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The Lived Experiences of Military Spouses Who Choose to Live Separately

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MA, University of Phoenix, 2006

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Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

This qualitative study was designed and conducted to hear the voices of military spouses who chose to live separately from the active duty spouse. The study also sought to identify potential risks due to the separation and protective factors that were used to positively cope with separation. Previous studies have examined risk factors for military spouses as a result of military induced separation such as deployment. However, no study has been conducted regarding separation by choice of the military spouse and active duty service member. The theory of resiliency provided an understanding of the presence of protective factors and resiliency. Data were collected from 8 military spouses, recruited through social media, using semistructured interviews, who provided details of their lived experience of voluntary separation. The study findings indicated that participants who were voluntarily separated from their active duty spouse were unhappy with the separation. All but 1 of the participants in the study experienced separation stressors such as being stressed, overwhelmed, lonely, and sad because to the separation. Negative psychological symptoms such as depression and anxiety were experienced by military spouses voluntarily separated 7 months and longer. Social support, such as family, was identified by all participants in the study as a protective factor helping them cope with the separation. The findings of the study provide other military spouses with knowledge on voluntary separation. Additionally, federal and state mental health professionals and policy makers can gain better understanding and knowledge about this population to help foster positive mental health and designed laws to assist military spouses.

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to all military spouses. A special dedication to military spouses who are separated from the active duty spouse either military induced or by choice.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I must give thanks and praises to God. “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

Philippians 4:13

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

The problem I investigated in this study was the various issues military spouses encountered while voluntarily living separately from their active duty service members. Military families must regularly cope with stressors such as repeated relocations, frequent separations from the service member, and reorganization of the family unit when the service member returns (Drummet, Coleman & Cable, 2003). On average, a military family moves every 3 to 4 years during the service member's career (Department of Defense [DoD], 2015a), likely resulting in six to 10 moves during a 20 to 30-year career. Moving for a military family involves a new city or country, new school for children or spouse, new friends, new base and regulations, and more. For the military spouse who works outside of the house, relocation also means seeking employment.

Finding a new job after relocation can be difficult. According to a survey conducted among military families, 75% of military spouses said being a military spouse had a negative impact on their ability to find employment (DoD, 2015b). A working spouse can bring self-satisfaction and financial support to the home. The DoD (2015c) found that military families with employed spouses experienced greater financial security, better mental health, and higher satisfaction with the military lifestyle. For such reasons, when a military family relocates, sometimes the decision is made for the family to live separately. In these cases, the service member will report to the new duty station without his or her immediate family. The spouse staying behind takes on a single-parent role and takes on all the responsibilities that might be shared by both spouses. Assuming

this new role can result in additional stress and may lead to health issues that were not previously diagnosed. It is important for the spouse who assumes the single-parent role to maintain his or her physical, emotional, and mental health to keep the family functioning in a positive manner.

Background of the Study

President Obama (as cited in Cozza, & Lerner, 2013) stated that *military family* is defined as active-duty servicemembers, members of the National Guard and Reserve, veterans, and members of immediate and members of immediate or extended families of those who lost their lives while serving their country. Active duty service members serve throughout the United States and abroad. Some of these active duty service members also have families that serve alongside them. In 2014, 43.3% of military service members were married to a civilian with children (DoD, 2015d).

During the active duty service member's career, he or she may be separated from his or her family for various reasons. The separation may result from a Temporary Additional Duty (TAD)/Temporary Duty (TDY) order where the active duty service member works at another duty station for a short period of time. The active duty service member may also be TAD/TDY to attend school or receive additional training for his or her military occupation specialty (MOS). When Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom began, a higher number of service members were separated from their families to fight in Iraq and Afghanistan (Johnson et al., 2007). For those who served in the war, separation during this time lasted anywhere from 3 to 12 months, and at times longer (Johnson et al., 2007). Not only were these service members separated from their

families, but they were serving in a war zone. When military families were separated during these war times, the stress level of the spouse who was left behind increased (Gambardella, 2008). With a separation, the potential for adverse psychological issues is possible for all involved. The problematic issues such as child care, parenting concerns, and education that military families face when they are separated contribute to poor academic performance, depression, and behavioral problems (Drummet, Coleman, & Cable, 2003).

Separation stressors such as loneliness, financial insecurities, children's discipline, and overall feelings that the military is not concerned about families' well-being were also noted during war time (Di Nola, 2008). Orthner and Rose (2008) reported that separation and reunions can result in role confusion and realignment, producing more stress. Although researchers have explored the psychological effects of separation on military spouses during war time, a gap remains regarding the psychological effects of separation on military spouses during voluntary separation (Eaton et al., 2008). This study was needed to identify the potential stressors or risk factors associated with voluntary separation.

Problem Statement

Military spouses face unique challenges due to the military way of life, making them a vulnerable population (Blank, Adams, Kittleson, Connors, & Padden, 2012). Separation from the active duty spouse is one of those unique challenges military spouses are confronted with throughout the servicemember's career. Being away from the active duty spouse can potentially bring about many stressors for the military spouse who is left

behind. The military spouse who is left behind assumes the roles of the active duty service member who is relocating to the new duty station. According to Boss (2000), being left behind can create a sense of "ambiguous loss" for the spouse. As a result, the active duty spouse is unable to carry out his or her role and responsibilities in the home or provide the military spouse that is left behind with emotional support and encouragement necessary in an intimate relationship (Boss 2000).

Maintaining a relationship can be difficult when spouses are separated. Maintaining a marriage with one spouse located in another city, state, or country can prove to be even more challenging. The stressors from the separation can result in adverse psychological effects and possibly spill over to other aspects of the military spouse's life. Research is lacking regarding the mental health status of military spouses during voluntary separation.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of military spouses during voluntary separation from the active duty spouse. The study also served to identify potential risk and protective factors for military spouses associated with living separately. Although previous studies have addressed the impact of separation during deployment, no research has been documented on separation due to personal choice by the military service member and his or her spouse (Eaton et al.,2008). Separation from loved ones may be difficult and challenging voluntarily or otherwise. I explored the challenges and difficulties military spouses faced during voluntary

separations. Those in the mental health profession and military community may be better informed and prepared to work with this population as a result of this study.

Research Questions

The research questions that guided this study are as follows:

Overreaching Research Question: What are the experiences of military spouses who choose to live separately from the service member?

The specific research questions were as follows:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): For military spouses who choose to live separately from the service member, what risk factors are associated with the voluntary separation?

Research Question 2 (RQ2): For military spouses who choose to live separately from the service member, what protective factors are used by the spouses to maintain positive mental health during the separation?

Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical framework for this study was Kaplan, Turner, Norman and Stillson's theory on resiliency. Resiliency is said to be "the capacity to maintain competent functioning in the face of major life-stressors" (Kaplan et al., 1996, p.158). Military spouses face many life-stressors that could be compounded when spouses are separated from their service member. However, military spouses must continue to function under stress without the support of the service member being present. Kaplan at el. (1996) also stated that "resilience is primarily defined in terms of the presence of protective factors (personal, social, familial, and institutional safety nets), which enable individuals to resist life stress" (p.158).

When military spouses choose not to relocate with their service members, additional stress associated with being separated from their loved one may surface along with extra responsibilities. This additional stress, if not dealt with positively, could potentially lead to more serious mental issues. However, the military spouses who choose to live separately from the service member may be resilient if they have protector factors such as family support, coping skills, and outside support (i.e., church). Orthner and Ross (2007) reported that resilience occurs when protective factors serve as "assets" to overcome the risk. It would be beneficial for those spouses and their military service members making the decision to live separately, to identify those protective factors and have them in place before the actual separation occurs.

This theoretical perspective relates to the research questions in that Kaplan et al.'s (1996) theory speaks to how individuals can be resilient. Military spouses who choose to live separately from their service members can live productive lives when they have protective factors in place and call on them when necessary. This study seeks to identify protective factors used by military spouses living separate voluntarily that assist them in being resilient. Chapter 2 will provide more of a detailed explanation of the theoretical foundation.

Nature of the Study

I used a phenomenological design because I sought to understand the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon (see Creswell, 2013). I used semistructured interviews to elicit information to answer the research questions. I conducted the interviews by telephone and online (Skype). I asked all the participants in the study the

same set of questions that I designed. Yin (2014 stated) interview data increased the accuracy of the study because the information come from more than one individual.

The research population consisted of military spouses who made the decision to live separately from the service member spouse. The participants provided data on their lived experiences as it pertained to living separately from their spouse that was not military-induced, adverse psychological effects, and coping skills. I used a phenomenological study because it was the best way to describe the lived experience of military spouses choosing to live separately from the service member.

Definitions

I have used the following terms throughout this study:

Dependents: Family members of a uniformed service sponsor (active duty, reservists or retired) who are eligible to receive care throughout the military health system- (Johnson et al., 2007).

Family Advocacy Program (FAP): provides clinical assessment, treatment and services for military members and their families- (DoD, 2016).

Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF): Wars fought in Afghanistan, Philippines, Somalia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Sahara from 7 October 2001 to 28 December 2014- (We Honor Veterans, 2017).

Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF): Wars fought in Iraq from 20 March 2003 to 18 December 2011- (We Honor Veterans, 2017).

Risk Factors: A characteristic at the biological, psychological, family, community, or cultural level that precedes and is associated with a higher likelihood of problem outcomes- (youth.gov, 2017).

Permanente Change of Station (PSC): The official relocation of an active duty military service member along with any family members living with him or her- to a different duty location, such as a military base- (DoD, 2016).

Protective Factors: A characteristic at the biological, psychological, family, or community (including peers and culture) level that is associated with a lower likelihood of problem outcomes or that reduces the negative impact of a risk factor or problem outcomes (youth.gov, 2017).

Temporary Additional Duty (TAD for the Marine Corps & Navy)/ Temporary Duty (TDY for the Army and Air Force): A United States Government employee travel assignment at a location other than the employee's permanent duty station, that is six months or less in duration- (DoD, 2016).

Assumptions

The sample population for the study was military spouses who chose to live separately from their service member spouses. I used purposeful sampling to identify and select individuals who were knowledgeable about the phenomenon of interest (see Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). My assumption was that these military spouses would be able to provide accounts of their experience living separate from their military service member. A second assumption was that these military spouses will be open and honest in their accounts of their experiences. These assumptions were necessary to gain knowledge

and a better understanding of the lived experience of military spouse choosing to live separately from their military service member.

Scope and Delimitations

In this study, I addressed stressors associated with voluntary separate living, adverse psychological effects, and positive and negative coping skills. These aspects are important because this population can provide information unique to military spouses, their lifestyles, and resiliency factors. In this study, I only included spouses of military service members who voluntarily decided not to relocate with their service member to the military service member's new duty station. Excluded from this study, military spouses separated from their active duty service member due to military-induced separation such as deployment to combat zone or being away for school, training, etc.. Also excluded, military spouses not separated from their active duty service member.

