84
Theme 4: Coping Strategies During Reintegration.....	85
Theme 5: Access Services on Base During Reintegration.....	85
Theme 6: Support From Spouse Service Member .....	86

Theme 7: Experiencing Resiliency .....	86
Theme 8: To Deploy or Not.....	86
Limitations of the Study.....	87
Data Triangulation .....	88
Recommendations for Future Research .....	89
Dissemination of Findings .....	89
Implications for Social Change.....	90
Conclusion .....	91
References.....	93
Appendix A: Informational Flyer for Recruitment.....	115
Appendix B: Screening Questionnaire.....	116
Appendix C: Interview Questions.....	117

List of Tables

Table 1. Participant's Demographics ..... 56

## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Introduction**

Renegotiation of routines and expectations of military spouses after military noncombat deployment can pose challenges to reintegration. Mutual responsibilities and expectations develop a natural order of operation within the normalcy of family life, and this interruption of the norm can prove challenging to realign. For example, military spouses' functions are disrupted and stressful because those responsibilities are interrupted upon reintegration (Freyter et al., 2017; Paley et al., 2013).

Reintegration after a military deployment can be difficult. Russo and Fallon (2014) noted that the military spouse begins to feel that change becomes normative. Although the reintegration of the military member into family life can be an exciting time, the reintegration process can prove difficult (Wilcox et al., 2015). The difficulties associated with reintegration can come in the form of communication, intimacy, expectations, and the roles of the U.S. military personnel and military spouse (Knobloch & Theiss, 2017; Wilcox et al., 2015). These difficulties can be compounded when there is a lack of acknowledgment of the reintegration challenges on the part of military personnel and their spouses. Higher risk factors are associated with each passing year due to number of military deployments (Hosek et al., 2006). Consequently, the increased experience constitutes a reorganization of the family unit when the U.S. military personnel returns.

In this study, I sought to investigate the various issues military spouses encounter during reintegration after a noncombat deployment. Military deployments are at least 15

to 60 days (National Guard, 2018). There can be tours of duty shorter than 90 days during a tour of service. Riggs and Cusimano (2014) noted that temporary-duty assignments (TDAs) could range from several days to weeks at a time. For the purpose of this study, I referred to short tours as TDAs or detachments. Typically, TDAs or detachments are located in the United States. In this study, I focused on extended periods of separation, referred to as *military deployments*, of 90 days or greater. Military deployments may include multiple and extended periods of time away from military spouses, which causes increased stress for military spouses that may be due to the geographic location of the soldier and the duration of separation during a military deployment.

I also examined the reintegration experiences of military spouses after a noncombat military deployment. In this chapter, I identify the background of the problem, the gap in the literature, and the purpose of the study. The conclusion of this chapter shows how educators, mentors, counselors, and the military community can use the results of this study to advocate and support military families during the reintegration phase of noncombat military deployment.

### **Background**

There are two specific types of deployments combat or noncombat deployment. Researchers have noted that combat deployment is active deployment in a war zone, such as Iraq and Afghanistan, specifically Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation New Dawn (Erbes et al., 2107; Otto et al., 2019; Paley et al, 2013; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, n.d.). Conversely, noncombat deployment is outside of war zones for reasons consistent with humanitarian aid, evacuations of U.S.

citizens, and restoration of peace and increases security (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, n.d.). Military personnel either engage in combat or noncombat deployments.

As of December 2016, there were 1,188,860 active-duty personnel in the U.S. military (Department of Defense, 2020). According to the Department of Defense (2018), more than half of the military personnel have spouses. Reintegration after all military deployments brings about unknown challenges for these spouses (Marini et al., 2017). Unforeseen challenges are obstacles in the reintegration process that can seem insurmountable to a family (Marek et al., 2014). Living separately for at least six months can pose unique challenges.

Adults who exhibit characteristics such as attachment avoidance may be vulnerable to emotional instability because of separation during military deployments (Borelli et al., 2014). Riggs and Riggs (2011) noted that attachment avoidance behavior poses a threat during all military deployments due to the traits of insecurities. Attachment avoidance behavior poses a threat during all military deployments because of insecurity traits exhibited by these individuals and are explained by Yuspendi et al. (2018) as difficulties with closeness, trust, and intimacy with romantic partners.

The impact of military deployment on a family goes beyond the military predeployment and deployment phases. Novak (2017) noted that the impact on the military spouse has the greatest impact on the overall adjustment within the family. The U.S. military personnel's career, military deployments, and preparation for the inevitable become more of a routine; however, despite a family's prior experience with military

deployments, there will still be unforeseen issues, and those come with compounded anxiety and insecurities (Marnocha, 2012).

The reintegration phase takes place when U.S. military personnel return from a military deployment and reintegrate with their families. Reintegration can also involve stressors and challenges (Bommarito et al., 2017). Despite enjoying the comfort of having the U.S. military personnel at home, the spouse has experienced insecurities and anxiety during the military deployment that need to be addressed during reintegration. If the emotions of the military personnel or military spouse are not reciprocated, it will be difficult to mitigate those negative feelings and memories from the deployment phase, impeding successful reintegration (Knobloch & Knobloch-Fedders, 2017).

Along with a reintegration phase, there is also an adjustment period for the U.S. military personnel and spouse. During reintegration, the military spouse must reorganize and adjust to the return of the U.S. military personnel (Riggs & Cuslmano, 2014). Leroux et al. (2016) studied how military spouses were affected during all phases of military deployment and found that the majority of military spouses were diagnosed with depressive, anxiety, and adjustment disorders. Presenting symptoms from mental health diagnoses may affect the overall well-being of the military spouse (Leroux et al., 2016).

This study was essential to understanding the perceptions of the lived experiences of military spouses during reintegration after a noncombat military deployment. Increased knowledge of these lived experiences will allow for additional support from civilians and the military community. All military deployments come with benefits, including possible pay increases and provisions for specialized training during military



deployments, but may also result in inconsistent work patterns for military spouses (Defense Finance, 2014; Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013; Joffrion & Wozny, 2015). Although several researchers have focused on the experiences of military spouses of combat-related military deployments (Vincenzes et al., 2014; Yambo et al., 2016), there remains a lack of scholarly literature concerning military reintegration of spouses after a noncombat military deployment. With this research, I sought to address the gap in the literature relating to the lived experiences of military spouses during the reintegration of their marital relationships after the return of U.S. military personnel from noncombat military deployment. This study was needed to identify and understand the experiences of reintegration after a noncombat military deployment and the impact it has on military families and others who may have the opportunity to work with the military population.

### **Problem Statement**

As of December 2016, there were more than one million active-duty U.S. military personnel (Department of Defense, 2016a). According to the U.S. Department of Defense (2017b), more than half of the one million are married. Connor et al. (2016) reported an increased number of military deployments and an increase in responsibilities for the U.S. military personnel and military spouses (Culler et al., 2019). Military deployments can range from 4 to 15 months, depending on the branch of service (Connor et al., 2016). The separation of the U.S. military personnel and the military spouse can be stressful and challenging due to the risk factors the U.S. military personnel may endure (Wilson & Murray, 2016). Noncombat military deployment in lower Force Protection Conditions

level areas provides the U.S. military personnel with the ability to respond to security challenges (Pitts, 2018).

The literature did not address descriptions of the experiences of military spouses after reintegration with their military personnel after noncombat military deployment. Researchers have identified stressors experienced during the reintegration of military personnel and their spouses (Bommarito, et al., 2017; Messecar, 2017, Wilcox et al., 2013), but identifying and understanding the lived experiences of military spouses is significant and will serve as a guide to identify barriers that prevent possible adverse psychological effects. In addition, the results of this study can be used as a resource for the military population and the community to understand challenges related to psychosocial vulnerability. Consequently, the results of this study can help structure interventions to support military spouses during reintegration.

Reintegration can increase avoidance and anxiety among military spouses (Borelli et al., 2014). Trail (2016) noted that combat military deployment increases negative marital issues due to combat-related trauma. Marek and D'Aniello (2014) reported that U.S. military personnel members and spouses could lose a sense of independence after a combat military deployment reintegration. Wilcox et al. (2015) noted the routines of the military spouse changing while the U.S. military personnel are deployed for combat, and these new routines are disrupted again by the reintegration after the U.S. military personnel's return. Combat-related exposure contributes to substance use and mental health issues, such as PTSD, depression, and anxiety, which can pose an additional burden to the spouse (Khaylis et al., 2011; Ramchand, 2014). Bommarito et al. (2017)

noted that the divorce rate increased among active-duty personnel, yet its association with deployment remains unclear. According to Wilson et al. (2017), children in military families experience difficulty with reintegration, as evidenced by an increase in behavioral problems, increased anxiety and anger, and poorer academic performance.

The reintegration phase poses challenges for the military personnel, veterans, and their families; therefore, access to services for these challenges is beneficial to their health and well-being (Elnitsky & Kilmer, 2017). Several researchers have focused on the experiences of military spouses' of combat-related military deployments (Vincenzes et al., 2014; Yambo et al., 2016), but there is a lack in the scholarly literature of research into military spouses' reintegration after a noncombat military deployment.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of military spouses following the reintegration of military personnel returning from noncombat deployment. In the study, I also sought to identify potential risks and challenges associated with reintegration. Although previous researchers have addressed the impact of reintegration (Vincenzes et al., 2014; Yambo et al., 2016), no research has been documented on reintegration after a noncombat military deployment.

### **Research Question**

What are the lived experiences of reintegration for military spouses of active duty U.S. military personnel after a noncombat military deployment?

### **Conceptual Framework for the Study**

The conceptual framework for this research study was grounded in McCubbin and McCubbin's (1989a) resiliency model of stress, adjustment, and adaptation. This model was the basis for exploring factors common in the life of a military family: the stress and adjustment phases and adaptation phase of reintegration after noncombat military deployment. The model elucidates four propositions within the relationship model: (a) stress, (b) cohesion, (c) resources, and (d) adaptability. McCubbin and McCubbin's (1989a) model of stress, adjustment, and adaptation provided a conceptual framework for this transcendental phenomenological study.

The primary focus of the resiliency model is an individual's perspective of and interaction with adaptation and stress (Kees & Rosenblum, 2015). Some researchers identified the need to explore military families, crises, and their ability to move from crisis to successful adaptation (McCubbin & McCubbin, 1989a; Meadows et al., 2016; Riggs & Riggs, 2011; Westphal & Woodward, 2010). The resiliency model's focus on adaptation and stress aids in the model's use as a basis to understand the reintegration of service members and their military spouses. The model emerged from the family crisis as the inability to achieve balance and harmony along the interrelated dimensions of family life, as identified by McCubbin and McCubbin (1989a). The crisis tends to bring about change within the family (McCubbin & McCubbin, 1989b). A more detailed explanation of the model will be provided in Chapter 2.

Military personnel and military spouses begin to feel that change becomes normative due to the responsibility of military service (Russo & Fallon, 2014). The

change may have an effect on the nonmilitary spouse's emotional and physical well-being (Marek & D'Aniello, 2014). Paley et al. (2013) found that the reintegration of military spouses following deployment is stressful for military and nonmilitary spouses.

Understanding the lived experiences of the military spouse during the reintegration of a noncombat military deployment deemed necessary to this model. The conceptual framework was used to develop a more thorough knowledge of the lived experiences of military spouses in the adaptation phase after the stress and adjustment of reintegration from noncombat military deployments and identify any psychological impact. In Chapter 2, I will provide an analysis of the necessity of employing the resiliency model.

### **Nature of the Study**

I used a transcendental phenomenological approach in this study. Qualitative research focuses on a description of what participants have in common as these participants experience a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). This study offered a perspective of the participants' personal experiences of the phenomenon of reintegration after noncombat military deployments. Qualitative research is used to explore and understand the interests individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (Patton, 2015). In qualitative research, inquiries are guided by research questions, not objectives or hypotheses (Patton, 2015).

I used a transcendental phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of military spouses during reintegration after a noncombat military deployment. This approach requires that a researcher abstain from biases through

bracketing (Moustakas, 1994). A researcher focuses on exploring a specific topic and the relationships that exist between external perceptions (Moustakas, 1994). The phenomenological approach is designed to identify what an experience means for the individual who has lived that experience by undertaking a systematic, disciplined study (Moustakas, 1994).

I completed in-depth face-to-face interviews with nine military spouses with the assistance of semistructured general and focus-driven questions related to their lived experiences through reintegration with their military spouse after noncombat military deployment. I conducted an authentic relationship and a nonbiased narrative of the participants by executing three processes as defined by Moustakas (1994): (a) epoché, (b) phenomenological reduction, and (c) imaginative variation.

Epoché is the first step to identifying biases and judgments in the phenomenology process. The process of epoché or the freedom from supposition (Moustakas, 1994), originates from a natural place in the psyche where prejudices, predispositions, and predilections are innate. Moustakas (1994) stated that experiences need meaning and reflection to be understood. Epoché does not negate everything, however, and is a result of everyday biases based on common knowledge. Therefore, it is imperative that researchers identify within themselves a consciousness of the present to decrease the probability of preconceived notions (Moustakas, 1994).

Phenomenological reduction is an approach a researcher implements in order to see and to listen in an unbiased, conscious manner (Moustakas, 1994). Epoché is a

necessary part of the phenomenological reduction process. The goal of this process is to remain objective, free, and open during the interview process (Moustakas, 1994).

Bracketing, horizontalization, and clustering the invariant constituents are the steps taken to reveal the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). With bracketing, researchers are removed from the study in order to ensure the focus is on the experiences of the participants, the topic, and the questions (Moustakas, 1994). Lastly, Moustakas (1994) reported that clustering the invariant constituents makes up the core placements and themes of the experiences.

Moustakas (1994) adapted van Kaam's analysis method to form the steps in his process of data analysis. The collection of the data form increased awareness and understanding of the social and emotional well-being of military spouses during reintegration after a noncombat military deployment to the community. The results of the data analysis identified some of the psychological impacts of this reintegration as well as possible positive adaptations used to help military spouses overcome the negative impacts of noncombat military deployment. The data analysis revealed ways to help spouses and families who undergo the same transitions in the future. Kees et al. (2015) noted the importance of clinicians and culturally informed clinical care providers to understand that deployment and military involvement impact individuals differently. The results of this research contribute to positive social change by helping to bring awareness to the stressors and barriers that correlate to the social and emotional well-being as a result of noncombat military deployment. Such awareness can serve educators, mentors, counselors, and other resources available to the military community.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Active duty:* A service member who has a full-time job in the military. This does not include the military reserve or National Guard (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012).

*Attachment avoidance:* Less positive feelings toward a spouse regardless of positive support from them (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003).

*Combat military deployment:* Military personnel departure from their home to engage in activities related to the Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation New Dawn campaigns (Larson et al., 2012).

*Detachment:* Any time spent away from permanent duty station working in support or preparation of operational military (Military Factory, 2018).

*Epoché:* An unbiased and judgment-free interview (Moustakas, 1994).

*Horizontalization:* Participants' responses have equal value (Moustakas, 1994).

*Military deployment:* The U.S. military personnel member is away from their base (Military.com, 2020).

*Nondeployed spouse:* Married to an active duty U.S. military personnel and is identified through the Defense Eligibility Enrollment Reporting System as having dependent benefits of the U.S. military personnel (Leroux et al., 2016).

*Noncombat military deployment:* Military personnel departure from their home to engage in humanitarian assistance and resolution conflict (Litz et al., 1997).

*Phenomenological reduction:* Describing the experience and relationships of the phenomenon and the participants (Moustakas, 1994).



*Reintegration*: The timeframe when the U.S. military personnel transition back to family life following a military deployment (Bommarito et al., 2017).

*Reserves*: A service member not actively serving, considered part-time. The Army and Air National Guardsmen and members of the Army, Navy, Marine, Air Force, and Coast Guard Reserve (Cohen et al., 2015).

*Temporary-duty assignment (TDA)*: Training, receiving education, or working away from the permanent duty station or residence farther than 50 miles (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2014).

*U.S. military personnel*: A member of the U.S. Army, U.S. Navy, U.S. Air Force, U.S. Marine Corps, U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Reserves, and U.S. National Guard (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2016).

### **Assumptions**

Several assumptions underlie this study. The primary assumption with this study was that military spouses endure stress during the reintegration process of a military noncombat military deployment. No research on noncombat military was found pertaining to the population chosen for this study. Therefore, it was important for military spouses to have an opportunity to discuss their lived experiences during the reintegration phase of a noncombat military deployment.

A second assumption was that the participants' answers would be an honest representation of their personal experiences during reintegration. Without lived experiences of military spouses after reintegration, this study would not be possible. The third assumption was based on a variety of military deployment styles and lengths.

Military deployments and experiences may vary among military branches and the participants.

The fourth and final assumption was the expectation that the results of this study would decrease discrepancies in understanding the social and emotional well-being of all military spouses during the reintegration of noncombat military deployment.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The scope of this study included nine military spouses who have experience with reintegration after a noncombat military deployment. I conducted a transcendental phenomenological study with semistructured interviews and specific questions. A phenomenological study is conducted to focus on understanding how a particular experience has affected something or someone (Patton, 2015). The interview questions were used as a guide to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of reintegration after a noncombat military deployment.

The chosen population for this study were military spouses. Because the foundation of this study was grounded on the lived experiences of these spouses during reintegration after a noncombat military deployment, eligibility for the study required that the U.S. military personnel of the spouse serve a minimum of at least one deployment of 6 months or longer.

Because none of the available research has focused primarily on noncombat military deployment and reintegration with military spouses, it was unknown if the results from this study would be different from studies that focused on combat military deployment and reintegration with military spouses. To decrease any chances of potential

transference of military deployment experience, military spouses who have lived experiences of combat military deployment were excluded from the study.

### **Limitations**

One of the potential limitations of this study was that all military branches were eligible to participate; however, the study did not include participants from all military branches, which may limit the data. Also, the population studied contained more spouses from a specific military branch and may reflect experiences unique to a particular branch of the military. Another limitation was that this study was limited because each military branch is exclusive. Not all military branches abide by the same standards with regard to military deployment. To that end, in the study, I addressed military spouses from the United States Navy, United States Air Force, and United States Marines.

Although this study was geared to focus on at least a 6-month or greater deployment, some deployments are less than 6 months, while others can last a year or longer. The length of noncombat military deployment can also vary based on location. The geographic location affects the noncombat military deployment reintegration experience. I addressed this limitation by incorporating an average noncombat military deployment length of U.S. military personnel experiences.

Another potential limitation of this study is that the majority of participants were women, which may not reflect the general nature of the study. For example, of the 1,083,9683 men on active duty, female military spouses represent 55% (Demographics, 2016). I addressed this limitation by inviting male and female military spouses to participate. Lastly, some participants may not have been open to sharing some of their

experiences with reintegration due to social desirability bias (Anderson & Mayerl, 2019). Therefore, researcher bias remained important throughout this study. As a military spouse, I needed to execute bracketing and reflexivity. Bracketing and reflexivity allowed the primary focus of the study to remain authentic and valuable to the participants' experiences.

### **Significance**

The results of this study contribute to addressing the gap in the literature pertaining to the reintegration experiences of military spouses with U.S. military personnel after a noncombat military deployment. The results of this study may reduce discrepancies surrounding the social and emotional well-being of military families who have experienced noncombat military deployment and may provide insight into the psychological experiences of military spouses. These insights help mental health professionals who work with these individuals.

The results of this study contribute to positive social change by helping to foster awareness of the stressors and barriers that correlate to the social and emotional well-being of military families as a result of noncombat military deployment. To that end, the findings of this study can enhance awareness for educators, mentors, counselors, and other resource providers who serve the military community. Patton (2015) stated that the critical change inquiry aims to critique conditions and, through the critique, bring about positive social awareness and change. As a result, shared stories from military service members and their family members provide a sense of peace and empowerment,

advocacy, and support for other military families who find the reintegration phase a challenge.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of military spouses following the reintegration of military personnel returning from noncombat deployment. Military spouses' lived experiences during reintegration after noncombat military deployments are unknown. No description of the lived experiences of military spouses during reintegration with their U.S. military personnel after noncombat military deployment are in the scholarly literature to date. This limits knowledge about the challenges and experiences of military families during reintegration. This lack of knowledge of military spouses' experiences during reintegration can pose a challenge for individuals who serve the military community and military families. Military spouses who have knowledge of noncombat military deployment and reintegration are more apt to advocate and provide support to other military families. A record of their lived experiences is valuable to future researchers who wish to understand the population and to have further research options for the study of noncombat military deployment.

Chapter 2 provides a deeper look at the literature regarding experiences, challenges, and adverse reactions sustained due to noncombat deployment reintegration. Also, the literature review includes articles that contribute to an understanding of the different branches of the armed forces and the role of each branch in relation to the safety of the United States. In addition, two military deployments are defined to target the

experiences of military deployment and reintegration. Due to the nature of military deployment, the effects of reintegration on military spouses are addressed. In addition, coping strategies are explored as appropriate support.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

To date, no study has been conducted that explicitly identified the relationship between military spouses, reintegration, and noncombat deployment. The literature has noted the relationships between military spouses, reintegration, and combat deployment (Marek & D’Aniello 2014; Vincenzes et al., 2014; Wilcox et al., 2015; Yambo et al., 2016). The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of military spouses following the reintegration of military personnel returning from noncombat deployment. In this literature review, I gather peer-reviewed articles and existing studies to support the need for this study. The topics I address include an overview of the military, military deployment, the effects of reintegration on military spouses, coping strategies, and social support.

### **Literature Research Strategy**

Throughout this study, I explored the lived experiences of military spouses following the reintegration of military personnel into the family when returning from noncombat deployment. A transcendental phenomenological approach was relevant to this study due to the specific goal of the study, the particular research method of interviewing, the research question, and collecting perspectives from military spouses. The interview and collection of data from military spouses offered an opportunity to understand the military spouses’ personal experiences during reintegration.

In this review, I cite peer-reviewed journals, military literature, and older literature to provide a perspective of history and to help better understand past sources

regarding military and reintegration. To identify relevant material, I mainly accessed the following databases: Google Scholar, Military & Government Collection, Walden University Library, PsycINFO, and ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. The following are keywords I used during my search: *military spouse, military wife, deployment, postdeployment, Navy deployment, Army deployment, Marine Corps deployment, Air Force deployment, military and reintegration, deployment phase, combat deployment, noncombat deployment, peacetime, peacekeeping, military deployment, military personnel, active duty service member, reintegration of military spouse, reintegration of military personnel, coping, problem-focused coping, and emotion-focused coping*. Primarily, all keywords were used throughout all databases to gather literature. However, key terms, such as *Navy, Army, Marine, Marine Corps, and peacetime*, were searched via the Military & Government Collection. I found the information beneficial due to the wealth of knowledge as it pertains to the government and the military.

### **Conceptual Foundation**

The basis of this study was the resiliency model of family stress, adjustment, and adaptation, which has been applied to a wide array of family stressors and was created by McCubbin and McCubbin (1988). The family stress model attempts to explain the correlations between external stressors, such as transition and psychopathology, and how stressors affect the family functioning (Gewirtz et al., 2018).

The model is based on Reuben Hill's family stress theory. Hill constructed the ABC-X model of family stress after studying families who survived wartime (Hill, 1958). Hill's work is best known for the family boundaries and how families can effectively



sustain through deployment and reintegration (Institute of Medicine, 2010). Family members as boundary managers promote balance while a service member is deployed. Boundary management is primarily geared toward maintaining the relationship between the military personnel and the military spouse and their children. Throughout the research, Hill noticed families were experiencing dysfunctions and challenges. Hill theorized that to improve the family unit, the family needed to reestablish their relationship to cope with stressful events (Grunert, 2002). The ABC-X model refers to variables as *A* being the stressors, *B* refers to resources, *C* refers to perceptions, and *X* refers to the level of stress/crisis (Daneshpour, 2017). Variables *B* and *C* were Hill's primary focus, while other theorists dedicated time to focus on the other variables (Daneshpour, 2017). While noted, variable *X* changes the family dynamics, which has led other theorists to focus on adaptation and resiliency.

There are two critical phases in studying resiliency and life changes: adjustment phase and adaptation phase (McCubbin & McCubbin, 1988). The two phases serve the goal of minimizing the challenges a family experiences in its ability to maintain function and fulfill developments (Brown-Baatjies et al., 2008). Also, the phases can minimize challenges and reestablish adaptive behaviors and improve the family's ability to solve problems and coping mechanisms (Lavee et al., 1985). In order to provide support and guidance to vulnerable families, more research is needed to explore the dynamics of military personnel and their families.

Furthermore, the resiliency model of family stress uses adjustment and adaptation to help facilitate an understanding of how families and individuals adapt to stressful

situations and maintain a healthy life. More specifically, in this study, I incorporated the model within the context of military spouses' experiences during the reintegration phase following a noncombat deployment. McCubbin and McCubbin (1993) noted that practitioners use the model to assist military families with effective coping strategies to help decrease stress from crisis and recovery factors, such as routine, tradition, and support network. In the resiliency model of family stress, adjustment, and adaptation coexist to guide the family to reunification with harmony and balance through the reintegration phase.

The resiliency model of family stress, adjustment, and adaptation is relevant to the study because I was exploring the lived experiences of military spouses following the reintegration of military personnel returning from noncombat deployment. One of the goals for the resiliency model of family stress, adjustment, and adaptation is not only to identify the stressful situation, but also to understand how a family can achieve adjustment and adaptation. Therefore, the resiliency model of family stress, adjustment, and adaptation was appropriate for this study because, following deployment, military personnel must reintegrate with their spouses, which may pose significant challenges.

### **Literature Review Related to Key Variables and Concepts**

In the following section, I assess themes in literature that I felt contributed to this study. One such theme is an overview of the military, in which I define the branches involved in this study and the roles each branch plays in the Department of Defense. In addition, military deployment is another theme I included, wherein I discuss the length of

deployment, military deployment phases, and the difference between combat and noncombat deployment.

Because military spouses are the primary focus of the study and their experiences with reintegration, the effects of reintegration on military spouses were included in this study. The positive and negative effects were addressed individually to identify the military spouses' experiences during reintegration. Consequently, coping with reintegration is another theme. The purpose of including coping as a theme was to explore different coping mechanisms that military spouses integrate during reintegration to maintain stability and adapt to their situation. Lastly, support factors are addressed to understand how military spouses benefit from social support to help overcome challenges associated with reintegration and to identify specific supports available.

### **Overview of the Military**

For this study, it is essential to understand the different branches of the armed forces. Active-duty military personnel consist of the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, Coast Guard and National Guard (Department of Defense, 2020). The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration (n.d.) defined the military as “highly skilled” (p. 1). Additionally, the military is ready and prepared to respond to natural or human-made disasters anywhere in the country or the world. According to the Department of Defense (n.d.), each military branch plays a vital role. The Army is responsible for protecting the ground forces. The Navy protects on, above, and below the water. The Marine Corps maintains amphibious and ground units and is connected to the Navy. The Air Force provides rapid air services. The Coast Guard provides law and

maritime safety enforcement, marine environmental protection, and military naval support. The National Guard supports combat missions, domestic emergencies, and homeland security (Department of Defense, n.d.). The National Guard is federally funded but is organized and controlled by each state. Each branch has a different requirement to include military deployment (Halvorson, 2010). *Military deployments* are at least 15 to 60 days (National Guard, 2018). There can be tours of duty shorter than 90 days during a tour of service. Military personnel play a crucial role in their responsibility to serve the country. Consequently, military spouses also play an essential role. In this study, I focused on military spouses and reintegration of a military service member following a military noncombat deployment.