Limitations

Limitations existed as potential weakness for this study. Due to the sample population of this study, the external validity will be limited. The results of the study may not be generalized to a larger population outside the sample population. The study was specific to military spouses in this specific situation. Each experience was unique to the individual and unlikely that the descriptions will be generalized to other groups or even other individuals.

The findings may also be compromised by researcher's bias. I am married to an enlisted Marine. In addition, I voluntarily live separate from my spouse. I ensured no

researcher bias influenced the results of this study and maintained contact with my committee members throughout this study to discuss any issues or countertransference.

I used member checking to ensure credibility. Merriam (2009) stated that the use of member checking is vital to validating the data and discovering any biases the researcher may have because it helps to exclude the chances of misunderstanding participants' responses and view on the subject. Creswell (2012) stated validating the results is important because it helps to determine the accuracy or credibility of the findings. This was achieved through transcript review. Participants reviewed the transcribed interviews and summaries and ensured that my personal views were not included. In addition, to ensure trustworthiness, each participant verified and validated the accuracy of the data once transcribed.

Significance of the Study

Military spouses serve their country in a different capacity than their spouses who are active duty. Spouses serve their country and endure stressors associated with this service. This population has seen limited research regarding their mental health and well-being. Studies that have been conducted on military spouses have mainly focused on their experiences during war-time separation (Mansfield et al., 2010). This study filled a gap in understanding how military spouses cope when faced with a separation that was by choice of the spouse and service member. With all that military spouses endure, it can have an adverse effect on their mental health. According to Eaton et al., (2008) military spouses have a similar rate of mental health problems as service members. To avoid the stressors associated with multiple relocations the military family may choose not to

relocate with the service member. Voluntarily living apart from the service member could potentially bring additional stressors to the spouse and the need for mental health assistance. Today individuals are more informed about external and internal factors that jeopardize the mental health of our service members. Because spouses serve alongside service members, they need to be more informed about the external and internal factors impacting their mental health.

This study has social change implications for the military family. Findings may enable counseling centers personnel on base to develop and provide the necessary treatment and support military spouses who choose not to relocate. Mental health providers in the community will also become knowledgeable of the necessary treatment and support necessary to assist military spouses who choose not to relocate.

In addition, study findings may be used to educate policy makers, including military and government officials, on the impact relocation has on military families. As a result, laws may be designed to assist career spouses who change jobs with every military move. State officials may begin to initiate policy to assist military spouses needing to apply for a license state to state for employment. Doing so helps military spouses live happy, healthy, and productive lives.

Summary and Transition

Although the military spouses are not actively serving in the military, he or she is impacted as a result of being married to an active duty service member. The military spouse may endure multiple relocations, multiple adjustments to new surroundings, multiple job changes, and more. One or a combination of these factors could induce stress

and other adverse psychological effects for the civilian spouse. As a possible way to alleviate or avoid these negative factors, the non-military spouse may choose not to relocate with the active duty service spouse.

Although staying behind and not relocating may eliminate the stressors associated with multiple relocations, the military spouses may open themselves up to a new set of stressors associated with the voluntary separation. With the active duty spouse out of the house on deployment, the spouse left behind takes on new and/or additional responsibilities to maintain the home. Taking on all the responsibilities going on inside of the home as well as outside the home could potentially bring about adverse psychological effects as well. However, these military spouses could prove to be resilient with protective factors in place. Chapter 2 will provide a deeper look at the literature regarding adverse psychological effects and protective factors during military induced separation.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

To date, no study has looked specifically at the mental health status of military spouses during voluntary separation. The literature has accounted for the mental health status of military spouses during war time separation. In this literature review, peer-reviewed articles and existing studies are gathered to support the need for this study. This chapter includes the following themes: (a) overview of the military, (b) deployment in the military, (c) military spouses and emotional cycle of deployment, (d) negative effects of deployment on spouses left behind, (e) resources for resiliency, (f) military and civilian resources, (g) coping, and (h) social support.

Research Strategy

The literature research I conducted used several sources of information. I accessed the following databases: PsycInfo, PsycARTICLES, GoogelScholar, EbscoHost, Military & Government Collection. Keywords used: *military spouses, deployment, deployment phases, risk factors, protective factors, resiliency, Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom, social support, United States military, military demographics, support for military spouses,* and *separation.*

Overview of the Military

The *military* is defined as forces authorized to use deadly force and weapons to support the interests of the state and some or all its citizens. The United States active duty Service Branches of the Department of Defense consists of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and the Air Force (DOD, 2016). Each branch of the Active Duty Services serves a

different mission within the whole purpose of the Department of Defense to secure the United States' security and peace (Military.com 2016). The Army conducts operational and institutional missions around the world (DOD, 2017). The Navy provides combat-ready Naval forces for worldwide operations focused on maintaining the freedom of the seas, deterring, aggression and achieving victory at war (DOD, 2017). The Marine Corps, which is a component of the Navy, serves as the country's expeditionary force in readiness and carries out global missions on both sea and shore (DOD, 2017). The Air Force maintains global superiority in air, space, and cyberspace and is equipped for a rapid worldwide response (DOD, 2017). Men and women serve in each of the four branches of the Active Duty Department of Defense service ensuring the safety blanket of all those who lie beneath. Those serving in the military are classified as active duty, reserves and guard, or retirees (military.com, 2016). This study focused on the spouses of active duty armed service members.

In 2015, there was over 3.5 million military personnel. Out of this, 1,301,443 were active duty (DOD, 2016). Out of the four active duty branches, the Army had the largest number (487,366) with the Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps following respectively (DOD, 2016). The gender make-up of the four branches in 2015 consisted of 201,412 (15.5%) women and 1,100,030 (84.5%) men (DOD, 2016). 31.3% or 407,563 identify themselves as being a racial minority (DOD, 2016). These men and women of the active duty branches served with or without spouses. In 2015, 54.3% of active duty service members were married, 44.2% were never married, and 4% were divorced (DOD, 2016). Active duty service members serve in the United States and abroad. In 2015,

87.5% service members served in the United States and its territories, 6.5% served in Asia, and 5.1% served in Europe (DOD, 2016). Within the United States, the top three states where active duty service members were stationed were California (150,563), Virginia (124,197), and Texas (116,549) (DOD, 2016). The average age for enlisted service member was 27.2 while the average age for officers serving was 34.7 years (DOD, 2016). These men and women in the armed services carry out the mission of their respective branch. The mission of each of these four active duty service branches worked together as a whole to protect the interest and welfare of the United States of America. At times, to accomplish these missions, the active duty service member must serve in a deployment status.

Deployment in the Military

Deployment is activities necessary to move military personnel and materials from a home installation to a specified destination (military.com, 2017). This movement can take place during war or peace time. Those service members who are on deployment serve away from their spouses and family. According to Military.com (2017) deployment for the active duty service members take place in four different phases, predeployment, deployment, post-deployment, and reintegration. Predeployment for the service member consists of training, medical evaluation, briefings, and at times counseling (military.com, 2017). The deployment phase consists of the service member moving from his or her home installation to the designated theater of operation, (military.com, 2017). The service member returning to his or her home installation and preparation for reintegrating, attending to medical and dental evaluations, briefings, and counseling makes up the post-

deployment phase (military.com, 2017). Finally, the service member enters the reintegration phase that consists of reintegrating with his or her family and community in addition to attending possible more briefings, medical and dental evaluation, and counseling (military.com, 2017). The deployment phase can be short or long in length, depending on the mission. A deployment would last no longer than 12 months with the service member having 24 months before being deployed again (Rumsfield, 2005). September 11, 2001, changed the United States and the length of deployment for active duty service members.

The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon killed 2,977 people according to the Cable News Network (2018). The length of deployments for service members increased greatly. After these attacks, deployments increased three-fold and required service members to deploy multiple times (Lewis, 2006). Service members were deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom in 2001 and Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003. According to the Department of Defense (2012), by 2012, 2.4 million military service members had been deployed to serve in Afghanistan and Iraq. United States active duty service members were fighting two wars in more than one country at the same time. Some of these service members served two or more tours in Afghanistan and Iraq (Korbet et al., 2007 & Jaycox, 2008). The multiple deployment of service members during both Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom did not go unnoticed to those in position to make changes to the practices of deployments for active duty and reservist service members. To prevent service members from deploying multiple times, deployments became longer (Tyson & White, 2007). For those serving in the

Army, deployments lasted 12–15 months and some longer at 18 months (Tyson & White, 2007). This solution of longer deployment lengths equated to these service members spending more time away in foreign countries and less time at home with their family.

According to Schodolski (2004) service member were stretched out severely because of the wars both in Iraq and Afghanistan simultaneously. With the need for service members to serve in these two wars, the Pentagon issued stop-loss order. Schodolski (2004) reported that in June 2004, the Pentagon issued the order which prevented service members from getting out of the armed services and required some service members to return to combat duty beyond their service contract. These two wars placed a strain on service members due to dealing with uncertainty regarding deployment cycles, working longer hours, and family separation while being in a warzone environment (Hosek et al., 2006; Lewis, 2006). During a deployment, service members react to and have their own experiences with each phase and the overall deployment. Military spouses left behind continued to maintain what was required at home while also having his or her own reactions and experience to the deployment.

Military Spouses and Emotional Cycle of Deployment

Deployment is an aspect of military life that can happened at any time during the service member's military career. While the military spouse is aware and may expect deployments to take place, it does not make the experience any easier when the service member deploys. Being aware of the deployment does not remove the stress or other negative psychological effects that could potentially impact the military spouse left behind. In a marriage, a couple may have shared responsibilities or specific

responsibilities that keep balance in the home (Boss,2000). In a marriage or relationship, the couple may look to each other for support (emotional and financial), companionship/friendship, security, and more (Gambardella, 2008). These things work together to create a foundation and help maintain the stability of the home. Removing one person may shift the balance of these things.

For some military spouses when the service member is deployed, it may take away the support, companionship, and/or security. The military spouse left behind may now have additional responsibilities for maintaining the home both inside and outside. Without support, this may include care and discipline of the child/children. The military spouse left behind may have other responsibilities such as cooking, cleaning, mowing the grass and maintaining the military housing quarter as a result of the deployment. The military spouse left behind may now oversee the finances of the house for the first time.

Deployment for the service member and the military spouse can be stressful and both may experience a variety of emotions. During each stage of the deployment, the military spouse left behind may face different challenges impacting his or her psychological well-being. Pincus et al. (2001) explained what each stage of deployment is like psychologically for the military spouse left behind. The predeployment stage consists of the service member receiving orders that they will deploy (Pincus et al., 2001) During predeployment, the service member and their military spouse get things in order. This may include getting essential legal documentation such as wills and power of attorney (Military One Source, 2017). The service member and their military spouse organize finances, create a family plan of care, and design contingency plans in case

things change (Military One Source, 2017). The military spouse left behind is anticipating the loss and may begin to put distance between themselves and their service member, mentally and physically (Pincus et al., 2001). There is also the possibility of increased arguments during the predeployment stage (Pincus et al., 2001).