### **Military Deployment**

Serving in the armed forces as an active duty military personnel involves responsibilities and obligations, including deployment. Military deployment is a situation in which a U.S. military service member is away from their permanent change of station or their home installation (Military.com, 2018). Due to extended time away from the active duty military personnel and because of dangerous situations, the military may be perceived as a family stressor (Gewirtz & DeGarmo, 2018). Deployments may include multiple and extended periods away from military spouses. According to Military.com (2020), (a) predeployment, (b) deployment, (c) postdeployment, and (d) reintegration are the four phases of deployment for active duty military personnel. Military deployment will vary. Deployments can range from 4 to 15 months, depending on the branch of

service (Accession Medical Standards, 2013; Buckman et al., 2011). Due to the nature of this study, it was imperative to differentiate between combat and noncombat deployment.

### ***Military Combat Deployment***

Researchers have noted that combat deployment involves being active in a war zone, such as Iraq and Afghanistan, Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation New Dawn (Erbes et al., 2107; Otto et al., 2019; Paley et al., 2013; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, n.d.). Although both combat and noncombat military deployments require an undetermined amount of time away from home, in combat military deployment, personnel engage in direct combat with the adversary and serve as a wall to protect the operating base during combat military deployment (Peterson et al., 2010). The heightened force protection conditions of combat military deployment has led several researchers (Marek & D’Aniello, 2014; Paley et al., 2013) to focus on how the U.S. military personnel adjust to combat life with the military spouse during reintegration after combat military deployment. Knobloch et al. (2016) noted that the reintegration period after military personnel return from combat military deployment could last 6 months and have psychological effects on the military spouse. Trautmann et al. (2015) described how the military deployment of U.S. military personnel for combat operations creates stress for military spouses. The military spouses identified combat injuries and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms of the military personnel as being among the greatest challenges (Hyatt et al., 2014). PTSD in military personnel increases the chances of psychological and behavioral abuse toward military spouses (Rabenhorst et al., 2012).

Unlike noncombat military deployment, U.S. military personnel on combat military deployments are entitled to special incentive pay and awards. One of the most desired monetary benefits for combat military deployment is the selective reenlistment bonus. The selective reenlistment bonus is specific to eligible personnel with a set of acquired skills in critical specialties (Joffrion & Wozny, 2015). The maximum selective reenlistment bonus payable is \$100,000 for a 4-year enlistment (Military.com, 2020). There are more than 60 special and incentive pays, but the more common among the 60 pays are hardship duty pay, assignment incentive pay, and hazardous incentive pay (Defense Finance, 2014). The pay is an added financial benefit for the military personnel and their military spouse. Military spouses may have the opportunity to work part-time or discontinue their employment (Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013). In conjunction with combat experience, military personnel are awarded decorations, medals, and ribbons for their accomplishments as these relate to their combat tasks (Military Awards, 2015; U.S. Department of Defense, 2015). The medals are a physical representation of the military personnel's dedication to serving in a combat zone.

### ***Military Noncombat Deployment***

Whereas noncombat deployment is outside of combat zones for reasons consistent with humanitarian aid, evacuations of U.S. citizens, and restoration of peace and increases security (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, n.d.). Litz et al. (1997) noted noncombat as a peacekeeping tour. Noncombat deployment represents the power of force, deter future combat interaction, and maintain a safe distance from the combat zone (Kawaja, 2015; Nayak, 2017). For example, noncombat military personnel have acquired

skills that provide security services to countries engaged in warfare (Kwaja, 2015).

Noncombat military personnel provide extra support for military personnel who are in the higher force protection conditions conflict zones. During noncombat deployment, some of the tasks of military personnel are to monitor activities of conflicting parties, ensure delivery of humanitarian aid, and assist in building infrastructures. Although this role does not prevent the military personnel from being subjective to distress, Sareen et al. (2010) noted some stress or psychological issues could either remain stagnant or decrease with time. Russell et al. (2017) refer to noncombat as domestic civil-oriented operations. The authors noted, engagement in Defense Support to Civilian Authorities can be traumatic, therefore bring about symptoms of combat-related mental issues. Additionally, mental health outcomes associated with Defense Support to Civilian Authorities included PTSD and depression (Russell et al., 2017). In addition to the effects of psychological health symptoms, including anxiety and trauma-related symptoms and separation from family, noncombat deployment also included feelings of futility and anger associated with low threat missions, compared to combat deployment (Brounéus, 2014).

### **The Effects of Reintegration on Military Spouses**

Paley et al. (2013) found that the reintegration of military spouses following military deployment is stressful for both the U.S. military personnel and the military spouse. Morse (2006) noted that the reintegration phase can take up to 6 months for a couple and family to stabilize their relationship. Reintegration can bring different challenges within the family, specifically to the role between the military personnel and military spouse.

Mutual responsibilities and expectations develop a natural order of operation within the normalcy of the family business, and this interruption of the norm can prove challenging to realign. As mentioned above, military deployments plight many benefits and challenges. When entering into a military culture, the reintegration following deployment is always unknown. However, how the military personnel and the spouse will receive reintegration following a noncombat deployment requires further research.

### *Positive Effects*

Reintegration following deployment brings about a lot of unknown and unforeseen circumstances. However, that does not negate the fact that some of the circumstances can deem positive. For most military families, return from a deployment can be a happy occasion (Messecar, 2017). A critical component relating to the reintegration phases is the ability to adjust. The military spouse may experience both positive and negative reintegration experiences. Therefore, I focus on both the positive and negative effects of the reintegration.

There is an elimination of cognitive dissonance, therefore increase the military spouses' ability to transition into a positive reintegration for the military spouses who successfully adjust to the new roles during deployment (Clark et al., 2018). Being said, the military spouse will reintegrate easily and successfully back into the roles as a couple. Clark et al. (2018) also noted that positive reintegration presents overall happiness and decreased symptoms of sadness, anxiety and anger.



### *Negative Effects*

When discussing the negative effects of reintegration, for the purpose of this study, the negative effect is defined by situations that cause distress. Green et al. (2017) noted that the lives of military spouses are compounded by layers of stress. The separation of a marriage and the reunion can pose as an adverse event due to the interruption of daily routines (Karakurt et al., 2013). Ross (1920) described distress as an unpleasant subjective state of depression and anxiety, which has both emotional and physiological manifestations. As mentioned, I provided literature that indicates the challenges of reintegration following deployment. Although military personnel duties and jobs can range from cooks, police officers, and drivers, the primary role and the responsibility of military personnel are to protect the United States (Redmond et al., 2015). The vast majority of the responsibilities of military personnel are related to noncombat and combat deployment. Either role requires direct combat, support, and serving.

Military personnel have been associated with psychological problems due to more prolonged deployment and deployment extensions, which directly impacts military spouses (de Burgh et al., 2011). For example, in one study, there was a high rate of diagnoses of depression, anxiety, sleep disorder, and adjustment disorder for military spouses (Mansfield et al., 2010). Another study identified relational uncertainty as a predictor during the first three months of reintegration, more specifically to the difficulty of the nature of the relationship between the military personnel and the spouse. Some of

the stressors can include a commitment to the relationship, infidelity issues, intimacy, and stressors regarding the household responsibilities (Knobloch et al., 2016).

### **Coping With Reintegration**

There are many aspects of how individuals react to stress. Aldwin (2007) noted that although the same individual may experience the same situation, such as reintegration, the individuals can respond in different ways to reintegration. Coping is the effort made to tolerate and minimize distress caused by a situation (Braun-Lewensohn & Bar, 2017). Furthermore, Braun-Lewensohn and Bar (2017) noted that coping is the “function of the interaction between situational antecedent and individual characteristics, perceptions of the situation, coping intentions and strategies.”

#### ***Emotion-Focused Coping***

Emotion-focused coping aims to manage the emotions that are caused by a stressful event or situation. Particularly during reintegration followed by deployment, the event cannot be altered. However, military spouses can engage in healthy strategies that change how they react during a stressful time. The use of emotion-focused coping increases an individual’s awareness of distress, therefore, likely to increase symptoms of distress (Wu et al., 2018). The ability to recognize the symptoms and implement self-reflective emotions will help motivate an individual’s ability to change their distress-reducing strategies. Rice and Liu (2016) noted that there are three techniques for emotion-focused copings to implement to reduce emotional distress, acceptance, positive reframing, and religion.

According to Rice and Liu (2016), acceptance requires adaptation and endurance and is the initial stage that gives individuals the ability to change their situation. Furthermore, the military culture is prevalent in this circumstance due to deployments, permanent change of station and training. Once the known reintegration date is known, the acceptance of reality is vital in the plans of preparation.

Positive reframing is a skill to help manage distress related to reintegration. Positive reframing is aimed to minimize the emotional distress from a stressful situation that is out of one's control. The goal of positive reframing is to challenge our negative thoughts that result in stress and construe the stressful related event in a positive nature.

Lastly, religion-based coping is the relationship between one's belief and the ability to rely on their faith to help cope through stressful situations (Rice & Liu, 2016). The United States military is religiously diverse with military personnel, including their family (Shalf, n.d.). According to Shalf (n.d.), about 30% do not identify as Christians. Furthermore, religious professionals are skilled in guiding concerning the faith. Religion-based coping can help with problems such as sadness, guilt, and hopelessness.

During reintegration, the military spouses may use emotion-focused strategies to cope with reintegration. The spouse may identify their feelings about reintegration and the change it will bring. Whatever their hesitations may be, the ultimate goal is reuniting with the military personnel after several months of military noncombat deployment.

### ***Problem-Focused Coping***

Problem-focused coping aims to resolve the stressful event or situation or alter the source of stress. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) stated that problem-focused coping is a

seven-step problem-solving process. The goal of the process is to incorporate problem-solving techniques to help stop or monitor progress, reduce or resolve stressors, and control symptoms (Cameron & Wally, 2015). The seven-step problem-solving process includes identifying the problem, gather a list of the solution, analyze alternatives choose the best method, incorporate strategy, monitor progress and repeat the process if needed (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Broadly, problem-focused coping is a situation that an individual cannot control. More specifically, military spouses cannot control the reintegration process. Therefore problem-focused coping may not benefit the couple. There are many aspects of a military deployment where problem-focused coping is beneficial, such as finances regarding allotments to pay bills, physical fitness, self-care to maintain or improve mental health symptoms.

Rice and Liu (2016) reported that problem-focused coping are techniques used by military personnel that faces challenges of military deployments and family separations. Problem-focused behaviors such as active coping and planning reflect the needed attention to the issue at hand and enforce the desire to implement constructive change.

In a study conducted by Mailey et al. (2018), among military spouses, problem-focused coping was directed associated with strategies to address mental health to cope with stressors and alleviate physical symptoms. Twenty-two female spouses participated in a mixed method focus group session where participants' reported lacking the importance of making their health and wellness a priority.

Eaton et al. (2008) noted that military life has many inherent stressors and its own culture, requiring a period of adaptation and adjustment to frequent family separations.

Also, behavioral perspectives were noted that identified the necessity of social support and the role it plays can directly influence behavioral outcomes related to social support. Furthermore, Padden et al. (2013) noted perceived stress and social support are essential behaviors among military spouses. Therefore, social support can help aid in the guidance of psychological and mental well-being.

### **Social Support**

Cobb (1976) described social support as information that benefits an individual, makes him feel cared for and a member of a network of mutual obligations. French et al. (2018) referred to social support as a “psychological or material resource provided through social relationships that can mitigate strains” (p. 288). Social support is imperative for military spouses. When military spouses lack social support, they report increased loneliness due to responsibilities of the military from the military personnel (Fish et al., 2014). Social support can form naturally within a military spouse environment. Social support can serve as a barrier to help decrease stress and improve psychological health (Skomorovsky, 2017). Cohen and Willis (1985) identified four types of support that are esteem, informational, social companionship, and instrumental support.

Esteem support directly relates to self-esteem. Esteem support is referred to as emotional support, expressive support, self-esteem support, and ventilation and close support. Individuals self-esteem increases when they feel accepted and valued as an individual (Cohen & Willis, 1985). During reintegration, esteem support would consist of having someone or a group of individuals to share their experiences or feelings about

positive and negative experiences of reintegration. Feeling supported through this time can increase the military spouse's esteem to handle the stressors or challenges that come with reintegration. Also, higher self-esteem increases the military spouses ability to respond to stress more confidently.

Informational support is advice and recommendations to help someone cope during difficult times. Informational support is also called advice, appraisal support, and cognitive guidance (Cohen & Willis, 1985). Military spouses receive information support before deployment until reintegration. Before deployment, the family engages in pre-deployment briefings. The purpose of this informational support is to prepare and plan. During the briefings, vital information is shared with the families, for example, stages of deployment, local resources, medical and dental information, legal assistance, point of contact, and chaplain information (Card, n.d.).

Companionship is spending time with others, rather family or friends. The benefits of companionship are to remain in contact with others, therefore, help distract the person from their stressors or problem, or by assisting with positive affective moods (Cohen & Willis, 1985). Companionship is crucial to maintaining during reintegration with the military personnel. Sharing reintegration and adjustment experiences with military-oriented individuals can be a significant modifier of life stressors. During reintegration, particularly, military spouses will find themselves learning to balance a new lifestyle. Consequently, the military personnel may not understand the unique differences between each role. Furthermore, companionship support can mitigate isolation and help explore problem-solving skills to adjust and adapt to reintegration.

Lastly, instrumental support refers to having specific instruments to help overcome barriers or decrease stressors. Instrumental support is defined as equipping or providing an individual with tangible items such as time, money, or anything to allow an individual the opportunity to remove themselves from the stressor. Cohen and Willis (1985) noted that material support and tangible support are also considered instrumental support. During reintegration, the military personnel may treat the military spouse to a spa day or provide additional support to their children to allow the military spouse to take advantage of a later start in the morning.

### ***Social Support Found in Study Community***

Edwards Air Force Base has created its community due to the deserted isolation and mission of conducting test missions and reports. Some of the support found on Edwards Air Force Base includes Edwards Spouses' Club, Edwards Club Muroc, Edwards Airman, and Family Readiness Center. The 412th Edwards Air Force Base Support Squadron, specific neighborhood social groups.

Edwards AFB Spouses' Club provides military spouses an opportunity to give back to the community while meeting and engaging with other military spouses. Members of the Edwards AFB Spouses' Club are spouses of activity duty, military to military, retired, reserves, civil service employees, and affiliates associated with Edwards AFB. Social events are held monthly to lunch brunch, games, book clubs, and dinner clubs. The spouses are involved in community events such as volunteering, scholarships, and fundraising (Edwards Spouses' Club, 2019). Edwards Club Muroc provides a range of breakfast, lunch, dinner dining, and entertainment options, for example, trivia night,

holiday-themed events, First Friday socials, and NFL, UFC, NBA viewing (Club Muroc, 2020). The Airman and Family Readiness Center supports Edwards AFB military families. The primary goal of the Airman and Family Readiness Center is to build healthy and ready communities that promote self-sufficiency. Programs such as resume and skill-building, career programs, military spouse employment assistance programs, and relocation assistance are created to help support the primary (Edwards Airman & Family, 2020). The 412th Force Support Squadron supports the Edwards Community with events, a program in morale, welfare, and recreation. Fitness programs, sports clinics, sports teams, game night, and off base events to nearby cities are benefits of the 412th Force Support Squadron (Edwards Air Force Base, 2020). Lastly, neighborhood events such as garage sales, social gatherings, and holiday events to promote social connectedness.

### **Summary**

In summary, military personnel are considered Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, and National Guard. Military personnel are highly skilled individuals, so they are ready and prepared to respond to any threats made to our country or world. One of the responsibilities of being in the U.S. military is deployment. Military deployments are defined by combat deployment and noncombat deployment. There are times where the military personnel will deploy, then reintegrate back with their family, specifically the spouse. In a review of the literature, deployment brings about stress but more specific to reintegration.

Reintegration following noncombat deployment comes with both challenges and benefits. The literature demonstrated that while there are positive effects of reintegration,



there are also negative effects during reintegration following military deployment. Adverse effects of reintegration following a noncombat deployment can pose challenges within a relationship, particularly challenges for the military spouses to included psychological well-being and issues within their marriage.

While the military spouse experience may demonstrate difficulties adjusting to reintegration following a noncombat deployment, the literature demonstrates skills, protective factors, and resources military spouses can acquire to help adjust and adapt. Each individual is different and will cope with reintegration in various ways. Literature noted that there are various social support and coping strategies to include emotion-focused and problem-focused coping skills, esteem, informational, companionship, and instrumental support. All forms of coping are essential to help military spouses cope and manage stress related to reintegration.

During the literature review, I provided information to support the research question: What are the lived experiences of reintegration for military spouses of active duty U.S. military personnel after a noncombat military deployment? As noted in Chapter 1, limited research exists concerning the limited data on this population. The gap in literature needs to be addressed to gain an understanding of the research questions from the perspectives of military spouses and strategies military spouses can demonstrate resiliency during the reintegration process. In the next chapter, I provide how this study was conducted, the participant selection, the data collection, and data analysis.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of military spouses following the reintegration of military personnel returning from noncombat deployment. In this chapter, I provide an explanation of the research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, methodology, participant selection, instrumentation, procedures for recruitment, participation and data collection, and data analysis plan. Also, issues of trustworthiness and ethical procedures are included.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

Maxwell (2008) noted that qualitative research focuses on exploring specific questions to process theory. The research question helps a researcher focus on and understand the meaning of the event or activity. In addition, the research question guides the exploration of the influence of the physical or social context surrounding the event or activity (Maxwell, 2008). The following research question guided this study:

What are the lived experiences of reintegration for military spouses of active duty U.S. military personnel after a noncombat military deployment?

To increase awareness and gain insight into the lived experiences of military spouses following the reintegration of military personal returning from noncombat deployment, I employed a qualitative research methodology.

According to Tufford and Newman (2012), a qualitative researcher typically collects data in the area where the participants usually experience the issue or problem.

The central research question and specific phenomenon for this study focused on how the participants explained their lived experiences. Creswell (2014) noted that a researcher should target individuals who will provide the best knowledge and help with the problem being explored and the research question. Furthermore, interest lies in how the participants make sense of what they have experienced. Patton (2015) stated that qualitative inquiry is the opportunity for a researcher to seek to understand a family's life and to aim to represent the community as a whole.

Qualitative inquiry offers researchers the ability to learn how participants experience and interact in their social world to understand the meaning participants have ascribed to a phenomenon (Merriam, 2002). According to Levitt et al. (2012), qualitative researchers are concerned with gathering and developing findings from data to provide a clear portrayal of a phenomenon as it is understood within the traditions or perspectives of the participants. To understand the phenomenon, a variety of data may be used by the researcher, such as interviews, observations, and document analysis, to aid in understanding the participants (Petty et al., 2012). A transcendental phenomenological approach was used to have a keen understanding and meaning of a phenomenon. The purpose of a transcendental phenomenological approach is to understand the factors involved in an experience (Burkholder et al., 2016). Furthermore, a phenomenological approach answers questions of the perceptions of the phenomenon within a context (Burkholder et al., 2016).

Narrative research, grounded theory, ethnography, case studies, and phenomenology are designs to conduct qualitative research. Narrative research was not

appropriate for this study because the purpose was to explore and describe perceptions of experiences by military spouses as they reintegrate after noncombat deployment.

According to Creswell (2014), narrative research studies the lives of individuals, but the information is retold or narrated chronologically by the researcher. Furthermore, the researcher's life is also incorporated in the narration. I did not use grounded theory as my design because the primary goal of grounded theory is to develop a theory. Grounded theory studies typically include a sample of 20 to 30 participants. Furthermore, Creswell (2012) noted that the literature is less often used as a direct correlation for the study. A case study approach was not appropriate for this research because it was not a single case; rather, it was a group of nine military spouses. In addition, this study did not integrate favoritism toward any hypotheses or any selection biases. Although case studies have time restraints, the researcher collects detailed information over time and the data collections are observations, documents, interviews, and audio and visual materials (Creswell, 2012); phenomenological study is geared toward several cases.

The phenomenological approach was the best fit for this study. Burkholder et al. (2016) posited that a phenomenological study is used to investigate the perceptions of lived experiences, how individuals relate to a phenomenon, and how individuals understand a phenomenon and the meaning given to a phenomenon. Therefore, a phenomenological study was the best fit because the goal of this study was to explore and provide a better understanding of the lived experiences of military spouses following reintegration of military personnel returning from noncombat deployment. Van Manen

(2017) noted that phenomenological concepts are focused on the lived experiences and intentional and thematic analysis to understand problems and solutions.

Furthermore, a phenomenological researcher practices epoche. Epoche requires the researcher to bracket their personal biases by being receptive, open, and naïve in listening to and hearing the participants as they explain their experiences of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) noted that epoche gives researchers a new perspective of looking at things. In addition, daily biases and knowledge are set aside so that a researcher can gain a sense of true clarity of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Having true clarity is a genuine way of seeing things, which prevents interference of researcher judgments or assumptions. The process of true clarity means setting aside preferences, perceptions, judgments, and feelings that refer to others. The researcher is positioned with traits such as consciousness and attentiveness (Moustakas, 1994).

A phenomenological researcher may use semistructured interview questions to conduct research to allow the participants to implement self-exploration of their experiences. Also, asking open-ended questions allows the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. A phenomenological researcher focuses on understanding how a particular experience has affected something or someone (Patton, 2015). The interview questions in this study were used as a guide to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of reintegration after a noncombat military deployment.

### **Role of the Researcher**

In this study, I sought to understand the reintegration experiences of military spouses after a noncombat military deployment. A phenomenologist explores a phenomenon via direct interaction with participants; the researcher tries to define the phenomenon under investigation (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). According to Patton (2015), qualitative researchers are the instrument. The researchers use their background, experiences, training, skills, and empathy to engage participants (Patton, 2015). To define the phenomenon, the researcher collects data and reports the details provided by the participants of their lived experiences regarding reintegration following a noncombat deployment.

Unlike quantitative studies, qualitative studies rely on the interpretation and representation of the participants' narratives for reliability and validity (Sutton & Austin, 2015). According to Moustakas (1994), a phenomenological researcher focuses on the topic, questions, or problem to help guide the study and focuses on findings that will allow further research and reflection. Furthermore, phenomenological researchers aim to increase awareness to help understand social knowledge (Patton, 2015). A researcher seeks to determine what an experience means for the individual who has experienced the phenomenon. Throughout the interview process, a researcher asks open-ended questions and creates probing questions for exploration and clarification and to allow participants to share their experiences as they see them.

In a phenomenological study, a researcher is focused on the experiences of the participants and their consciousness. According to Gallagher (2017), consciousness

enacts the present. Within the consciousness of an individual, the meaning of what was experienced and the meaning of the phenomenon are shared. Patton (2014) noted that intentionality refers to consciousness. Furthermore, a researcher's role is to help bring consciousness and meaning of the phenomena to life.

Therefore, the researcher employs epoche, a Greek word that means refrain from judgment (Patton, 2014). I will attempt to utilize epoche to remain objective and decrease personal biases or emotions as it relates to the phenomenon of this study. As a military spouse, I did not have any personal and professional relationships with the participants. Due to my personal experience surrounding the military and reintegration, I will strive to remain objective and true for the validity and reliability of this study. According to Tuffor and Newman (2012), self-awareness is an essential trait for the researcher to aid in the elimination of emotions and cognitions surrounding the phenomenon. If the researcher does not bracket their experiences, there is potential for a false data collection and analysis. Therefore, bracketing is necessary. I utilized reflexive journaling as a form of bracketing to avoid potential role conflicts with the participants and presumptions. According to Probst and Berenson (2014), reflexivity is an awareness of the influence the researcher has on what is being studied and how the research process affects the researcher. I employed reflexivity to avoid bias, as I identify with the demographic of the study. Berger (2015) noted that self-reflexivity help the researchers become aware of their reactions and feelings to collect accurate data as presented by the participants.

Phenomenological reduction is another approach a researcher implements in order to see and to listen in an unbiased, conscious manner (Moustakas, 1994). *Epoché* is a

necessary part of the phenomenological reduction process. The object of this process is to remain objective, free, and open during the interview process (Moustakas, 1994), therefore bracketing is necessary. Because my husband is a chief in the United States Navy, I will avoid conflict of interest. I limited any participants who have a professional or personal relationship with my husband.

The goal of phenomenological reduction is to reach pure consciousness by practicing reflection (Moustakas, 1994). Reflection is a vital role of the researcher and is defined by reflecting and bracketing. Moustakas (1994) noted that when reflection is integrated into the experience, there is an opportunity for the researchers to grasp the full nature of a phenomenon.

Researchers use imaginative variation to seek meaning and structural description of an experience (Moustakas, 1994). The implementation of reflection and imaginative variation is to decrease the likelihood of how my experiences and biases may affect the study. Imaginative variation provides clarification to the explicated experienced during the data analysis process (Bevan, 2014). As a result, shared stories from the military spouses will provide a sense of peace and empowerment for the families to advocate and support other military families who find the reintegration phase a challenge. While incorporating imaginative variation, the researcher works to understand several experiences that lead to the truth, which will connect the essences and meanings of the experience.



## **Methodology**

In the methodology section, I address the procedures associated with this study. I explore the methodical application for selecting the participants. I explore the instrument used for the study, data collection, data analysis, and findings.

### **Participant Selection Logic**

According to Teherani et al. (2015), a phenomenological study is an inquiry that seeks to explore a phenomenon based on the perspective of those who have experienced it. Therefore, the participants must identify their experiences as it relates to the phenomenon of the study. The goal was to capture the essence of the lived experiences of participants who share the same lived experience. The population for this study included nine women who met the following criteria (a) married to an active duty (enlisted or officer) U.S. military personnel in the Navy, Army, Marine Corps, Air Force, or Coast Guard; (b) the U.S. military personnel served a minimum of at least one noncombat military deployment of six months or longer (c) and resided in the same household before deployment.

I recruited participants through social media Facebook groups for military spouses and families. I used purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling is a case that provides rich information to gain and an in-depth understanding of specific cases (Patton, 2015). Moustakas (1994) noted that the participants should identify with definite characteristics. Furthermore, Moustakas (1994) suggested the selection of research participants should include essential criteria such as, their experience with the phenomenon, the understanding of the nature and meaning of the phenomenon, the ability to engage in a

lengthy interview, and approval to be audio recorded via audio and the publishing of the data.