The second stage of deployment consists of the service member leaving his or her home. The military spouse left behind is experiencing the actual absence of the service member. With the service member out of the home, the military spouse must find a new routine (Morse, 2006). The actual departure of the service member creates a variety of emotions experienced by the military spouse left behind (Pincus et al., 2001). According to Pincus et al. (2001), the military spouse may experience sadness, numbness, loneliness, anger, and feelings of abandonment. While the military spouse attempts to navigate multiple emotions, he or she is still expected to carry out the responsibilities of the home.

After several months of the active duty spouse being away, it is time for him or her to return home. Prior to the active duty spouse returning home, the preparations begin. The military spouse left behind may start to get anxious and excited not knowing what to expect emotionally or physically from their service member (Pincus et al., 2001). This is also the time the military spouse left behind may start to feel energized and work to get the house ready, a process that is referred to as “nesting” (Pincus et al., 2001).

Pincus et al., (2001) offers a four-stage model of the emotional cycle military families experience when their service member is deployed. Morse (2006) offers a seven-stage emotional cycle of deployment, which accounts for military families who

experienced deployments within a 9–12 month following a previous deployment (Morse, 2006). This may present a different challenge for families as they attempt to stabilize with the military service member out of the house.

During the first phase of the cycle, anticipation of departure, the military spouse may already be in anticipation of the deployment due to multiple deployments previously (Morse, 2006). For some military spouses, the anticipation of deployment sets in before the deployment order is issued to their service member. During the second phase of the deployment the service member starts to prepare psychologically while the spouse may start to shut down their emotions and become numb to the solider leaving, this is the detachment and withdrawal phase (Morse, 2006). The back to back deployments of their service member may initiate emotion shut down for the wife before the deployment takes place. Within this phase, marital problems may increase due to the shutdown of emotions and numbness (Morse, 2006).

The third phase in Morse's emotional cycle is emotional disorganization (2006). This phase is like the deployment phase of Pincus et al. (2001), when the service member deploys. Spouses experiencing multiple deployments may not get the time needed to recover from the previous deployment and experience feelings of burnout and fatigue (Morse, 2006). As stated earlier, during the time the service member is deployed, the spouse left behind starts to form new routines. Having to form a new routine yet again may be impacted due to feelings of being overwhelmed (Morse, 2006). When the military spouse left behind can be resilient to the multiple emotions experienced because of the multiple deployments, he or she is in the recovery and stabilization stage (Morse, 2006).

The last stage of Morse's seven stage model is the anticipation and preparation of the service member returning home. Unlike Pincus et al. (2001), Morse breaks the last stage down into two stages.

When the service member returns from deployment, both the military spouse and the service member are experiencing a mixture of emotions. During the sixth stage—return adjustment, and renegotiation—the military service member could be experiencing combat stress, which could potentially create significant stress for the spouse to manage (Morse, 2006). Like the military spouse left behind during the detachment and withdrawal stage, the service member may numb their emotions and shut down creating further marital dysfunction and arguments (Morse, 2006). During the last stage of Morse (2006) emotional cycle the family is attempting to renew their relationships and attachment to one another (Morse, 2006). This stage is called reintegration and stabilization and can last up to six months (Morse, 2006). While the family is attempting to stabilize and reintegrate, the service member could receive orders for another deployment, causing further distress in the family as Stage 1 begins all over again (Morse, 2006).

Negative Effects of Deployment on Spouses Left Behind

Stress describes physical, biological, or psychological conditions that are beyond the individual's control and can hinder the individual's ability to adapt (Segerstrom, 2007). The source(s) of the stress can be external (i.e. military spouse's deployment) or internal (i.e. thoughts about the spouse's safety on deployment) (Conard & Matthews, 2008). The stress state can be acute (i.e. episodic) or chronic (i.e. persistent) (Lovallo, 2004).

Typically, an individual will respond to stressors through extraordinary physical or mental effort, or through reduced performance (Conrad & Matthews, 2008). Barlow, Lehrer, Woolfolk, & Sime (2007) reported that mental or physical exhaustion or injury could be the result of extreme effort over time in response to chronic stress.

Service members serving in a combat area experienced their own stressors while deployed. Service members experienced stressors such as long working hours, war zone environment and extreme temperature (Vogt, Samper, King, D., King, A. & Martin, 2008). Back at home, military spouses contended with a variety of social and emotional stressors such as adjusting to military rules and regulations, highly mobile lifestyle, and often isolation from extended family and civilian communities (Segal, 1986; Eaton et al., 2008). Added stressors were experienced by military spouses when service members deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq with "unprecedented lengthy and multiple deployments" (Park, 2011). According to Faber, Willerton, Clymer, MacDermid and Weiss (2008), military spouses left behind experienced constant concern over the safety and well-being of their active duty spouse, Service members, military spouses, and their families experienced periods of extreme fear and exacerbated stress due to lengthy separations (Verdeli, et al., 2011).

Wexler & McGrath (1991) reported that military spouses experienced higher levels of anxiety and insomnia due to the duration of the deployment. SteelFisher, Zaslavsky, Blendon, and the National Library of Medicine (2008) also found that the duration of deployment impacted the stress levels of military spouses left behind. In a study conducted by The National Military Family Association (2005) one spouse

reported the mental struggle she felt when she found out her husband would be deployed for a year. She reported feeling "defeated" before the deployment even began (The National Military Family Association, 2005). Spouses experienced more significant feelings due to the separation when deployment was longer (Figley, 1993).

SteelFisher et al., (2008) conducted a comparison study of 355 spouses of Army soldiers whose spouses' deployments were extended to 419 spouses who husbands returned home as scheduled or earlier than expected. The study found the spouses who experienced extended deployment had higher levels of depression (53.0 % vs 33.8 %), loneliness (85.3% vs 72.3%), and anxiety (64.2 % vs 40.6%) (SteelFisher et al., 2008). From the study conducted by SteelFisher et al.in 2008, Flake, Davis, Johnson, and Middleton (2009), found that military families are better able to cope with shorter deployments that last 6 months or less.

Mansfield et al. (2010) found that the rate of psychopathology for wives of Army soldiers increased as the duration of the deployment increased. The findings showed higher levels of depressive disorders, sleep disorders, anxiety disorders, acute stress reaction, and adjustment disorders among the Army wives whose husband were deployed for one to 11 months compared to Army wives whose husband were not deployed (Mansfield et al., 2010). The study also found for the Army wives whose husband was deployed more than 11 months had even higher levels of psychopathology than those wives who experienced deployments from one to 11 months long (Mansfield, et al., 2010). Lester et al. (2010) used the Brief Symptom Inventory and conducted a cross-sectional study of 163 active duty Army and Marine Corps spouses, found the spouses

had significantly high levels of depression and distress with longer deployments. From these findings, Lester et al. (2010) showed deployment duration as significant predictor of the wife's functioning during deployment.

DeBurgh, White, Fear, & Iverson (2011) reported that spouses of service members who deployed to war zone experienced widespread psychological morbidity and social dysfunction since the Vietnam war. Burton, Farley, and Rhea (2009) found that military spouses of deployed service member experienced stress twice as high than those military spouses of service member not deployed. Studies conducted by Burton, Farley, and Rhea (2010) and Dimiceli, Steinhardt, and Smith (2010) showed that 85% out of the wives of deployed service members surveyed, reported foreign deployment of their spouse as the most stressful situation they experienced in the last five years, having experienced perceived stress and somatization. The American Psychiatric Association (2013) characterized somatization as 1) a history of physical complaints prior to age 30, which occur over a period of several years, 2) significant impairment in functioning or a history of resulting medical treatment, and 3) lack of explanation for the reported symptoms or for the severity of the complaints after seeing a physician.

Padden, Connors, & Agazio (2011) reported that adjustment stress, a term used to imply psychological distress, was prevalent among wives of active duty service members. Adjustment stress among wives of active duty service members was also linked to increases in sexual frustration (Allen, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2011). Burton et al. (2009) reported adjustment stress was also linked to physical health complaints. In addition, Warner, Appenzeller, Warner and Grieger (2009) stated adjustment disorder

served as a barrier to seeking mental health care. Eaton et al. (2008) reported that many wives of service member had significant adjustment and emotional problems, such as depression and anxiety that interfered with their quality of life to include. As defined by the American Psychological Association (2017) *depression* is a diminished pleasure in daily activities, irritability, hopelessness, and intense sadness. *Anxiety* is defined as symptoms such as uncontrollable worry, restlessness, and difficulty concentrating on daily activities (American Psychological Association, 2013). Mansfield et al. (2010) reported that wives of active duty service members were more likely to experience depression and anxiety than civilian wives. Lester et al. (2010) reported that a depression diagnosis was more likely to be present throughout all stages of the deployment, even post-deployment, while anxiety did not. Lester et al. (2010) suggested that depression may have last psychological impairment for military families. Both psychological distress symptoms have important implications for health and well-being of the left behind spouse during deployment and separation. In addition, it may negatively impact the spouse's overall satisfaction with the marriage.

Resources for Resiliency

Protective factors can be defined as "a characteristic at the biological, psychological, family, or community (including peers and culture) level that is associated with a lower likelihood of problem outcomes or that reduces the negative impact of a risk factor or problem outcomes" (youth.gov, 2017). The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration (2015) defines *protective factors* as characteristics associated with a lower likelihood of negative outcomes or that reduce a risk factor's impact. In addition,

protective factors may be positive countering events (Substances Abuse and Mental Health Administration, 2015). For some military spouses, deployment and separation from their active duty service member can be a risk factor for adverse psychological effects such as depression and anxiety (Eaton et al., 2008). Having protective factors such as resources, coping strategies, and support can help military spouses left behind deal effectively with the deployment and separation. Military and civilian organizations have made large investments in resources for service members and their families to help mitigate the effects of deployment cycle stressors (Department of Defense, 2004; Meredith et al., 2011).

Military and Civilian Resources

When military service members are given orders for deployment, military spouses left behind attend predeployment briefings that is provided by the service member's unit. At the briefings, military spouses learn the general idea of where their active duty service member will be during the deployment, how to contact the service member if there is an emergency, and how long the deployment may last. Military spouses are provided with an address to mail letters and care packages from home and items that their service member can receive in the mail while on deployment. Each branch of the active duty services provides military spouses and families left behind with resources and services to help them be resilient during the deployment and separation.

The Airman and Family Readiness Center is the service organization and focal point for Air Force families (Robins Air Force Base, 2017). The Family Readiness Center provides assistance, education, and information for planning ahead before a family

separation to ensure loved ones are prepared during the absence of the military member (Robins Air Force Base, 2017). The United States Navy also offers a variety of programs to help Navy families cope with the hardship of deployment (US. Navy, 2003). The Fleet and Family Support Center provides counseling and predeployment briefs (US Navy, 2017). The Command Ombudsman provides spouses left behind with front-line information and serves as a direct link of communication between the family members and the service member's command (US Navy, 2017). Spouses left behind also have Navy Chaplains as resources if they want faith-based counseling.