The sample size for this study consisted of nine participants. According to Creswell (2015), phenomenological studies generally range from 3 to 10 participants. Lowe et al. (2018) noted that saturation is designed to justify the conclusion of the research and to guide the researcher to complete or continue sampling. Once the researcher has collected the data and no longer receives new data, saturation has occurred. Fusch and Ness (2015) noted that probing questions and creating a state of epoche in a phenomenological study will aid in data saturation. Furthermore, data saturation will occur when no new themes or new coding have developed (Guest et al., 2006).

### **Instrumentation**

I used a semistructured, face-to-face interview. If the participants were not available to conduct face-to-face interviews, I conducted the interviews by telephone or online via Zoom. I recorded the interview to allow transcribing at a later date. Xu and Storr (2012) noted that the quality of observation data is contingent on the researcher who serves as the instrument in generating the data. The primary research question will be used to address and understand the lived experiences of military spouses during reintegration after a noncombat deployment. As noted earlier, the researcher is the primary instrument during a phenomenology study, which may be a challenge and an advantage. The interview aided in the process of data collection. During the face-to-face interviews, the researcher became involved in the research to understand the participants'

perspectives and experiences in a new way. Participants are interviewed. Therefore, the researcher has the ability to monitor body language, affect, and ask additional questions for a more in-depth understanding (Creswell, 2015). The research produces detailed descriptions of the participants' feelings, opinions, and experiences, then interprets the meaning of their actions. Thus, providing a holistic understanding of the human experience (Koopman, 2015). Brisola and Cury (2016) noted that the researcher requires integrity, a high degree of rigor and wholeness in the efforts to become fully present in the scientific report to deepen the researcher's awareness of the lived experiences of the participants.

As opposed to the advantages, the multitude of different approaches provides many options and decisions. Therefore, it can also be a disadvantage for newer researchers (Hopkins et al., 2017). Lam (2015) noted that smaller sample sizes do not intend to claim wider generalization to other contexts. The researcher may find it challenging to bracket oneself from the study. Bracketing the researcher's personal perspectives will decrease beliefs, judgments, and preconceived notions, which can have a negative impact on the study (Koopman, 2015).

Interview questions were explored, and probing questions assisted throughout the semistructured interviews to allow the participants to explore relevant experiences. Moustakas (1994) noted that interview questions should have purposeful significance and meaning with clear and concrete terms. In a phenomenological study, the research questions are aimed to understand a specific problem or topic. The goal of the questions

is to uncover the experiences of military spouses during the reintegration of military noncombat deployment.

### **Procedure for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

Once I received approval from Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB), I recruited participants through social media Facebook groups for military spouses, and families (Appendix A). The approval number for this study was 08-13-20-0561214. I emailed the participants a pre-study questionnaire to complete. The pre-study questionnaire helped eliminate participants who did not fit the criteria for the study (Appendix B).

Recruitment was ongoing until I had the necessary participants to complete the study. Once I received the required number of participants, I emailed the participants who agreed to participate the informed consent form and some dates for the interview. Once the participants responded to the informed consent, I scheduled the interview time. The participants were made aware of the date and time to proceed to conduct the interviews.

The interviews were conducted in a private agreed-upon location feasible to the participants. If the participants were not able to meet at the specified locations, the interviews were conducted by telephone and online via Zoom. Each participant answered the same in-depth questions (Appendix C). The length of each interview lasted approximately one hour. After I completed the interviews and transcriptions, I employed member checking. Member checking is a technique to validate the credibility of results (Birt et al., 2016). I provided a summary of the interview to each participant and asked that they review it for accuracy.

Each participant has a secure file. Creswell (2013) noted that files help with the organization during the analysis process. The files (audio, transcriptions, and paperwork) are stored in my home office. The computer is password protected and physical files are stored in a locked file that I have sole access to. I followed-up via phone and email with some participants due to spelling concerns and clarification of the specific verbiage during the interview process.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

According to Alase (2017), a phenomenologist examines the interview responses of the participants' to identify common themes. Moustakas (1994) noted that the organization of data begins when the researcher starts the transcription process through the methods and procedure of phenomenological analysis. Phenomenal analysis entails identifying present textural and structural descriptions of the participants' experiences to reflect the meaning and essences of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

I used a transcendental phenomenological approach as described by the Moustakas (1994), to understand the meaning of the lived experiences of the participants. Qualitative analysis includes reducing the volume of raw information, separating relevant facts, identifying meaningful patterns, and establishing a framework of the collected data from the participants of the study (Patton, 2015). For instance, the focus was directed to data that reveals adverse reactions during reintegration. I hand-coded the data collected from the interviews by gaining an understanding of themes, patterns, differences, and similarities shared by the participants. Once I completed my first interview, I copied all the highlighted codes to a blank Microsoft Word document. I continued this process until

I coded my last interview. Data analysis in qualitative research requires the researcher to prepare and organize the data for analysis, developing themes by coding, and placing the data in figures, tables, or a discussion (Creswell, 2013).

I analyzed the data by following the steps designed by Moustakas (1994):

1. List and Preliminary grouping (horizontalization);
2. Reduction and Elimination to determine the invariant constituents;
3. Cluster and thematize the invariant constituents to identify the core themes of the experience;
4. Final identification of the invariant constituents and themes by checking them against the data;
5. Construct individual textural descriptions using examples;
6. Construct individual structural descriptions based on the individual textural description and imaginative variation, for each participant;
7. Construct textural-structural descriptions of the meaning and essences of the experience, for each participant. A composite description of the meaning and essences of the experience will be developed, representing the entire group as a whole (p. 120-121).

The results of the data analysis were conducted, and results are provided in Chapter 4.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

According to Amin et al. (2020), trustworthiness is subdivided into credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Trustworthiness is important in

qualitative research because it provides reliability and validity to the researcher (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). As a researcher, it was necessary that I addressed how the research findings were credible, transferable, dependable, and confirmable.

Shufutinsky (2020) noted that use-of-self is generally the main instrument of the research rooted in qualitative research. Furthermore, use-of-self by the researcher is vital to the validity and credibility of qualitative research. Creating a protocol to aid in trustworthiness within qualitative research is an essential process (Amankwaa, 2016).

I collected data from nine participants for the purpose of gathering credible information by implementing the triangulation of data for comparison. Amankwaa (2016) noted that triangulation of different data sources is an examination of consistency. In conjunction with triangulation, I used member checking to help determine the accuracy and to enhance trustworthiness (Doyle, 2007). Member checking involved the participants' reviewing a summary of their interviews to determine if they feel the information is accurate.

Transferability is another component of trustworthiness. One of the responsibilities of a researcher is to provide a rich, thick description of the participant's experiences to determine if the findings are transferrable to other settings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Transferability requires detailed information such as the location setting, atmosphere, climate, attitudes of the participants, and reactions observe to gain an understanding in which the reader can obtain a vivid picture of the phenomenon (Amankwaa, 2016).

Another component of trustworthiness is dependability. Dependability refers to the findings and helps answer the research question to determine reliability and consistency (Bitsch, 2005). Researchers noted that if the work were repeated in the same context, the same methods, and the same participants, the results would be similar. To help establish dependability, I audio recorded all interviews. The audio recorder allowed me to replay the interviews repeatedly in an effort to capture the experiences and allowed for transcription (Polit & Beck, 2006)

Lastly, confirmability was used to determine trustworthiness. Confirmability is to ensure the experiences are those of the participants and were documented accordingly. During the interviews, I allowed the participants time to respond to the questions and ask clarifying questions. Confirmability maintains how the data was collected and what interpretations were made (Ellis, 2019). To ensure confirmability, I used reflexive journals during the interview process.

### **Ethical Procedures**

Ethical issues are a concern with all research. Sanjari et al. (2014) noted that researchers face ethical challenges in all stages of the study. Creswell (2013) stated that the researcher faces many ethical issues that cause a dilemma throughout data collection, analysis, and dissemination of qualitative reports. As noted earlier, I recruited participants once I received approval from Walden University IRB. To decrease the risks of potential ethical issues, the participants reviewed and signed informed consent before they engage in the interview process. According to Sanjari et al. (2014), an informed consent is an integral part of the research process and should discuss how the data is collected and how



it is used. Furthermore, the informed consent provides details on ways the researcher will protect research participants' privacy (Zahle, 2017).

Creswell (2013) stated there should be backup copies of data, the use of high-quality tapes for audio-recording, a master list of gathered information, anonymity of names in the data, and a data collections matrix to locate and identify information for a study. I removed all identifiers to protect the anonymity of the participant's data collection and analysis. Therefore, the participants were assigned a number such as Participant 1 [P1, P2, and so on] to protect their identity. As noted earlier, the files were stored in my home office. The computer is password protected and physical files were stored in a locked file that I will have sole access to. In addition, all of the information will be stored for a minimum of 5 years and then destroyed.

During the interviews, the participants understood that their participation is voluntary. Therefore, they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. The participants did not receive any type of incentive to be in the study. I provided a list of mental health resources in case a participant experiences negative emotional issues from the interview process. I provided the Mental Health Association website and 2-1-1 United Way of Kern County, California. In addition, local resources were included, 412 Medical Group Mental Health Clinic and National Alliance on Mental Illnesses of Antelope Valley.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of military spouses following the reintegration of the family of military

personnel returning from noncombat deployment. I focused on the consciousness of the meaning of each of the individual's experience to contribute to positive social change to help bring awareness about the stressors and barriers that correlate to the social and emotional well-being as a result of noncombat deployment to educators, mentors, counselors, and other resources who serve the military community.

I conducted semistructured interviews with nine military spouses to understand the individual's lived experiences. I analyzed the data via Moustakas (1994) modification of van Kaam's method to analyze the interview transcripts. In Chapter 4, I discussed the setting, demographics, and the results of this study.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of military spouses following the reintegration of the family of military personnel returning from noncombat deployment. More specifically, in this study, I examined the experiences of military spouses during reintegration after a noncombat deployment. By using the resiliency model of stress, adjustment, and adaptation as a guide, the following research question for this study was answered: What are the lived experiences of reintegration for military spouses of active duty U.S. military personnel after a noncombat military deployment? The answers to the research question included a description of each participant's experience during reintegration. In this chapter, I discuss the lived experiences, details related to the setting, participants, data collection, management, and analysis. Lastly, I present the qualitative analysis results to answer the research question, the evidence of trustworthiness, and emerging themes.

### **Setting**

The setting for data collection occurred via telephone. I conducted every interview in my home office. All participants in the study participated voluntarily. I reviewed the informed consent that included the purpose of the study, the right to withdraw from the study at any time, and the assurance of confidentiality. Before ending the interview, I addressed questions if there were any. The participants were informed that if the interview needed to stop due to distress, I would conclude the interview immediately and provide them with resources and referrals to seek mental health care if

needed. None of the interviews was stopped or discarded due to distress. There were no unexpected events; all interviews proceeded as planned.

### **Demographics**

A total of nine military spouses married to active duty military personnel of different branches (Air Force, Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard) participated in the study. The criteria for participation in this study were that volunteers must (a) be married to active duty (enlisted or officer) U.S. military personnel in the Navy, Army, Marine Corps, Air Force, or Coast Guard; (b) the U.S. military personnel served a minimum of at least one noncombat military deployment of 6 months or longer; (c) and reside in the same household before deployment. Information for all nine participants is listed in Table 1. Each name has been assigned a number to preserve the privacy and identity of each participant. Table 1 includes the age, number of children while deployed, number of years of military experiences, number of deployments and length of each, and branch of service.

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographics*

	Age	# of children while deployed	Military experience (years)	# of deployments	Length of each deployment (months)	Branch of service
Participant 1	47	1	14	4	6–7	Marine Corps
Participant 2	34	2	12	3	6–8	Navy
Participant 3	35	4	16	4	6–7	Navy
Participant 4	26	0	10	1	6	Air Force
Participant 5	37	2	20	2	7–9	Navy
Participant 6	37	2	17	4	9–13	Navy
Participant 7	40	3	16	4	6–7.5	Navy

Participant 8	35	1	11	1	6–9	Navy
Participant 9	32	3	22	3	6–8	Navy

### **Data Collection and Management**

Nineteen participants volunteered for the study. Of the volunteers, nine met the demographic criteria for participation in the study. The 10 volunteers who did not qualify for the study were either not married to an active-duty military personnel, their spouses did not complete a noncombat deployment, they did not return the informed consent, or they did not live together before deployment. I sent emails to those who did not qualify, thanking them for their interest. I also provided a brief explanation as to why they were not chosen for the study. Nine volunteers met the criteria for participation, and I scheduled interviews with those nine participants.

The participants emailed me or sent me a message via Facebook once they saw the recruitment flyer (see Appendix A) to inform me they were interested in participating in the study. I responded to all messages via email with a screening questionnaire (see Appendix B) to the potential participant. If the potential participant met the criteria for the study, they were emailed the consent and requested to either sign the consent and email it back or respond “I consent” along with their full name as a means of a signature. Once a participant gave their consent, a date and time to conduct the interview were agreed on. To gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of military spouses following the reintegration of the family of military personnel returning from noncombat deployment, I conducted semistructured interviews via phone with each participant from my home office. Each interview followed the ethical guidelines as discussed in Chapter

3. The interviews lasted 60–70 minutes. The interviews were all audio recorded to ensure accuracy for transcribing. There were no unusual circumstances encountered in data collection.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis technique I used for this study followed the modified van Kaam methodology developed by Moustakas (1994). I reviewed each transcribed interview for accuracy and clarification. After completing the semistructured interviews and transcription process, I employed the reduction process that Moustakas (1994) identified as a process to study the verbatim transcript from each participant to compose textural meanings and invariant constituents. Reduction aided in the filter process to help distinguish if the experience from each participant was significant while eliminating overlapping, repetitive, and vague statements.