The Marine Corps' Community Counseling Center offers military spouses assistance with deployment. Family Readiness Officers serves as a direct link between the family members and their service member's Command. The Family Readiness Officers provides readiness and support for spouses left behind during the deployment. The Army also offers an array of behavioral health services for military spouses to utilized (US Army, 2015). The Family Readiness Group focuses sharply on family readiness as a result of lessons learned during the 1990–91 Gulf War (US Army, 2017). Originally called the Family Support Group, it was renamed to the Family Readiness Group to emphasize the need for readiness and self-sufficiency among Army Families in the modern Army (US Army, 2015). These groups and services offered by the four branches of the Armed Services also bring spouses left behind together for social activities, networking, and support.

For military spouses and families, formal programs, such as the ones listed above, can promote community network of services through outreach and foster resiliency that

strengthens the military and family members (United States Navy, 2013). Other programs such as Families Overcoming Under Stress or FOCUS provides military service members, their spouses, and family members with resilience training (Family Overcoming Under Stress, 2017). FOCUS provides skills to help families overcome challenges associated with military life such as how to cope with each stage of deployment (Family Overcoming Under Stress, 2017).

Joining Forces is an initiative initiated in 2011 by First Lady Michelle Obama and Dr. Jill Biden. This nationwide initiative called on Americans to rally around military service members, veterans, and their families (The White House, 2014). Joining Forces serves to bring awareness about the service, sacrifice, and needs of military families (The White House, 2014). As a national initiative, this formal program supports military spouses and families in three identify areas, employment, education, and wellness (The White House, 2014). These programs work to help military spouses cope with not only deployment and separation from the military service member, but other stressful aspects associated with military life.

Coping

Coping as defined by Carroll (2013) is "the intentional efforts we engage in to minimize the physical, psychological, or social harm of an event or situation". Folkman & Lazurus (1980) defined *coping* as "the cognitive and behavioral efforts made to master, tolerate, or reduce external and internal demands and conflicts among them". Lazarus (1993) reported that coping is a process that represents two major functions that are either problem-focused or emotion-focused.

Emotion-focused aims at managing the emotions associated with the stressful situation or event, as opposed to changing the situation itself. Emotion-focused coping would involve the military spouse left behind engaging in strategies that change the way he or she thinks or perceive the stressful event, such as the deployment of the service member. Wishful thinking, minimization, or avoidance are emotion-focused strategies that an individual may utilize to decrease perceived stress from an event (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). During a deployment the military spouse left behind may use emotion-strategies to cope with the deployment and separation. The military spouse left behind may avoid watching news or media coverage showing service members in war-zone areas. While separated, the military spouse left behind may set a goal to accomplish before the service member's return or focus on something such as school or learn a new hobby.

Problem-focused coping aims to resolve the stressful event or situation or alter the source of the stress. Lazarus (1991) stated that problem-focused coping utilizes problem solving skills such as defining the problem, generating alternatives solutions, cost/benefit analysis of the alternatives, choosing the appropriate course of action, and acting. Problem-focused coping should be utilized by an individual when they can change or alter the situation. When a situation is out of the individual's control, the use of problem-focused would not be useful and may produce more stress. The use of problem-focused coping may not be useful or beneficial for the military spouse left behind in regard to the actual deployment of the service member. He or she may benefit better from the using problem-focused coping for situations he or she can control that may come up during the

service member deployment. This may include financial problems/learning how to budget, child care, car or home maintenance, feelings of loneliness or depression.

Blank, Adams, Kittleson, Connors and Padden (2012) reported problem-focused behaviors such as supportant (i.e. support system) and confrontive behaviors (i.e. using constructive problem-solving strategies such as compromising), showed to be effective in coping with deployment separation. In a study conducted by Dimiceli et al. (2010), among military spouses, problem-focused coping strategies and controllability were significantly related to decreased depressive symptoms, while emotion-focused coping was positively related to increased physical symptoms. Eight military wives who participated in a qualitative phenomenological study all reported using problem-focused strategies, during their spouse's deployment in Iraq, by reaching out to the military community support network (Chambers, 2013). Military spouses in the same study conducted by Chambers (2013) also reported using emotion-focused coping strategies to include prayers, seeking protection of spirituality, and reframing the situation through positive self-talk.

Padden et al. (2011) reported studies have shown that among military spouses, different coping behaviors are used among those with previous deployment separation, ranks, and those who grew up in a military family. Less stress was experienced during the deployment by military spouses left behind when the spouse perceived his or her coping behaviors to be effective (Blank, Adams, Kittleson, Connors, and Padden, 2012). According to Green (2011) unfortunately, for many military spouses left behind, certain demographic factors such as young age and young motherhood are predisposed to

ineffective coping during the deployment. Results from a study conducted by Everson, Darling, and Herzog (2013) showed that among military spouses with a higher sense of meaningfulness, manageability, and perception of comprehensibility they experienced better satisfaction with their lives however, factors such as length of deployment and ethnic background influenced their satisfaction and perception of family coping. When stressors are handled with ineffective coping skills, it has the potential to manifest psychological and/or physical with ailments such as anxiety, depression, fatigue, and sleep disturbances (Padden and Posey, 2013). Social Support can help to buffer these psychological and physical ailments.

Social Support

Shumaker and Brownell (1984) described *social support* as when two individuals exchange resources that are perceived by either the recipient or the provider to be intended to enhance the recipient's well-being (Shumaker & Brownell, 1984). Marsella and Snyder (1981) referred to social support as the social connections provided by the environment. Central to mediating stressful situations and relationships is social support (Whelan, 1993). Chronister, Chou, Frain, Cardoso's (2008) social support theory states that when there are stressors and the individual has a negative interpretation it can lead to health problems. Chronister et al. (2008) also stated that with social support those effects of stress on health and adjustment can be moderated. Willis and Shinar (2000) outlined five types of support that are emotional, instrumental, informational, companionship, and validation.

Emotional support is showing compassion, empathy, and genuine concern for an individual. For spouses left behind, having emotional support would consist of having someone or multiple people to share their experiences and/or feelings about the deployment and other concerns/issues while the military spouse is deployed. Emotional support can come from family members, friends, and/or the units Family Readiness Officer. Instrumental support consists of tangible (financial) help. An example of this would be the service member's unit providing child care to the spouse left behind. Allowing him or her to have some personal time to go a movie and/or dinner.

Informational support is any information provided that is useful or provides advice or guidance. Spouses left behind receives information support when they attend briefings provided by the unit. This would also be information that they receive from their spouse which and other information provided throughout and after the deployment. Companionship refers to friendship or close relationships. Companionship support for spouses left behind could consist of the spouses forming bonds and friendship and engaging in activities together. The last type of support, validation, refers to one having his or her feelings recognize or affirmed. For military spouses left behind, this could be having their feelings validated by their service member's command/unit. The stress the military spouse left behind experience during the deployment and separation may not necessarily be removed by the presence of social support. Rather, the level of perceived social support is a better indicator of coping success (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Summary

In summary, the men and women that serve active duty in the armed forces serve by choice. These service members defend our nation and interests here at home and abroad. At times, the service member may deploy from their home base, spouse, and family. The literature showed that deployment created additional stress for military spouses left behind. While the service member was deployed, the military spouse acquired additional roles and responsibilities as a result of the service member's absence. The literature also showed that the absence of the service member may also result in a loss of support and companionship for the military spouse left behind. The deployment and separation from the service member produced stress and other negative psychological effects such as depression and anxiety. In addition, military spouses left behind also experienced adjustment stress, physical complaints, and other distress.

The literature demonstrated that while military spouses left behind experienced stress and other negative psychological effects, with protective factors and resources in place, military spouses left behind can manage the stressors and negative psychological effects associated with the deployment. Resources offered through military and civilian sectors helped spouses left behind positively cope during the deployment. In addition, the literature demonstrated the use of various coping strategies, both emotion and problem and problem-focused, helped military spouses left behind reduce and manage stressors associated with deployment and separation. The present study examined the negative impact of separation on military spouse as a result of voluntary separation and ways

military spouses proved resiliency while separated. The research design that aided in answering the research questions is presented in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

In chapters 1 and 2, I discussed the need to better understand risk factors that negatively impact the lives of military spouses who choose to live separate from their military spouses. In addition, I discussed the need to better understand what protective factors may help to reduce or eliminate these risk factors. Recent studies have explored the impact of military induced separation, such as deployment to war zone areas, on military spouses. The literature, SteelFisher et al. (2008), showed that military spouses may experience adverse psychological effects such as depression, anxiety, and loneliness when they must be separated from the military spouse. The literature (Meredith et al., 2011 & Department of Defense, 2004) also showed that having programs in place for military spouses helped to decrease these negative psychological and physical symptoms. Kaplan et al. (1996) theory of resilience can be used to explain how these military spouses, despite all they face while being separated from the military spouse, can be resilient in their situation.

In this chapter I provided the qualitative research methodology used to explore the lived experiences of military spouses who choose to live separate from their active duty military spouses. In this chapter I also discussed the methodology, design, role of the researcher, participants selection, and procedures.

Research Methodology

I selected a qualitative methodology for this study. According to Maxwell (2005) a qualitative study should be used when there is a need to have a better understanding of

the topic. While there is literature on the impact of separation on military spouses, it serves the purpose of understanding these impacts during war time deployment. I conducted this study to understand the impact of separation on military spouses that was voluntary. Creswell (2007) stated that a qualitative study should be conducted when there are no variables to identify as it relates to a specific group or population with a specific problem. I also conducted this study with the intent to identify what, if any, psychological factors that negatively impact the lives of military spouses during a voluntary separation. Creswell (2007) also stated that a qualitative study should be conducted to hear the voices of the participants and to understand how participants in a study addressed a problem or issue. The military spouses that participated in this study had the opportunity to have their voices heard regarding how they addressed this issue of voluntary separation. Maxwell (2005) suggested using a qualitative study when the method will provide the necessary data to answer the research question(s). A qualitative study allowed participants to share in his or her own words their lived experience of living separately from the military spouse, voluntary. Semistructured interviews captured participants' thoughts, feelings, and actions without being limited by a choice of answers. As a result of the participants' responses, I gained the data necessary to answer the research questions and a better and in depth understanding of the impact of living separate, voluntarily, on the military spouse.

Research Design

Within qualitative methodology, there are several approaches that could be. I selected a phenomenological approach for this study. Moustakas (2004) suggested that a

phenomenological approach be used when the intent of a study seek to understand a common meaning for a group of individuals and their lived experience. For t study, I sought to understand the common meaning of military spouses who are voluntarily separated from their active duty spouse. Moustakas, (2004) also suggested that the phenomenological approach is used when the researcher needs to make meaning out of the experiences of people to address an issue being studied. In this study, I addressed possible risk factors associated with voluntary separation and protective factors used by the participants.

I considered other approaches for this study and decided a phenomenological approach was best. According to Creswell (2007) a narrative approach would allow for a lived experience of one individual. For this study I wanted to capture the lived experience of more than one military spouse therefore, a narrative approach was not used. A grounded approach, as described by Creswell (2007), is an approach that attempts to define a new theory. The intent for this study was not to define a new theory thus, a grounded approach was not best for this study. I also considered an ethnographic approach which is used to study the culture and day-to-day of the participants in a study. Once again, this was not the intent of this study and an ethnographic approach was not used. The last approach considered was a case study. Creswell (2007) stated this approach is used when a study examined one or more cases within a bonded system using multiple sources of information. In this study I used military spouses as the source of information for living a voluntary separation from the military service member.