I used a horizontalization approach and highlighted significant statements to understand the lived experiences of military spouses of reintegration following a noncombat deployment. I read carefully through each interview and highlighted with a different color each significant sentence and phrase by each participant about the purpose of the study. The color-coding data assisted with the identification of the horizons. Then, I went back through each interview, only focusing on the highlighted sentences and phrases to examine the relevancy to the phenomenon. I deleted each highlighted word that did not capture the experience or help understand the phenomenon to identify the invariant constituents. I hand coded via Word after the completion of all interviews to organize the transcripts into codes and to identify the thematic categories and invariant

constituents. The invariant constituents from each participant were labeled with specific thematic colors in a Word document. The significant statements found in each Word document helped create clusters for each document, which resulted in themes for the study (Moustakas, 1994).

Eight themes emerged from the interview questions: (a) initial feelings about reintegration, (b) military spouses and the community's expectations of reintegration, (c) issues with the U.S. military personnel upon reintegrating, (d) coping strategies during reintegration, (e) accessing services on base during reintegration, (f) support from spousal service member, (g) experiencing resiliency, and (h) to deploy or not. I looked for discrepant cases from the themes, which revealed that one participant believed she did not have any reintegration issues. One participant identified alcohol as a coping strategy during reintegration. Because the participants still met the inclusion criteria in the study, the discrepant cases were a part of the findings.

Once the themes were generated, I reviewed my invariant constituents in each Word document to ensure the themes accurately represented the participants' lived experiences. The textural-structural narrative aided as guidance for me to summarize the data presented during the interview to understand the lived experienced military spouses of reintegration following a noncombat deployment.

I used member checking to assist with the reassurance of validity. I emailed each participant their transcribed interview and asked that they review it for accuracy and provide any information for correction or clarification. Each participant verified accuracy based on the information they provided during the interview.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

Qualitative researchers hold true to trustworthiness (Korstjens & Moser, 2018) to ensure findings are accurate. To confirm the accuracy of the study, the participants reviewed the narration of their experience. Secondary criteria provided additional benchmarks of validity (Whittemore et al., 2001). Also, Whittemore et al. (2001) noted that explicitness, vividness, creativity, thoroughness, congruence, and sensitivity provide further quality checks in trustworthiness. Thoroughness and congruence allowed for a full exploration of the phenomenon and the connectedness between the research question, method, data collection, analysis, the current study, and previous literature.

To maintain evidence of trustworthiness, my Walden University dissertation committee members reviewed the study. Furthermore, to achieve dependability for this study, I included (a) review of the informed consent, (b) audio recordings, and (c) transcription of the data from the interviews. In addition, triangulation, member checking, and several examinations of the transcripts aided in the process of dependability.

According to Amin et al. (2020), trustworthiness is subdivided into credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Trustworthiness is important in qualitative research because it provides reliability and validity to the researcher (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Shufutinsky (2020) noted that use-of-self is generally the main instrument of the research rooted in qualitative research. Furthermore, use-of-self by the researcher is vital to the validity and credibility of qualitative research. Creating a protocol to aid in trustworthiness within qualitative research is an essential process (Amankwaa, 2016). Triangulation was used in this study by using peer reviewers who



either had experiences working with the population in this study, in qualitative research, or both.

Transferability is another component of trustworthiness. One of the researcher's responsibilities is to provide a rich, thick description of the participant's experiences to determine if the findings are transferrable to other settings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Transferability requires detailed information such as the location setting, atmosphere, climate, attitudes of the participants, and reactions observed to understand how the reader can obtain a vivid picture of the phenomenon (Amankwaa, 2016).

Another component of trustworthiness is dependability. Dependability refers to the findings and helps answer the research question to determine reliability and consistency (Bitsch, 2005). To establish dependability for my study: (1) identification of participants via social media platforms, (2) review of the consent form, and (3) the semistructured interview.

Lastly, confirmability was used to determine trustworthiness. Confirmability was employed to ensure the lived experiences are those of the participants and were documented accordingly. Confirmability consists of how the data was collected and what interpretations were made (Ellis, 2019). To help establish dependability, I audio recorded all interviews. The audio recorder allowed me to replay the interviews to capture the experiences and aid in the transcription process (Polit & Beck, 2006).

## **Results**

I sought to understand military spouses lived experiences following the reintegration of the family of military personnel returning from noncombat deployment

by exploring their experience of reintegration. I employed 19 interview questions to answer the following research question: What are the lived experiences of reintegration for military spouses of active duty U.S. military personnel after a noncombat military deployment?

### **Theme 1: Initial Feelings about Reintegration**

Theme one emerged from the participants exploring their lived experiences of the phenomenon of their initial feelings about reintegration. Most of the study participants shared their experiences concerning their feelings about reintegration.

P1: You think you sort of get it down as you know every single one of them is different and you know the first one was tough. In 2006 it was definitely stressful. It was very stressful I think they all are stressful... uncomfortable, exciting, hard, it can be joyful, but hard too. My feelings were all over the place. Happy, frustrated, and disappointed.

P2: It's very exciting but also stressful. Especially after those long periods of times submarines is a unique community because when they're gone they have very little contact and so you don't really get to keep in touch a lot, ...it was a lot of anticipation you know before they come home you know and what it's going to be like. Those first few moments are very happy and excited beyond describable and being together again is awesome.

P5: There's always that awkwardness of trying to fill each other out because you know it's almost like retrying to date somebody even though you're married...Anxious, it is like everything has to be perfect when they come back

everything has to be perfect when they come back and then the anxiety of if they are still you know if there's still a connection there.

P6: We've never really had any issues with that, it's a little bit nerve-wracking. You know it's a little bit like butterflies beforehand but when he comes home, we are both pretty excited we don't have a lot of stress I would say. I think maybe happy and anxious because so many things impact their feelings and they kind of set the tone.

P7: I usually feel pretty good but a little apprehensive because you know personality-wise just fitting back in together is difficult. Most of our focuses are really on them first and then we kind of find ourselves easing back into our typical relationship.

These quotes reflect the understanding of the military spouses who experienced some form of stress and anxiety during reintegration. The next set of statements reflected different initial feelings about reintegration.

P8 and P9 shared their perspectives on anger. P8 stated, "I was devastated, confused, angry, irate, very emotional and disappointed. I was disgusted with my experience. ...excited initially." And P9 said, "anger and resentment... The first one was the hardest. I struggled."

Lastly, are miscellaneous statements about feeling during reintegration. P3 noted that "I felt rushed." P4 stated, "I personally think that it was pretty easy when he came back home from his most recent deployment." These quotes reflected perspectives about

feelings about reintegration. The quotes were included to demonstrate multiple perspectives about initial feelings about reintegration.

### **Theme 2: Military Spouses and the Community's Expectations of Reintegration**

Theme two emerged from the participants comparing their lived experiences of the phenomenon of reintegration following a noncombat deployment of a spouse to the expectations of the military community and personal expectations. P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, and P9 had this to say about their and the community's expectations of reintegration:

P1: Disappointed because I would have an unrealistic expectation of how it would go when he came home, and it never went that way. I work with a lot of military spouses and so you get into those conversations and I think that they're very they're very similar I think we all go through this.

P2: ...for us as spouses, life goes on as usual. It's like they miss all of it so when they come home, it's like trying to catch them up on it. It's a lot. ...some people have no stress when they reintegrate... but for our family and many others that I have known over the years, you know the degree of stress might be different for different families, but I feel like it's always there. Most people have those same stress it depends on what level, and I also wasn't naïve that there weren't going to be changes.

P3: "I assume most of the people in our community deal with that, but I guess I never really thought about it too much is it kind of our normal, so I just assumed that it's everybody's normal."

P4: ...it was a little easier because one we don't have children and it's a lot difficult for spouses or even my friends, it is a lot difficult because obviously the kids are reintroduced...I don't think that my reintegration compares and hard for me to just have them [nonmilitary spouses] relate because they don't know what that's [reintegration] like.

P5: You come close to all these other families while you spouse is gone and then when they come back you come and go your separate ways because now you have that missing part back so everybody kind of ...you don't really know how their reintegration is so I've never really even thought about looking at how other people would view it.

P6: "neither one of us knew what to expect... other spouses don't have positive experience ... A lot of empathy and respect for spouses who do it on their own"

P7: He pretty much sets the tone for all it and we're reacting to his feelings. The civilian communities don't think about it [reintegration] until I mention it. We don't look at it as we train for it and we don't even realize it.

P9: "The first one was the hardest. I had been on the opposite side of it and so I did not know what to expect."

These themes encompassed the lived experiences of the participants concerning their perspective of their and the community's expectations about reintegration. Some of them shared that they were disappointed as their expectations were not their reality. However, there were a few who noted that the community expectations of reintegration were "normal."

Lastly, P8 noted her perspectives about military spouses and the community's expectations of reintegration: "Speaking to a lot of friends this [affairs] is such a common occurrence in the Navy specifically. And it's just disgusting."

### **Theme 3: Issues With U.S. Military Personnel Upon Reintegrating**

Reintegrating following a noncombat deployment can be a challenging experience. To understand the lived experiences of military spouses following the reintegration theme one the spouses identified specific feelings. This theme describes perceived conflict upon reintegrating.

Reintegrating following a noncombat deployment can be a challenging experience. Theme 3: Issues with the U.S. military personnel upon reintegrating was created to evoke an understanding of the experience.

P1: "Dealing with how he handled loud noises you know all of those things I mean I really didn't know kind of how to help him through that. He had a lot of anger... him kind of dealing with his anger that was hard for me."

P2: We had to figure out how to connect as husband and wife but also as parents for the first time...butt heads because you may not have changed in the same direction. Parenting would be the number one thing ...we had different ideas on that [parenting].

P3: The parenting role I find it very hard for us when he comes back. and he wants to integrate into the family he wants to spend time with the kids but he doesn't want enough to discipline them with his only interaction he doesn't want

to come home and play the disciplinarian which is hard because I feel like I'm still doing both sides of the parenting that sometimes becomes a problem.

P5: Him realizing that we are married, that I don't work for him. ... I am not his subordinate I am his partner and that's how I should be treated, my husband also is very good about compartmentalizing his life, that is also hard. He has a little box for everything, and I don't necessarily like being put in a box. I am his wife; I don't think I should be put in a box.

P6: "to do better about communicating I needed to speak up and let him know how we had been doing things," "Communication was the biggest one," and "my husband not knowing the entire [home] schedule."

P7: He can be a little bit sensitive; he thinks I don't understand what it what it's like to be away from family, our spouses are married to the navy first, and not second. The biggest stressor for me is how the service member feels about his job. We don't have very good coping skills. There is usually some type of animosity towards each other.

P8: communication was a massive area of concern. This relationship [affair] was still going on. I would say our reintegration was absolutely horrible. I am still highly struggling, very difficult time trusting him, and he was absolutely horrible in both [spouse and parenting] of those avenues.

P9: very distant for the first few months, shut down, didn't talk to him a whole lot. I didn't know how to talk to him about any of it. I did not communicate, talk or verbalize what I was feeling, and I just shut down for a period of time.

The quotes reflected agreement from these participants. These participants noted some perceived issues upon reintegrating with the U.S. military personal. However, P8 noted “no issues, none at all.”

#### **Theme 4: Coping Strategies During Reintegration**

The participants shared their experiences of how they coped during the reintegration phased. The coping strategies varied by each individual. Each participant used a strategy they felt was best for them at the time of reintegration.

P1: I rely on my two best friends a lot. I started seeing a therapist and ...carrying enough physical activity to help my mental and emotional state ...I journal a lot, as well, so I try to work through the feelings.

P2: Military spouses, we have family, but I would not say they were there on an emotional level more so a physical level such a childcare.” “And my friends were my military spouses especially during deployment you kind of gravitate towards each other.

P3: “...group of other wives or moms that don’t mind going out just girls,” “I solely relied on friends...other spouses,” “my parents had come, and given us you know a night out,” and “I joined a gym with daycare.”

P4: I read, I’m in book clubs, different social events with friends and my local community...I’m always busy and that’s kind of helpful to have my time and we [military personnel] can communicate you know through stressful times.

P5: “I have my mom and my sister...I’ve done therapy, working out a lot, I volunteer a lot at my kids school.”



P6: “military spouses...Taking time to myself. Going on walks by myself,” and “time away from my children to regroup and come back and feel refreshed.”

P7: my mom would fly out. some physical activity and time away from each other so and go for a run go to the gym. We try to talk, talk through things and actually have a real conversation...and reassurance and support from people.

P8: “You know, we were in marriage counseling. My parents, my entire family was very supportive. My close group of friends were very supportive... therapy.”

P9: “I talked to my mom a lot...We [military personnel] would both talk about expectations and what we needed from each other. I attended monthly meetings. I was FRG leader for a period of time and an Ombudsman...I was volunteering.”

Theme 4 provided experiences of how the military spouses cope during reintegration. Almost all of the participants noted that they heavily relied on the support of their loved ones, social clubs, and therapy. Whereas P7 noted that “social media played a big piece [in coping].”

#### **Theme 5: Access Services on Base During Reintegration**

Each participant in the study shared some of the benefits or resources they utilized on base during reintegration. The military spouses in this study associated with a military base, except one military spouse.

P1: “I don’t find my connections to the military being like crucial to my support, but my therapy came through base resource.”

P2: Often or all the time. I don't think reintegration changed that at all. Pretty much everything that is available. I am very thrifty. A lot of the base services are free or cheap...indoor playground for the kids, free movies at the movie theatre, and restaurants.

P3: "Not too much...we have utilized ITT [Information, Tickets, and Travel]."

P4: "going to the commissary but support groups like the AFRC (Armed Forces Recreation Centers) we did not use or the military life counselors."

P6: "Very rarely. I never use the commissary...The exchange maybe a few times a year. "

P7: "I became an ombudsman...learned about resources that were available. We ended up using CHAPS [the chaplain]... I used ITT...the FOCUS [Focusing On Children Under Stress] program...a Fleet and Family Services therapy"

P8: "I don't go on base for anything, unless he had watch. I don't shop on base; I don't do anything on base."

P9: "I always did our shopping on base at the Commissary."

These quotes reflected these participants' outlook when asked about their access to services on base during reintegration. Almost every participant of this study noted some sort of support from the military base. When asked about access to services on base during reintegration: P5 noted, "none."

### **Theme 6: Support From Spouse Service Member**

This theme described those that identified feeling supported by their service member during the reintegration phase and how the military spouses define their support.

P1: “good job handling things... be more affectionate although that is hard for him because he isn’t a touchy-feely person.”

P2: He understood that he went through a very stressful time, but he also realized that it was stressful for me and he did not negate my feelings, just because I was at home. Him supporting was allowing the changes to be instead of being upset about them.

P3: He does say often “tell me what you need me to do and I’ll do it. He is also good about watching [the kids] when I’m at a very stressed point. He tries to take the kids outside or tries to get the routine started or something.

P4: I felt supported by him when he would tell me “he needed his own time or didn’t want to constantly clean.” Mostly because I’m a type-A , clean freak, and must have a clean home. He would communicate the he needed to slow down to my fast pace. This helped me understand his needs and that it was ok he wasn’t back to our “normal” predeployment routine. Communication also help me understand that he needed time to adjust back to our normal routine. I relaxed a bit more.... But most importantly he would express that he’d appreciate me allowing him his own time and space to slowly adjust.

P5: “Sometimes we [military personnel] would meet up coffee and talk.”

P6: He is very supportive of me. He would tell me, “hey if there’s anything you need.” Always very encouraging and letting me know if I need time to myself, go out with my friends or sister in law. He is always telling me “it’s okay and not to

feel guilty about that kind of stuff [things around the house].” He would always tell me, “why don’t you just sit down?”

P7: “Sometimes he will surprise me by saying something on social media that gives me a lot of praise for having to take care of the boys, myself and deal with the house and everything else that goes wrong.”

P8: I felt mildly supported in certain circumstances. He was trying to be supportive and trying to get me out of the house to do things on my own things like that but in hindsight in our situation he was only trying to get me out of the house so that he can communicate with this other person. It’s really hard to say if he was being supportive or not. ... I don’t really know what was genuine.

P9: “he was more understanding and would ask me what was going on at home or what things had changed. We would both talk about expectations and what we needed from each other.”

This theme encompassed the lived experiences of the participants concerning their perspective of how they felt supported by their service members. The participants shared that they felt supported during reintegration.

### **Theme 7: Experiencing Resiliency**

Participants explained how they experienced resiliency during reintegration following the noncombat deployment. Following are the participants who shared their perspectives of their experience.

P1: I think it’s in that moment of taking that deep breath, knowing that it’s gonna be okay. Yeah, you’ve done this before, while it may not actually look like it did

last time, it's gonna workout. You experience whatever you're experiencing emotionally, or you know mentally, this is hard, but you take that deep breath than you realize it's hard right now but it's not always going to be this hard. It does get better, it does get easier, and I think that is one thing that as military spouses, you have to learn through all aspects and definitely during reintegration. It's not always going to look exactly like this, it's not always going to be this hard, it gets better, yeah it gets easier every day you wake up and chose to believe that you know, today is going to be a good day.

P2: I also wasn't naive that there weren't going to be changes. I had no idea what reintegration was or what it would be. It was good to have an idea that things could be stressful, hard and there are resources that you can utilize.

P3: I just kind of always been the kind of "get it done" type of person. I don't know that I ever really relinquished too much responsibility from myself, so I've always just done what I feel like I can handle. And when he comes home it's like anything that he does, it's nice, it's not needed, but it's just nice though. I try not to take on too much more than I can handle by myself. And I always take on responsibilities under the assumption that it's me, so when he does come home it's just kind of like a little bit of stress off my back. I never counted on him for too much.

P4: I think the resiliency for I guess my husband and I is that we both are strong communicators and we both have our own hobbies. So, we're resilient and that you know we can identify what we need to have you know I guess our individual

independent time and then come together. I don't know if that's considered resiliency, but I do think that being able to I guess decompress individually is important and we're not codependent on one another.

P5: "Knowing that eventually it's going to get back to our normal [help with kids activity, dinner every night] and just you know work together to help him adjust. If he is adjusting well and it helps me adjust better."

P6: Communication was the biggest one. But reminding myself that he is a part of the family too and I can't keep chugging along. I have to let him be a part of the decision making, helping with the kids and things. He is an equal part of the partnership. I am so used to being tunnel vision. A lot of it is inner dialogue with my thoughts. Making sure that the communication is okay between us.

P7: I think in a way the military actually prepares us for reintegration by subjecting us to multiple PCS moves. That if anything is a training in resiliency. Starting over finding something new and becoming the new person whether it's in a group of friends or a professional capacity. That actually helps because we are fresh on them [skills], we use them a lot to reinvent ourselves and quickly adapt. I think one of the things that do help that we don't look at is we train for it and we don't even realize it.

P8: "it was definitely more difficult as you're used to being on your own and being so independent you know you forget to ask for help with little things because you essentially don't need them [military personnel]."

P9: “I just took it as life goes on. And considered a lot of it was him adjusting to getting back. My life continues he needs to figure out how to fit back into the world.”

Theme 7 provided the lived experiences by the military spouses in this study proved their resiliency beyond deployment. This theme was important to include to gain a greater understanding of how the military spouses conquer adversity.

### **Theme 8: To Deploy or Not**

Based on the participants’ experiences with reintegration, both positive and negatives aspects of reintegration were shared. Every participant had an opportunity to share their outlook on if they had to decide for the service member to deployment or not.

P1: “I wish for him to deploy. Because that’s his mission and that’s why he came in.”

P2: “It is very complex, I would say deployment has brought us great stress, but I would also say it brought us a lot of growth within ourselves and our marriage... I would probably say yes to deployments...”

P3: I would still probably live through deployment although they’re very stressful on both of us, my husband does love what he does, he is good at his job, he takes pride in what his job is and I would never want to take that away from him.

P4: “...we didn’t hesitate we were just like yes.”

P5: A part of me says you don’t want them to deploy because you want them to come home every night. as much as it’s hard to reintegrate. I was talking about the awkwardness, but there is some excitement in there too... so no, I wouldn’t want him to deploy again.

P6: "I don't love deployments by any means. I understand why they are necessary. I would rather have him home."

P7: "I would and the reason I would is because he enjoys it. He enjoys supporting the mission."

P8: "...definitely not be on a ship."

P9: "I would say deploy. He loves deployment."

These quotes reflect what the participants said about the choice for their U.S. military personnel to deploy or not. The final theme was important to include to allow the military spouses to consider their full experience of reintegration and whether it deterred their decision of choosing for their spouses to deploy or not.

### **Discrepant Cases**

Moustakas (1994) noted that from the individual textural-structural description a composite description of the themes identified from the participants analyses, creating a narrative about the group's experiences (p. 121). Within this section, the themes were broken down. This composition will assist in understanding how the participants experienced the phenomenon in the study.

Based on the themes that emerged from the interviews, the following describes military spouses' experiences during reintegration after a noncombat deployment. The interpretation also addresses the research question: "What are the lived experiences of reintegration for military spouses of active duty U.S. military personnel after a noncombat military deployment?"



Several themes emerged throughout the interviews. The themes identified similarities of the military spouse experiences during reintegration. It appeared as though the participants were self-aware and able to identify specific feelings about the reintegration. The theme: Initial feeling about reintegration was created. Although the participants noted things would change upon their active duty service member's return, some participants could identify more than one feeling upon reintegration. A few women participants reported feelings of happiness, anxiety, and stress. P3 noted feeling "rushed" due to the expectations of the Navy. P4 stated that her reintegration was "pretty easy. P8 and P9 noted feeling angry. The women shared their feelings about reintegration, which supported the theme's development: Military spouses and the community's expectations of reintegration.

Some women noted that their and the military community's expectations were "normal" based on their experience and the information they received from other military spouses within the community. Although a few participants viewed their feelings during reintegration as "normal" and some did not, they all provided perspectives on specific issues they experienced during reintegration with their spouse after a noncombat deployment P8 explained that the expectations were easy compared to many friends in the Navy. She noted no concerns of infidelity and not having children made it "easier" compared to others.

These descriptions of some of the participants perspectives helped form the theme: issues with the U.S. military personnel upon reintegrating. Eight participants provided their view of the issues they experienced upon reintegration with their spouses.

They noted that communication, parenting, and lack of coping techniques to work through difficult times were issues. Whereas P4 noted “none [issues] at all.”

Therefore, the next theme emerged: Coping strategies during reintegration. The participants shared their experiences with how they coped during the reintegration phase. All participants shared healthy coping strategies, as socializing and interacting with others were their primary coping strategies. The participants also shared the support they received from others during reintegration. All nine of the participants explained that they have support outside of their spouses. P7 noted, “social media plays a big piece” in her life to help cope. Specifically, recognition from others on social media, stating they “were thinking about her” as she reintegrated. P8 noted MilitaryOne Source and [drinking] alcohol.

Some of the participants noted they had support from the military community. Thus theme 6: Access services on base during reintegration was created. Most women noted being connected to a military base was important for community groups, shopping, and being close to their spouses’ work. Whereas P5 noted she did not access the base during reintegration.

The next theme: Support from the spouse service member. All nine of the participants explained that they felt support by the active duty U.S. military personal during reintegration. The participants shared that they experienced support by words of affirmation, improved communication, and acts of service. For example, P3 shared that her spouse was very hands-on with their kids and took charge of the daily routines.

In theme 2, the military spouses identified “normal” or “similar” experiences for their feelings and the military community view on reintegration expectations. Therefore, theme 7 emerged: Experiencing resiliency. The women shared that their marriage and way of life have allowed them to adjust and adapt. For example, most women noted staying encouraged and optimistic during reintegration.

The participants explained that they had learned a lot about their marriage and themselves during the reintegration process. The participants shared that there are both positive and negative impacts of reintegrating after a noncombat deployment. Most of the participants noted that if they were allowed to decide for their spouse to deploy or not, they would choose yes.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I presented the participants lived experiences in an attempt to answer the research question: What are the lived experiences of reintegration for military spouses of active duty U.S. military personnel after a noncombat military deployment? I provided the nine participants' demographics, the setting for the study, and an explanation for how the data were coded and analyzed. The interview's narrative responses were used to identify specific themes identified throughout the study to address the phenomenon. The participants shared that although reintegration brings about mixed emotions and challenges, which could result in conflict within their marriage or interpersonal conflict, the participants in this study leaned on the support around them to facilitate the reintegration process with their active duty U.S. military personnel.

In the next chapter, I present a summary of the findings and an interpretation of the results, the limitations of the research, the suggestions for further studies, and the recommendations for social change.

## Chapter 5: Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I summarize the findings presented in Chapter 4 about the lived experiences of military spouses following the reintegration of military personnel returning from noncombat deployment. In Chapter 2, I noted that research focused on the experiences of military spouses, in general, is replete. There is a gap in the literature relating to the lived experiences of military spouses during the reintegration of their marital relationships after the return of U.S. military personnel from noncombat military deployment. The current scholarly literature is lacking a description of military spouses lived experiences during reintegration with their military personnel after noncombat military deployment. The results of this study not only provide an understanding of the lived experiences of military spouses during the reintegration of a noncombat military deployment but also provide awareness of the general social and emotional well-being of military spouses.

I conducted face-to-face semistructured interviews via phone with each participant. I recruited participants via social media through Facebook groups for military spouses and families. I used a transcendental phenomenological study to explore the lived experiences of military spouses following the reintegration of military personnel returning from noncombat deployment. Rich information was used to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon.

I employed a purposeful sampling criterion, in which, the participants met the criteria of being (a) married to an active duty (enlisted or officer) U.S. military personnel

in the Navy, Army, Marine Corps, Air Force or Coast Guard; (b) the U.S. military personnel served a minimum of at least one noncombat military deployment of 6 months or longer; (c) and resided in the same household with the service member before deployment.

Eight themes emerged from the data analyzed: (a) initial feelings about reintegration, (b) military spouses and the community's expectations of reintegration, (c) issues with U.S. military personnel upon reintegrating, (d) coping strategies during reintegration, (e) access to services on base during reintegration, (f) support from spousal service member, (g) experiencing resiliency, and (h) to deploy or not. I used Moustakas modification of van Kaam's method to analyze the data. I used the resiliency model of stress, adjustment, and adaptation as the conceptual framework to provide an understanding of factors common in the life of a military family. I will present the eight themes in this chapter, discuss the limitations of the study, future research recommendations, implications for social change, and conclusion.

### **Interpretations of the Findings**

Participants in the study shared their lived experiences as military spouses following the reintegration of military personnel returning from noncombat deployment. Reintegration of the military member into family life can be an exciting time, but the reintegration process can prove difficult (Wilcox et al., 2015). As the literature review demonstrated, there are difficulties following reintegration from a noncombat deployment (Knobloch & Theiss, 2017; Wilcox et al., 2015).

### **Theme 1: Initial Feelings About Reintegration**

The first theme identified was initial feelings about reintegration. Participants shared many responses during the interview about their feelings about reintegration. Brounéus (2014) noted the effects of psychological symptoms, including anxiety and trauma-related symptoms and separation from family. Noncombat deployment also included feelings of futility and anger associated with low threat missions compared to combat deployment. However, for most military families, return from a deployment can be a happy occasion (Messecar, 2017).