Measures

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe how military spouses experience living voluntarily separate from their military spouse. For this study, living voluntarily separate meant the military spouse did not live in the same location with the service member at their duty station. In this study I used semistructured interviews and specific questions for the interview.

Research Questions

The research questions that guided this study were as follows:

Overreaching Research Question: What are the experiences of military spouses who choose to live separately from the service member?

The specific research questions were as follows:

RQ1: For military spouses who choose to live separately from the service member, what risk factors are associated with the voluntary separation?

RQ2: For military spouses who choose to live separately from the service member, what protective factors are used by the spouses to maintain positive mental health during the separation?

Role of the Researcher

As the researcher, my role included recruiting participants for the study, conducting interviews, and collecting and analyzing data. According to Groenewald (2004), when conducting phenomenological research, a researcher should not be nor pretend to be separate from his or her own presuppositions about the phenomenon. I have

been a military spouse for the last 18 years. Not only have I lived the experience of multiple deployments, but for the last 4 years, I have lived the experience of voluntary separation from the service member. These lived experiences have provided me with personal knowledge of possible adverse psychological effects and the importance of support during the voluntary separation. This presented as both beneficial and challenging for me.

Having the inside knowledge and being a military spouse helped me build rapport with the participants, military spouses, who were in the study. This rapport helped the participants feel safe and comfortable with me to share openly their successes and hardship as it related to living voluntarily separate. Another benefit of having these experiences was my familiarity with the military life, culture, and terms.

Having lived the experience of voluntary separation from the military spouse, it was important that I did not bring any presuppositions to the study. This study sought to gather information and understanding from military spouses who were living separate from his or her spouse that is not-military induced and how best the military and civilian sector can assist them to be successful during the separation. It was vital for me to keep any personal biases and opinions out the study. I kept in contact with my dissertation committee and discussed all potential biases I experienced while conducting this study. No other potential ethical issues are anticipated.

Participants Selection

The participants in this study were seven women and one man who meet the following inclusion criteria: (a) married to an active duty service member either in the

Marine Corps, Army, Navy, Air Force, or Coast Guard (enlisted or officer); (b) lived separately from the active duty service member voluntarily; (c) lived separately for at least 3 months. For a phenomenological study, the suggested number of participants is three to 10 (Dukes, 1984). Moustakas (2004) suggested that a sample size of a minimum of eight for phenomenological studies that use interviews. For these reasons, for this study used no less than eight participants. Both Moustakas (1994) and Silverman (2011) suggested a minimum of eight participants as sufficient to gather a thorough account of personal experience to achieve data saturation in a phenomenological study.

I recruited participants with a public notice sent out on the social media Facebook and LinkedIn. Social media Facebook had both public and private groups for military spouses. This allowed for access to participants that fit all the criteria for this study. The social media LinkedIn also provided for access to military spouses who fit the criteria for this study.

Procedures

I sent emails to military acquaintances and asked for support and to informed others of the study. I provided contact information for those interested in participating. I sent out public notice on social media outlets Facebook and LinkedIn that was posted on my individual page. The public notice described the study and criteria for participation. The public notice also contained my contact information. In addition, I recruited participants from private Facebook groups, Military Spouses Network and PhD Women's Network, that I am a member of. Both groups' administrator was provided a description of the study along with approval letter from Walden's IRB prior to being posted in the group. All those

interested in participating in the study were prescreened with the use of a brief questionnaire via email to ensure they met criteria for participation in the study. An informed letter of study and consent form for participants was emailed to those who met criteria to participate. Once I received the signed consent form, I contacted the eligible participant to schedule a face-to-face interview. A video or telephone conference was scheduled for participants outside the geographical location. A debriefing took place after the interview to ensure no psychological harm was endured during the interview.

I conducted all interviews, recordings, debriefing, and transcribing. Each of the participants participated in a second informal interview by telephone one month after the initial interview. one month from the first interview. Each participant was able to review their transcribe interview and validate for accuracy. Two peers were selected to review all transcribed interviews. They analyzed the transcripts and develop independent interpretation and themes. The two peer reviewers adhered to all ethical protections of the participants' information in the study.

Data Collection

I collected data from the online (Skype) and telephone, using semistructured interviews with participants. Each participant answered the same open-ended questions, found in the Appendix. Moustakas (1994) stated the use of open-ended questions allow for participants in a study to share their lived experienced about a phenomenon without being restricted to a set of answers. Each interview lasted approximately forty-five to sixty minutes. I scheduled interviews as needed to collect the data. Video and telephone conferences provide a way to collect data from participants outside the geographical area.

I audio taped and transcribed each interview word for word. I organized and created a file for each participant. Creswell (2013) suggested files be organized in order to be better prepared for the analysis process. All files (i.e. audio, transcribed interviews, all paperwork) was stored in my home office in my private locked desk.

Data Analysis

With the data organized and all interviews transcribed, I conducted further analysis. I analyzed the data following the steps outlined by Moustakas (1994).

Horizontalization: This consisted of going through all transcribed interviews and highlighting any significant statements.

Cluster of Meaning: Statements grouped together and developed into themes.

Textural Description: Themes developed were used to write a description of what the participants experienced with the phenomenon.

Structural Description: A written description also describe how the participants experienced the phenomenon.

Essence: Finally, a composite description was written to include the textural and structural description to describe the essence of the phenomenon.

I also utilize the software MAXQDA. This software is used for qualitative research. Using the MAXQDA software assisted me in organizing and analyzing the data that was collected from the interviews. MAXQDA also assisted me with coding and categorizing themes.

Verifications of Findings

In conducting a qualitative research, I sought to understand the participants' experience with the phenomenon. In a qualitative study, the study needs to demonstrate credibility (Creswell, 2007). To ensure that the findings were accurate, various forms of validation were used. Creswell (2007) suggested using at least two of the eight validation strategies. For this study, I selected three out of the eight validation strategies suggested by Creswell (2007) to validate the findings from this study. For this study, I used clarifying the researcher bias, member checking, and peer review as validation strategies.

I used clarifying researcher bias as the first step to verify the findings in this study. According to Creswell (2007), one way to clarify researcher bias is by commenting on past experiences that may have shape the approach and interpretation to the study and any biases. I commented on my personal experience, connection with the population in this study, and biases under the sections Limitation (Chapter 1) and Role of Researcher (Chapter 2). As stated by Creswell and Miller (2007) commenting on past experiences allow for readers to understand the researcher's position early in the study in order that readers suspend biases as the study proceeds. I also maintained a reflective journal and recorded my personal experience, feelings, thoughts, and opinions associated with the interviews. I wrote reflections prior to and after each interview. Reflective journaling also helped me exam any biases, beliefs, and/or assumptions that may impact my interpretations of the data. While it was not necessary during the study, I had the ability to contact my dissertation chair and/or committee member to process and receive feedback to preserve validity and reliability of the research.

I also used member checking to validate my findings. Chang (2014) stated member checking is used to increase trustworthiness in a qualitative study. In addition, Chang (2014) stated member checking allows for sharing data, analytic categories, and interpretations with participants in the study who provided the information. Participants in the study reviewed their transcribed interview, corrected misinterpretations, and provided additional information that was omitted. In a study, member checking is described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as the "most crucial technique for establishing credibility" (p. 135) because it allows for participants in the study to ensure the data collected is true and correct. Peer review also provided validity to this study.

Creswell and Miller (2000) stated peer review or debriefing allows for a review of the data research process by someone external. I selected two peers educated and trained in qualitative inquiry for this validation strategy. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) peer review serve to support, challenge assumptions (from reflective journal) and ask the hard questions about method and interpretations. The two peers selected performed all the tasks listed above and provided written feedback. Creswell and Miller (2000) also stated about peer review that this external review adds credibility to a study conducted. The validation strategies listed above contributed to the accuracy of the findings. Likewise, I used different strategies to make this study reliable.

According to Creswell (2007) one way to obtain reliability in a study is with the use of a good quality tape recorder and transcribe the tape. I used a good-quality tape recorder that provided for optimal recording of participants' interviews that contributed to straightforward transcribing. After I transcribed the interviews, I used member

checking for accuracy. The use of a computer program, as suggested by Creswell (2007), to analyze the data provide reliability in a study. I used the computer program MAXQDA to analyze the data from this study to further reliability in this study

Ethical Protection

Participants in this study were adults, at least 18 years of age and older. Participants, as required, read and signed consent prior to their participation. Participants acknowledged their understanding of this study, what their participation entailed, and participated willingly. Participating in this study exposed participants to minimal risk of harm. Participants could withdraw from the study at any time due to harm because of what they shared about past and current emotions and feelings associated with the voluntary separation. In addition, a referral to a local service would have been made immediately. Prior to the start of collecting data, I obtained approval from IRB to conduct the study. I maintained participants' confidentiality, using assigned pseudonym for each participant. I stored all information collected to include paperwork, files, audiotapes, consents, and transcripts in a private locked desk located in my home office. In addition, all paperwork will be stored for a minimum of 5 years.

Summary

For this study I used a qualitative measure. I selected a phenomenological approach to hear the voice of military spouses who chose to live separately from the military spouse. I conducted semistructured interviews with eight participants who met criteria for the study. Data collected from the semistructured interviews were organized and prepared for analysis. Interpretations and themes developed from the data was validated for accuracy

using the validation strategies clarifying research bias, member checking, and peer review. The data will be presented and discussed in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of military spouses during voluntary separation from the active duty spouse. In this study I also examined risk and protective factors associated with living separate and challenges military spouses face during the voluntary separation.

Overreaching Researching Question: What are the experiences of military spouses who choose to live separately from the service member?

RQ1: For military spouses who choose to live separately from the service member, what risk factors are associated with the voluntary separation?

RQ2: For military spouses who choose to live separately from the service member, what protective factors are used by the spouse to maintain positive mental health during the separation?

In this chapter, I will present the results of the qualitative analysis conducted to answer the research questions. The chapter is outlined in the order of participant demographics, data collection, data analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, results, and summary.

Demographics

A total of eight military spouses married to active duty service members across different military branches (Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps) participated in the study. Seven of the participants were women and one was a man. All the participants in the study have been living separately from their active duty spouse voluntarily with various length of time from 3 months to 5 years. The participants age ranged from 21 to

52-years-old. The length of marriage ranged from 11 months to 24 years of marriage. I assigned pseudonym to each participant to maintain their anonymity. Table 1 shows the profile of the participants.