All participants spoke directly about their reintegration experiences. A misconception about reintegration is that it is a purely happy occasion. As noted above, anxiety is a prevalent feeling associated with reintegration following a noncombat deployment. For example, five participants repeatedly noted feelings associated with anxiety and stress. Reintegration can increase avoidance and anxiety among military spouses (Borelli et al., 2014). The findings from this study indicate symptoms related to anxiety are possible with reintegration following a noncombat deployment. However, there was inconsistency when the participants shared their perspectives on how some of their feelings were impacted. The participants did not note avoiding their spouses during reintegration.

For example, P1 said, “In 2006 it was definitely stressful. It was very stressful I think they all are stressful... uncomfortable, exciting, hard, it can be joyful, but hard too. My feelings were all over the place.” While military spouses may experience symptoms

of anxiety during reintegration, their expectations of the reintegration and the community's expectations could be a contributing factor to those symptoms.

### **Theme 2: Military Spouses' and Community's Expectations of Reintegration**

The second theme identified was related to the expectations surrounding reintegration. Most of the participants identified their expectations and the community's expectations were not as anticipated or imagined. The difficulties associated with reintegration come in the form of communication, intimacy, expectations, and the roles of the U.S. military personnel and military spouses (Knobloch & Theiss, 2017; Wilcox et al., 2015). This was expressed by P1, who stated she felt "disappointed because I would have an unrealistic expectation of how it would go when he came home, and it never went that way." P4 commented that her reintegration was easier due to not having children. However, for other military spouses, reintegration was stressful. The findings indicated that military spouses' perceptions of expectations during reintegration were not as imagined. Some expected challenges, while others identified that a stressful reintegration was normal.

### **Theme 3: Issues With U.S. Military Personnel Upon Reintegrating**

The third theme had to do with issues between the military spouse and the military service member. This theme emerged as a result of one interview question in which I asked each participant to share specific issues they experienced with their spouse upon reintegration. The participants provided insight regarding their perspectives of conflict. Some participants noted ineffective communication as an issue. The participants explained that communication was difficult because they were not familiar with their



spouses being home. The participants noted that it took time to adjust back to their routines. P6 shared that communication was the biggest issue for her family during reintegration. P6 needed to communicate with her spouse regarding changes that had taken place while he was deployed. Also, P9 shared she did not communicate what she was feeling and shut down for a period. As mentioned in Chapter 1, difficulties associated with reintegration come in the form of communication, intimacy, expectations, and the roles of the U.S. military personnel and military spouse (Knobloch & Theiss, 2017; Wilcox et al., 2015).

#### **Theme 4: Coping Strategies During Reintegration**

Coping strategies were identified by all participants in this study that helped them cope with reintegration to the best of their ability. As noted in Chapter 2, coping is the effort to tolerate and minimize distress caused by a situation (Braun-Lewensohn & Bar, 2017). P1 noted that emotion-focused coping by journaling to work through her feelings. P6 noted that she engaged in problem-focused coping by taking time to herself and going on walks. Social support was a primary strategy for the participants. P2 and P8 shared that their friends and receiving therapy helped them cope during reintegration.

#### **Theme 5: Access Services on Base During Reintegration**

The support found on military bases provide military spouses the opportunity to meet other spouses by engaging in social events. However, it also provides assistance related to childcare, career, counseling, and education (Edwards Airman & Family, 2020). Findings from this study indicated that the likelihood of military spouses utilizing

base resources during reintegration was great. P1 and P7 noted their therapy was a base resource. In addition, military spouses utilized shopping as a primary resource.

### **Theme 6: Support From Spouse Service Member**

During reintegration, the military spouse must reorganize and adjust to the return of the U.S. military personnel (S. A. Riggs & Cushman, 2014). Support from the spouse service member can aid in safeguarding the military spouse against stressors as a wife and mother. Like many of the participants, P4 noted words of affirmation as primary support. Cascio (2016) noted that affirmations can improve self-worth, such as personal success, which increases the success of a positive reintegration (Clark et al., 2018).

### **Theme 7: Experiencing Resiliency**

This theme provided insight into how participants experienced resiliency during reintegration. McCubbin and McCubbin (1988) define the adjustment phase and adaptation phase as critical aspects of resiliency. The importance of the two phases was solely due to factors as it serves the goal to minimize the challenges of the family's ability to maintain function and fulfill developments (Brown-Baatjies et al., 2008). P1, P5, and P9 noted that throughout the difficulties, they did not give up as they understood their experience [reintegration] was temporary and their lives would go back to "normal." P7 noted that adapting to situations such as multiple PCS prepared her for reintegration.

### **Theme 8: To Deploy or Not**

This theme is a derivative of the lived experiences of the participants. The perspective of the women, both positive and negative effects, were addressed individually to identify what the military spouse's experiences were during reintegration. Based on

that information, the women were asked to share their views if they had to decide for the service member to deploy or not. Most of the women noted they would wish for their spouses to deploy. P1 and P3 noted that deployment is important to their spouses.

The conceptual framework for this research study was grounded in M.A. McCubbin and H. I. McCubbin's (1989a) resiliency model of stress, adjustment, and adaptation. Individuals can adjust and adapt to reintegration based on the four propositions in the model: stress, cohesion, resources, and adaptability. The women noted stress as part of the reintegration phase. Improvement in their mood when cohesion and collaborative relationships were present. The resources available for the spouses on a military base provided protective resources, which resulted in enhanced human development. Lastly, Walsh (2002) noted that how a family confronts and manages a threatening or disruptive experience, buffers stress, effectively reorganizes, and reinvests in life pursuits will influence adaptation for all members and their relationships. The actions by the military spouses in this study has shown that military spouse can be resilient during the stress and adjustment phases and adaptation phase of reintegration after noncombat military deployment. Employing this conceptual framework helped to discover the true essence and lived experiences of these women.

### **Limitations of the Study**

I identified a few limitations in this study: (a) the study may not include participants from all military branches, which may limit the data, (b) the length of noncombat military deployment can also vary, (c) the study consisted of women, and (d) the exclusion of retiree and veterans spouses.

As noted earlier, qualitative studies' sample sizes are small. Therefore, the sample size consisted of nine military spouses. Although the findings of this study were widespread that allowed several spouses to represent the following branches: United States Navy, United States Army, United States Air Force, United States Marines, United States Reserves, and United States National Guard, the population studied contained more spouses from a specific military branch. As a result, it may reflect experiences unique to a particular branch of the military. Furthermore, each military branch reflects different experiences and resources available for military spouses.

The length of noncombat military deployment can also vary based on geographical location. Military deployments can range from 4 to 15 months, depending on the branch of service. The study comprised of military spouses who endured deployments ranging from 6 to 13 months. Therefore, due to more prolonged deployment and deployment extensions, which may impact the military spouse.

Although the study was open to men and women, the study consisted of all women. In addition, the study was not open to retirees and veteran spouses. Men and military spouses of retirees and veterans could likely provide additional information to the lived experiences of military spouses and reintegration.

### **Data Triangulation**

The data triangulation strategy was supported using my dissertation committee by checking the coding structure and the analysis. My committee reviewed the coding and ensured that the van Kaam modified version of Moustakas's data analysis method was implemented correctly to analyze the data. The University Review Board verified the

interview questions to confirm that it was aligned with the research question and the purpose for the study.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

As previously stated, there was a gap in qualitative literature on the lived experiences of military spouses during reintegration after a noncombat deployment. The need to acknowledge and further study the lived experiences of military spouses following reintegration as this study showed a variety of factors that influenced each individual's experience. I designed this study to understand military deployments' impact on military spouses beyond predeployment and deployment phases.

One of my goals of this study was to identify and understand the experiences of reintegration after a noncombat military deployment, the impact it has on military families, and others who may have the opportunity to work with the military population. Because this study has limitations, recommendations for further research are based on these limitations. The recommendations that emerged from my findings are as follows: (a) retired military spouses inclusion, (b) representation from each military branch, (c) and male participants. By understanding the experiences of individuals in this study, recommendations can provide additional knowledge to educators, mentors, counselors, and other resources who serve the military community.

### **Dissemination of Findings**

The findings of this study will be disseminated in a few ways. One goal for dissemination will be to submit the data and findings for publication and present the information at conferences for the military. In addition, the findings will be shared with

military spouse groups. Lastly, the study was vital for educators, mentors, counselors, and other resources who serve the military community to have a better understanding of the effects of noncombat deployments.

### **Implications for Social Change**

As identified above and addressed by participants in this study, noncombat deployment poses challenges for military spouses (Karakurt et al., 2013). Noncombat deployment produces stressors and challenges. In this study, many of the military spouses identified feelings of stress and anxiety due to reintegration. One participant shared challenges while reintegrating with her spouse due to an extramarital affair while on deployment. Another participant noted, extramarital affairs are “normal” in the United States Navy. The implication for positive social change brings awareness of the stressors and barriers that correlate to the social and emotional well-being resulting from noncombat military deployment to educators, mentors, counselors, and other resources who serve the military community.

In understanding that one of the missions of the U.S. military personnel is to deploy, then reintegrate back to their family. The results may enlighten individuals who do not necessarily understand the phases of deployment, including reintegration and the transitions military spouses endure. Furthermore, the conceptual framework for this research study was grounded in M.A. McCubbin and H. I. McCubbin’s (1989a) resiliency model of stress, adjustment, and adaptation. This model was the basis for exploring factors that are common in the life of the military family: the stress and adjustment phases and adaptation phase of reintegration after noncombat military deployment.

Implications for social change to cultivate dialogue about how military communities can provide support to spouses left behind for a noncombat deployment, specifically with a focus on military spouses that promotes resiliency.

Lastly, highlighting the issues with reintegration following a noncombat deployment. For the community that serves military spouses, this study helps to bring awareness of this phenomenon. It is too often that the community speaks of combat deployment and reintegration. This study provided information on the feelings, conflict, support, and resiliency of military spouses. It is important to understand how each deployment and reintegration may come with a different outcome. Also, this study can be used as a resource for the military population and the community to understand psychosocial vulnerability challenges. Consequently, it aids in the structure of interventions that supports military spouses during reintegration.

### **Conclusion**

In this phenomenological study, data were collected from nine participants, all of whom were military spouses of active duty U.S. military personnel. The data collected was important in describing how noncombat deployment can impact military spouses positively or negatively. The military spouse takes on additional responsibilities during deployment. The experience of deployment comes in many phases, as noted in the above literature. The data in this study focused on military spouses and reintegration following a noncombat deployment. It is essential to understand the dynamics when the service member and military spouse reintegrate. The experience shared in this study identify adjustment and adaption.

The voices of military spouses and their experiences with noncombat deployment needs to be heard. There are significant studies of combat deployment and its effect on military spouses. This study was an opportunity to understand the importance of the impact of noncombat deployment. Therefore, anyone providing support to military spouses and families must understand the reintegration phase and its challenges affecting this population.

I employed a phenomenological approach for this study to share the lived experiences of military spouses. I used Moustakas (1994) adapted van Kaam's analysis method to form the steps in his data analysis process. I believe that the results of this study will bring awareness and understanding of the social and emotional wellbeing of military spouses during reintegration after a noncombat military deployment to the community.



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## Appendix A: Informational Flyer for Recruitment

**VOLUNTEERS NEEDED FOR RESEARCH ON THE EXPERIENCES OF A  
MILITARY SPOUSE**

I am looking for volunteers to be interviewed for a study about military spouses and reintegration following noncombat deployment. **YOU MUST BE:**

- **Military spouse (married) to an active duty enlisted or officer U.S. military personnel in the Navy, Army, Marine Corps, Air Force or Coast Guard**
- **The U.S. military personnel has served a minimum of one noncombat military deployment of six months or longer**
- **Reside in the same household before deployment.**

As a participant in this study, you would be asked questions about your personal experiences with reintegration following noncombat deployment. The interviews will take about an hour and will take place at a private agreed-upon location, telephone, or via Zoom. If you are interested, please email me. Please include your full first name and first initial of your last name and phone number for more information.

## Appendix B: Screening Questionnaire

The following questions will be used to determine study participation eligibility as interested individuals initial contact the researcher:

1. Are you married to an active duty military personnel?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
2. Were you residing together before deployment?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
3. Since being married, how many noncombat deployments has the military personnel served?
  - a. 1
  - b. 2
  - c. 3
  - d. More than 4
4. Since being married, how many combat deployments has the military personnel served?
  - a. 1
  - b. 2
  - c. 3
  - d. More than 4



## Appendix C: Interview Questions

1. How long have you and your spouse been married?
2. How long has your spouse been in the military?
3. What branch of the military?
4. How many children do you have?
5. Please explain the duration of each noncombat deployment?
6. What was your spouse role during each deployment?
7. How do you feel about reintegrating (reconnecting with your spouse) after the noncombat deployment?
8. How do those feelings compare to the views of military community?  
(How do you think your feelings compare to the opinions and attitude of the military community?)
9. What were some specific issues you experienced while reconnecting with your spouse after noncombat deployment?
10. How did your experience with reintegration (reconnecting with your spouse) affect you?
11. What coping strategies did you use during the reintegration phase?
12. What type of support do you have?
13. What do you feel has helped you to cope with reintegration?
14. How important is it to you to be close to the military base?
15. How often do you access any services on base during reintegration?
  - a. If so, what services do you access?

16. What type of support do you get support from other military spouses during reintegration?
  - a. And how often?
17. How do you feel supported by your spouse during reintegration?
18. How did you experience resiliency (the adjust and adapt) during the reintegration following the deployment?
19. If you were able to make the decision for your spouse to deploy or not, what decision would you make?
  - a. And why?