Table 1

Participants' Demographics

Participants/Gender	Age	Education	Length of Voluntary Separation	Years Married
Alpha/Female	41	Master	4 months	18 years
Bravo/Male	52	Bachelor	5 years	18 years
Charlie/Female	28	Master	3 months	11 months
Delta/Female	33	Master	7 months	10 years
Echo/Female	21	HS Diploma	1 year	2 years
Foxtrot/Female	34	Master	1 year	9 years
Golf/Female	48	Master	2 years	24 years
Hotel/Female	38	Master	1 year	15 years

Data Collection

For this study, I collected data using online (Skype) and phone interviews with eight participants who were (a) married to an active duty service member either in the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, or Coast Guard (enlisted or officer); (b) live separately from the active duty service member voluntarily; (c) live separately for at least 3 months. To gain a better understanding of military spouses living a voluntary separation from the military service member, I conducted semistructured interviews with each participant. I recruited participants through a public notice I sent out on social media sites Facebook and LinkedIn. I posted a request for participants in multiple public and private groups for military spouses.

Each interview conducted, followed all ethical procedures as outlined in Chapter 3. Each participant in the study completed a brief questionnaire to ensure they met the criteria to participate in the study. Participants signed a consent form prior to the interview and debriefed after the interview. The interviews lasted 30 minutes to 1 hour and audio recorded using a digital voice recorder. Each interview was transcribed from the digital recorder and organized to help in sorting and analyzing the data.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

According to Creswell (2007) in conducting qualitative research, a study needs to demonstrate credibility (Creswell, 2007). To ensure the findings were accurate, I took multiple steps to ensure credibility. I clarified my biases under the sections Limitations (Chapter 1) and Role of the Researcher (Chapter 2). I maintained a reflective journal, writing reflections prior to and after each interview. I used member checking to probe participants on their responses for further explanations as needed. Member checking also allowed each participant to review their transcribed interview and the credibility and accuracy of my findings and interpretations. I also used peer review for credibility. Two peers educated and trained in qualitative inquiry provided an external review of the data research process (transcribed interviews, interpretations, and reflective journal).

Transferability

Guba and Lincoln (1994) stated transferability or external validity refers to the ability to generalize the findings outside the study setting. I provided the sample size, demographics of the participants, and the inclusion and exclusion criteria to participate in

this study for readers. Lastly, participants' detailed responses that described their experiences with the phenomenon was included in this study for readers. Readers of this study will have enough detailed facts to decide transferability to another setting.

Dependability

Dependability or reliability are required verify the findings of a study. To accomplish this, I used a high-quality digital recorder to record all interviews. The digital recorder allowed me to replay the interviews as many times necessary to transcribe participants interview accurately. Member checking ensured accuracy of participants transcribed interviews. Participants participated in a second interview after interviews were transcribed and data analyze. Participants reviewed their transcribed interview and interpretations to ensure accuracy. Member checking also allowed for follow up questions for clarity.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the study results being based on the experiences of the participants and not my own biases. To ensure this, I used reflective journals throughout the process. I wrote prior to and after each interview to reflect my own thoughts, values, and interests. Each participant in the study responded to the same questions and reviewed their transcribed interview. Peer review conducted by two peers provided an external review of the data research process. Two peers reviewed the transcribed interviews, reflective journal, and provided independent interpretations of the data.

Data Analysis

The data analysis began with digital interviews being transcribed word for word and organizing the files for further analysis. I reviewed each transcribed interview for accuracy and clarification purposes. The data were coded for sorting purposes and identifying patterns and themes. Following Moustakas's (1994) steps in data analysis, I used a horizontalization approach and highlighted significant statements to understand the experiences of military spouses living separately from their active duty spouse voluntarily. In conjunction with using Moustakas's (1994) steps, I also used MAXQDA (2018) software for data analysis. Codes, terms, and phrases were uploaded into the computer software to help with sorting and grouping. MAXQDA (2018) provided a count on the number of times a code or phrase appeared in participants' transcript. This helped me identify participants key experiences with the lived experience.

From the identified codes, I was able to identify patterns. The identified patterns lead to developed meaning units. From the meaning units, I identified emerging themes from the participants' experiences. I used themes developed to write both textual and structural descriptions. Finally, I consolidated the descriptions to provide the essence of the phenomenon.

Results

Table 2

Meaning Units and Themes

Meaning Units	Themes
Being separated, by choice, from the service member is difficult.	Although by choice, separation is difficult.
Employment is important to military spouses.	Career management.
We are doing what is best for our Family.	Best for our family.
Overwhelmed and stressed since the separation.	Stressed and overwhelmed because of the separation.
Longer separation time can result in symptoms of depression and anxiety.	Lengthy separation.
Children can be a positive impact on coping.	Having children encourages positive coping.
Preparing for the separation starts With discussion.	Let's discuss it.
Family support is very important.	Family support.
Having an older child/children helps with coping.	Having older children helps.
Technology is great.	Technology is great.

Table 2 (continued)

We talk about everything.	Everything.
Therapy is useful to those experiencing depression and anxiety.	Yes, to therapy.
No connection to the unit and it's okay that I don't.	No connection, but it's okay.

Two peer reviewers were asked to review participants' transcribed interviews. Each reviewer highlighted common responses of the participants responses to each question. Each reviewer provided their own independent interpretations and themes. Table 3 shows the results from the peer reviewers.

Table 3
Peer Review Analysis

Meaning Units	Themes
Separation is not good, even by choice; Even by choice, separation is difficult.	Separation is difficult, even by choice; Separation is difficult.
Employment for military spouses is important; employment is important to military spouses.	Military spouses' employment is important.
What's best for family; Family first.	Best for our family; Family first.

Table 3 (continued)

Stressors of separation overwhelmed and stressed; Separation causes feelings of stress and overwhelmed.	Separation stressors; Overwhelmed and stressed from separation.
Lengthy separation time can result in Symptoms of depression and anxiety.	Lengthy separation not good.
Children helps with coping.	Children promotes coping; children help coping.
Discussion starts the preparation; Preparation starts with discussion.	Let's discuss it.
Family support; Family support is very important.	Family support.
Older children help with coping.	Older children help with coping.
Technology helps with the separation.	Technology.
Talking about everything.	Talking about everything.
Therapy for depression and anxiety.	Therapy.
No unit connection is okay; No unit connection.	No connection is okay; No unit connection.

Overreaching Research Question: What are the experiences of military spouses who choose to live separately from the service member?

Theme 1: Although by choice, the separation sucks. Military spouses living separately, even by choice, do not like being separated from the service member. Participants responded with "it sucks," "I don't like it," and "lousy." The separation has produced separation stressors "it's overwhelming," "there are days of being lonely and sad," "at times it is overwhelming and stressful." Military spouses miss their spouses and is sadden that the service member is missing out on aspects of their children's lives, "I hate that he is missing out on things with the kids," "I want him to be hands on with her upbringing."

Bravo stated:

> Particularly for a male I did not get married to sleep in the bed by my damn self. And so, I didn't get married particularly to have a girl child and now have to raise her by myself. You can do but so many things on a phone and particularly as a man and you're like this is not how this is supposed to be. And if I was a different type of man maybe I would have pressured her to get out or even pressure her about her career, I don't know. Or to retired. But thank God I'm not that kind of guy and I have enough resources around me and people around me, where's you know we're blessed. As a man there is a certain degree of frustration and I can see why there would be a high rate of infidelity. And you know, we both know that the military, you got some good folks and whatnot but sometimes that's a hell of a demon to deal with.

Charlie stated, “I don’t like it at all. I don’t like it at all. It’s overwhelming and that I do a have a newborn baby. But luckily, I do have my family, I stay with my parents. So, I do have a lot of help. But it’s just like I said, it’s not the same.” Echo stated, “It sucks! I miss my husband, my friend.” Foxtrot responded with, “Lousy. It has been very difficult dealing with not being together. Having the kids and dealing with everything on my own. But I will make it through.”

Delta responded:

> So far it has been up and down. It has been mostly good days, but there have been some bad days as well you know. I miss my husband. The kids miss him. I hate that he is missing out on things with the kids. At times it is overwhelming and stressful. You know having a six and four-year-old, working, and school. It is a lot at times. Being the only caregiver for little ones, you know they are dependent on you for everything. It can be a lot.

Golf stated:

> This experience has been up and down. I think for the most it has been on the up side. You know but I think on the times he was deployed, and you have that huge adjustment when they get back. Well, we have that adjustment at least two to three times a month, every time he comes home. And more when he’s on leave and home for a week or so. At times, I think that the adjustment is harder than not having him here and really missing him. Cause you know, my son and I have a rhythm or a, a schedule that works for us you know. Then here he comes in and want to change that rhythm (laughing). And so, we do this each time. Like mini

> deployments a couple times a month. I say that laughing however, I do miss him and don't like us not being together.

Hotel responded:

> The overall experience is mix. There are good days and bad days. Days I'm overwhelmed with what I need to do and what the kids have going. But of course, I wish my husband was here with us because we miss him. So, there are days of being lonely and sad.

One of the military spouse's experience with the separation has been positive, helping to improve the quality of her marriage.

Alpha responded:

> I think it's better for us right now. I mean we in the beginning, we weren't communicating as well cause we were still having issues. But we are getting a lot better at communicating and we had some pretty serious talks about you know. Cause you know we were straight talking divorce or talking separation for the next two years and then when he gets back finalizing. Whereas now, we're talking more lovingly toward each other. Yeah, so it's kind of like the whole thing of like I need growth and he need growth and trying to be together right now and making it happen is not going to happen. Because you're going to be in, in my theory was like you're going to be gone anyway whether I stayed in Italy or not you still be gone most of the time.

Theme 2: Career management. The theme that emerged from participants responses was the need to maintain their career in conjunction with their spouses serving

in the military. Managing and having a career can be difficult while supporting the spouse in the military. Employment, being employed or not wanting to lose their job was the main contributing factor of not relocating with the active duty spouse, “I had, you know a pretty good job”, “I’m not able to transfer down to him”, “I have a great job that I love”, “we didn’t want to lose my income”, “also, not wanting to lose my job”. Other factors that contributed to not relocating with the active duty spouse responses were military spouse retiring after current assignment, “my husband is retiring in the next 10 months”, “we decided not to relocate because this is his las and he will be retiring”. Additionally, having a child in high school and not wanting to relocate them, “we wanted our son to complete high school at one school”, “we wanted our son to finish out at one high school, not be moved within one year to finish at a new school”, and “our daughter is in high school, let her finish out high school, let her finish high school”. Charlie responded with “I actually work for the government and I got in the government through a program. And right now, being that I haven’t been there for a full year, I’m not able to transfer down to him.”

Bravo stated:

> Well at that point I retired, our daughter is in high school, let her finish high school. Didn’t want to change high school. While you know, you don’t want them to change while they’re in high school. And also, I had you know a pretty good job. And knowing that she was going to Camp LeJeune and from what I knew there they don’t pay what they pay up here. And it’s not many opportunities for me. So, I just, you know it was best for this family to have to stay here. Because,

> and then again, at that point in your career, you don't want to move from an executive position. You want to stay to stay as far career management. And I think that's something they need to talk about. Let me say something about that for a second if I could. For the spouse with a career they have to find out how they're going to manage their career. And when you get to a certain level rather it be at GS whatever level, a social worker, or an executive you have to turn around and, and I'm, I'm a hospital administrator. So, we know that going to these bases at the position I'm in right now they have tenure offices and they're not going to move. And that really impacts you for, what's the loss of my career right now. I'm sacrificing family indeed. But what do I want for my career. I had the opportunity while I was in Okinawa to become the medical record, I did that job as a E5. So, I'm not going to drop down to that GS7 to be Chief of Medical Records. There again how do play that on you resume. So, these are the things, these are the challenges that you have to face if you want a career. And support my spouse while they're in uniform.

Delta stated:

> Well there were a couple of things. First, I have a great job that I love. And when I checked with my job to see if I could transfer to the office where we would be PCSing to, there were no opening, position. We didn't want to lose my income and I really did not want to leave my job. I am doing great and starting to make some upward growth at my job. Also, I'm back in school for my MBA. I like my

> program and didn't want to look for another program or worse lose credits as a transfer student.

Golf stated:

> My husband is retiring in the next 10 months. When he got his new duty station, we knew he would be retiring at the end. We knew we did not want to stay in Florida after retirement and had always talked about moving back home. So, I moved back to Mississippi our home state with our son to get settled. And another reason for not relocating with him to his duty station, we wanted our son to finish out at one high school, not be moved with one year to finish at a new school." Hotel stated, we decided not to relocate because this is his last and he will be retiring. We wanted our son to complete high school at one school, so we decided I would stay here with the kids while he did his last assignment. Also, not wanting to lose my job. For military spouses who have a career, it is very hard, depending on the career, to take it whatever your spouse goes. And moving again would mean me starting all over again finding a job hopefully back in the GS system. I don't think people outside the military truly understand what working, career military spouses go through. Some believe that no matter where we go, we get hired and that is not the case. When we were stationed in Japan, I was working in the GS system. Then went to Europe and I was not able to get back in or find a job at the level I was at when we left Japan, which is another problem. When we got to Virginia, it took me over two years to get a GS position and at the level I should be given my education and experience.

For the participant, Alpha, her decision to voluntarily separate was medical. Alpha stated, “while we were in Hawaii, I was diagnosed with a neurological disorder.” So, we went there and the situation there in Italy was just not conducive to the disorder I have.”

Theme 3: Best for our family. Despite separation stressors and unpleasant feelings associated with living separate from the service member, the same decision would be made by the military spouse to voluntary separate. The military spouses in the study changed their perception of the stressful event viewed the separation as necessary for the betterment of their family’s future. Bravo stated, “it would be the same. And I, I wouldn’t change anything. I made the right call. By the grace of God, we’re in the right position financially.” Charlie stated, “I would make the same decision again. We would stay separated for the simple fact that we know right now, yeah, we don’t like it but in the end it’s the best thing for our family unit, so we can be ahead.”

Delta responded:

It was a difficult decision for us to make to have our family in two different states. However, when we looked at the distance and what was best for our family, living separate was the best for us right now. So, I would make the same decision again.

Echo stated:

> You know what, being away from my husband has been and is hard. We have a plan and trying to get our family set up for the future. Me staying here and getting

> my degree is part of that plan. So, I guess the answer to the question I would make the same choice.

Golf responded:

> You know I would. Because this is the end and we are setting up for the future. While the past two years have been up and down, this is putting us ahead after retirement and best for us.

Foxtrot stated:

> You know I would make the same decision. I like having my children stable in one place and not moving from place to place. I like where we are and the community we are in. We made the right decision that was best for our family.

Hotel stated:

> Making the decision over again, would be the same. I would say that only because my husband is retiring, and we are doing what is best for us as a family unit. I know that this is the set up or preparation for our family after retirement.

RQ1: For military spouses who choose to live separately from the service member, what risk factors are associated with the voluntary separation?

Theme 4: Stressed and overwhelmed because of the separation. Even as a choice by the military spouse to separate, separation from a loved one separation stressors were experienced by the military spouse "I get sad and lonely," "stressed sometimes," and "I do get overwhelmed." Delta stated, "you know I get sad and lonely and at times it is overwhelming and stressful." Echo stated, "you know I get sad and lonely." Foxtrot responded, "I get anxious and overwhelmed with our schedules. It is stressful most of the

time." Golf stated, "yes, I have or do experience symptoms of depression. Some anxiety as well." Hotel stated, "days I'm overwhelmed with what I need to do and what the kids have going" and "So there are days of being lonely and sad."

Charlie responded:

> I do get overwhelm all the time. Stressed sometimes. The separation plays a part in it. Far as me being a full-time student, taking care of the baby, and working full-time. The separation plays a part because it would help a whole lot more having him her to do stuff too.

Theme 5: Lengthy separation-For spouses who have been living separate from the military spouses seven months or longer, they endorsed feelings of depression and anxiety. Echo responded, "and I have some days of being depressed." Golf stated, "yes, I have or do experience symptoms of depression. Some anxiety as well."

Delta responded:

> Yes, since we have been living separate, I have been having some depression. When we got married, I always thought I would be there as well. When you get married, it's to be together, not a part. I haven't been sleeping like I should. I wake up during the night, some nights. You know still trying to adjust to him not being there.

Foxtrot stated:

> Sometimes I do have some anxiety. I get anxious and overwhelmed with our schedules. I do have depression at times, but I have to pull myself out of it for my children. Sleeping can be a problem as well. I get over tired and can't sleep. When

> it's time to get up, I'm tired but I have to get up for the two children I'm responsible for. Oh, and I need to go to work (laughing)."

For one military spouse in the study, the five years of being separated has exacerbated symptoms of another diagnosis. Bravo stated, "I would have to admit to you that I already have PTSD. And that it has exacerbated, it's caused some problems with that."

Theme 6: Having children encourages positive coping. All but one of the military spouses in the study have a child or children. In this theme, the child or children of the military spouse was an encouragement for the military spouse to cope with the separation in a positive way. Charlie stated, "I am just dealing with everything so that she doesn't get the vibe off me that I'm stressed or overwhelmed, or any of that stuff. I just push it forward."

Alpha stated:

> I think it, I don't want to say they provide a distraction. It would be horrible to say my children are a distraction. It, helps, it's like a grounding element, how's that. It helps ground you. It's not nearly a distraction but you know, you're not all by yourself. So, you don't have to reach for a whole bunch of external resources to try to like help maintain a homeostasis. You actually have it like within the household itself. You got that immediate being there that depends on you and you can kind of depend on them. So, you're not completely isolated.

Bravo stated:

> It makes you stick to it (laughing). Can't just say the hell with it, I'm out of here. I think a better way for me to say that is it strengthens your resolve. It gives you

> that sense of being committed to your family. And making you go out of your comfort zone. I think that perhaps it's more so true for more men than women, you know. Because it's one thing have a girl child but having a girl child and you're by yourself. If her braids came out now you got to learn how to braid (laughing).

Delta stated:

> Children make you view your situation in a different way. I may want to stay in the bed and mope and be down or even if I do, I still know I have two little people that need me. My children make me want to get up and make it through what I'm going through with the separation. I might be sad, missing my husband. However, being with my children changes that. Takes the focus of me and make sure they're ok.

Echo stated:

> Having children makes you do!" It makes you go outside, or to the park when you really don't. It makes you change your vibe, so they don't pick up on the negative. Or the sadness I maybe experiencing because I miss him. It makes me want to cope and use tools, so I can cope appropriately, for the most.

Foxtrot responded:

> It makes a big difference. You know if it was just me, I could stay in bed or not leave the house if I didn't. But that's not a choice I can make with two small kids depending on me.

Golf stated:

> Children, having children makes a difference. I have some difficult days with feeling sad and lonely. Days I don't want to get out of bed. My son being there in the house makes me push through those days. Having a child makes me want to cope with the separation or whatever is going on.

Hotel stated:

> Having children, makes you cope even if you don't want. While my oldest can do for self he still needs his mom, you know. Not as much as the kindergarten but still. Having children make you get out the bed when you don't. Or talking about their day when you might want to take a nap (laughing).

RQ2: For military spouses who choose to liv separately from the service member, what protective factors are used by the spouse to maintain positive mental health during the separation?

Theme 7-Let's discuss it. Each of the participant in study planned for the separation by discussing and talking about what the separation would look like. This included identifying support for the military spouse and for some participants how often they would see each other. Charlie stated, "I wouldn't say, it more so. It was kind of a discussion but we both were in denial so we both try to avoid talking about until the very last minute."

Alpha responded:

> So, I mean we discussed it. You know we had a discussion about what the best step was. And I said, I think I need to leave so, you know that was kind of cooperation on both of our parts to initiate the early return of dependents.

Bravo responded:

> Yes, we discussed me going back. Things had gotten to a point where we had dipped in savings a few times and saving is not looking to heathy. Me getting frustrated about being home. And it's one of those things where you know hey, honestly there's a stigma attached. You have a degree of pride within yourself I want to do something employable while the kids are going to school all day. What I'll do? Going to work out. That's cool but now I got to get a job. And there's nothing really there for you and back in the States, you're seeing these jobs. And you say you know what maybe I should start applying to these. And the sad part is you know I shouldn't have to. It was easier from me to get a gob promotion going back to the States than it was to get a job on Okinawa.

Delta responded:

> We had a long talk, talked about it for a while. I actually think we started talking about it when he got his orders. We talked about me getting help with kids, making sure I would have support especially on nights I have class.

Echo responded:

> Well you know we talked and thankfully my husband understood how important finishing school means to me. We know that this is for us, better job, better

financial set up. We talked with my parents to make sure we had their support, that it would be ok for me to move back in with them.

Foxtrot stated:

How did we plan? We talked it, separating the family. A lot of discussion was on who I could get to help out with the kids. My husband wanted to make sure I would have the support for us to do this. We talked with the kids to let them know what would be going on, daddy living in another state. We talked about how often we would see each other.

Golf stated:

How did we plan. Well you know it was talk or discussion between my husband and me. Because like I said we knew this would be our last move because he would be retiring after this assignment. So, we started talking as a family, you know about what the plan would be with dad retiring and where we wanted to retire at. So that kind of lead to ok going in separate directions and getting set up for after retirement. And then we knew I would have support from our families since this is home.

Hotel stated:

My husband and I talked first then we talked with the kids. We wanted to make sure everyone was involved with the decision of staying in Virginia and ok with dad not being here. The biggest thing from my husband and I was making sure the kids were going to be ok. We have been through multiple, multiple deployments and always made sure to we talked with the kids to help them prepare for the

> change. So, this time was no different. We discussed how things would change with dad not being here. You know schedule changing, needing my oldest to help out with the youngest.

Theme 8- Family support. Emotional support from family was a response given by all participants in the study contributing to positively coping with the voluntary separation. Family members that were supportive of the military spouses included parents, siblings, in-laws, nieces, and nephews. Some participants also have support from their church family and other military families. Echo responded, "well I have my parents. I moved back in with them when we decided that I would stay here. And you know this is home, so I have other family members like my siblings and other family." Golf responded, "family. You know that's why we decided to move back home. We attend church and our church family. Then there are my sorors, my sorority sisters who have been supporting me during this time." Foxtrot stated, "I have immediate family helping me and the kids. My church family helps. And I have friends that help." Golf stated, "family. You know that's why we decided to move back home. We attend church and our church family. Then there are my sorors, my sorority sisters who have been supporting me during this time."

Alpha stated:

> I have my parents, they live almost across the street. I can walk down the road and get to their house like 10 minutes. So, they're really close. I got involved with church right away and found it to be a way to meet more people.

Bravo stated:

> We were blessed when we got here that her brother had orders to Quantico, and he has a phenomenal wife. They stepped in and stepped up a lot. So, I would say that the military, say the military family cause she is married to him. That's what I would say.

Charlie stated:

> I have both my parents. I have my siblings. I have two brothers and a sister. And then my nieces and nephews are very hands on, they help as well. So then of course the support of his mom. She's in New York and can't really do too much but she constantly checks on us and, I'm very appreciative.

Delta stated:

> Ah, my support is my family. They are my rock. I am truly fortunate for my parents. My mom has been down to help out. Also, I have two consistent babysitters that help me out with the kids. I also have my church family who have been supportive.

Hotel stated:

> Well I have support from my church and from my husband's family actually. He has some family out here and so when I need help I can call them. And there is another military family that we were stationed with in Germany that is also here in Virginia. We have kids around the same age. The mom and I help each other out with the kids.

Theme 9: Having older children helps. For the participants who have a child or children that were older and/or in high school contributed to them coping with the separation. Alpha responded, “then my daughters are, they’re not little kids, they’re like 13 and 16. So, it’s like I can actually have a real conversation with them.” Bravo responded, “and my daughter is older.” Golf responded, “also, my son is older. And that makes a big difference.” Hotel stated, “having an older child, in high school that can help around the house and with the care of younger one makes a big difference.” Participants also responded with “staying busy,” “my job, working out,” “school is a big distraction,” and “the distance not being far, he comes home three times a month.”

Theme 10-Technology is great. Being able to talk, text, and FaceTime with the military spouse has been very helpful with positively coping with the separation. Technology makes it possible for the military spouse and service member to have contact daily despite being separated. Charlie stated, “technology. The fact that we can talk all the time and we can text all day long while we’re both at work. Emails.” Delta stated, “talking to my husband. Seeing him on FaceTime. We text throughout the day.” Echo responded, “also, you know talking, FaceTime is wonderful.” Golf responded, “talking to my husband daily. This is different from a deployment, so I take advantage. We will text each other throughout the day.” Hotel responded, “then I talk with my husband daily, couple times a day.”

Alpha stated:

> I make an effort to talk to talk with my husband. Whereas before when it, it’s different because when I first met him he was submarine. So, when I first met him

> I could, I was given like 8 sheets of paper where I was allowed to give him 50 words or less no code and could send those out to him during his 3 months deployment. But I would never hear anything back. So, um, it went you know it went from that to then being able to have email and then being able to get like they give you a total of *5* emails during the entire deployment. You know I could remember some of the other wives lamenting and being like, oh I haven't heard from my husband today. Um like wait you get like an email every day? I was like hey stop complaining I'm lucky to hear from my husband like you know 5 times out of the entire deployment. You know and because he was just busy all the time. So, it's been really helpful that, that the technology of this ship, that this ship has ok. Cause the ballistic missile one, they didn't have the abilities for him to communicate via messenger. So, this ship in particular, he is still able to do like instant message so that's been like a real plus.

Theme 11-Everything. With being able to communicate with the service member daily, all except one military spouse in the study share and discuss everything about home with the service member. They make sure to discuss their day and that of their children, holding nothing back. Charlie stated, "oh, we talk about everything. Every single thing that comes up." Echo stated, "we talk about everything. You know sharing our day with each other. Foxtrot responded, "all. Everything. I hold nothing back from him. He knows everything going on in the house, with me, with the kids."

Alpha stated:

> We talk about everything. Yeah, um I have really nothing that I keep from him you know. We talk about the girls and how the girls are doing in school or we talk about you know my days when I was subbing. And pretty much now it's summer break and I'm applying for jobs we talk about that. So, for the most part there is nothing we don't talk about.

Delta stated:

> Everything. You know we had that type of relationship of sharing everything before we made this decision. I didn't want that to change. You know although he is not here, he is still part of the family. So, we always talk about our day, what's going on with the kids.

Golf responded:

> Everything. We talk about everything. I don't hide or keep anything from my husband. Now I will say there may be a time where I have to make a quick decision about the finances, or our son and I don't have to discuss with him. Or you know, not able to get a hold of him. I do tell him later."

Hotel responded:

> I would say just about everything. I talk to him about the kids and what's going on with them. I try not to keep anything from him. And I talk to him daily, so it would be kind of hard to not talk about everything although he is not in the home.

One spouse expressed limiting what is shared with the military spouse. This is not to keep the military spouse in the dark but to keep the spouse uplifted and not worry about things going on at home.

Bravo stated:

> Little. Yeah, when my daughter was having a rough time dealing with, we had to deal with our daughter dealing with um, she got diagnosed with, she went through a couple of major depression episodes when she was 12-years-old and up until this day. She's on medications, change medications. She already had ADD. You don't want your spouse to be freaking out, you want to go ahead and say hey, go on. Oh, I got this. But some spouses may play at as oh I need you to come home or whatever else. But that's not me. You turn around and try to make it work. The minor day to day kind of things, you try to keep your spouse uplifted. You try to, you minimize things. The trick is to minimize.

Theme 12: Yes, to therapy. For those military spouses who endorsed being depressed and/or having anxiety or had other mental health diagnosis exacerbated by the separation, therapy is helping them to positive cope. Bravo responded, "so, I do see a psychiatrist on base. Echo responded, "yes, I actually see a counselor at my college. It's helping me to manage or balance life with school and my depression." Golf responded, "yes, I am currently involved with individual therapy as I just stated."

Delta stated:

> Yes, I do see a therapist. I started seeing a therapist about 5 months into the separation. I noticed that I was feeling a little too sad. And I was having difficulty

> with getting my school work done. So, I felt it was best to start talking with someone.

Theme 13: No connection, but it's ok. All the military spouses in the study have no connection with the service member's unit. However, the military spouse is "o.k" with not having a connection. Charlie responded "no, I don't have a connection with them, but I haven't meet them. I don't even know who the Ombudsmen is from the commend honestly." Echo responded, "oh, no. I haven't heard from anyone from his unit." Foxtrot stated, "no, I do not. And I'm guessing that's because I'm not there with him which is ok with me." Hotel… "No, I don't. I haven't heard from anyone and that could be due to me not physically being there with him. And while I have not heard from anyone, I'm not sure I need a connection with the unit."

Alpha stated:

> No, I get emails from the Ombudsmen but none of them are like, oh hey you know did your move go well or just checking on you or anything like that, no. But we've been married for 18 years, it's kind of like I don't care. But if I was younger with smaller children, yeah, I would want someone checking in on me like, hey. We know you didn't disappear off the face of the earth and want you to know that you matter. But having older children and being married for a longer time, it doesn't impact you as much and you have coping mechanism. But yeah, younger spouse with younger children, I would be pretty perturbed if the command didn't check on me.

Bravo stated:

> Ah hell no. But that's by choice on me. So that's an individual choice. Because I'm prior military retired. I know she's like they're doing the officer's spouses club and inviting me to luncheons, to tea time, to wine tasting… what the hell. No. none of that (laughing). Yes, they have reached out to me. The choice, I chose not to. I think the difference is that she had to put the outlier in there, outlier with me is that spouse is retired military. So, I don't need that, or how to navigate the military. I'm o.k. without being connected with her unit.

Delta stated:

> I do not. You know I have not been on the base where he is stationed because he usually come home. But you know I'm ok with not having that connection with the unit. I have other support, so I'm good. I think a check in here and there would be nice though.

Golf stated:

> Ah no. While I have been down to Florida where he is stationed, I don't have connection with the unit. You know, I'm older and have been married for 24 years. I pretty much know my way around the military from a spouse's perspective.

Summary

Chapter 4 presented findings from the eight semistructured interviews conducted to answer the research questions. Participants disliked the overall experiences of living separate voluntarily from the service member. Participants used phrases such as "it sucks," "I don't like it," and "it's lousy" to describe the overall experience. Military

spouses in the study experienced separations stressors such as being overwhelmed and stressed because of the voluntary separation. Longer separation time produced adverse psychological effects such as depression and anxiety. Social support, specifically family, was identified by all participants as a protective factor helping them cope. Other factors such as having older children, technology, and communicating everything with the service member emerged as helping the military spouse cope with the separation. The interpretations of the findings will be further discussed in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of military spouses who made a choice to not relocate with the service member to the new duty assignment. The study also served to identify potential risks that military spouses may experience during the voluntary separation. Additionally, the study served to identify protective factors used by the military spouses in the study to help maintain positive mental health.

The study findings were that participants who were voluntarily separated from their active duty spouse were unhappy with the separation. All but one of the participants in the study experienced separation stressors such as being stressed, overwhelmed, lonely, and sad because to the separation. Negative psychological symptoms such as depression and anxiety were experienced by military spouses voluntarily separated 7 months and longer. Social support such as family was identified by all participants in the study as a protective factor helping them cope with the separation.

Interpretation of the Findings

Participants in the study shared their lived experience of being a military spouse voluntarily living separately from the service member. The findings in the study indicated that the voluntary separation was a difficult decision to make and was displeasing to the military spouses in the study. Being separated from the service member had a negative impact on the military spouse and the overall experience of living separately from the active duty spouse, voluntarily.

Being separated from a loved one such as a spouse can be difficult and challenging. The findings from this study indicated that separation, while voluntary, produced separation stressors. All but one of the military spouses participating in the study experienced stress and feelings of being overwhelmed due to the absence of the service member. Participants also experienced loneliness and sadness because of missing the service member. The findings from the study indicated the likelihood of experiencing symptoms of depression and anxiety was greater with longer separation periods. This was the experience for Bravo, Delta, Echo, Foxtrot, and Golf; all of whom have been separated from their service member for 7 months or longer. For Bravo, being separated from his spouse for 5 years caused an exacerbation of diagnosed posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms. SteelFisher et al. (2008) found higher levels of depression, loneliness, and anxiety among Army spouses whose husbands' deployment was extended. Flake et al. (2009) found that military spouses were better able to cope with the separation when the deployment was six months or less. From past studies and this study, military spouses separated 6 months or longer could potentially produce negative psychological effects. While the military spouse may experience separation stressors and/or negative psychological effects, protective factors can help to relieve or lessen the negative impact otherwise experienced.

Social support, specifically support from family, was identified by all participants in this study as a protective factor that helped them to positively cope with separation. Family, for the participants in this study, showed to be instrumental in their coping during the voluntary separation. This was expressed by Golf, who stated, "Family. You know

that's why we decided to move back home." Participants such as Alpha, Delta, Foxtrot, Golf, and Hotel also identified church/church family as contributing to their social support, helping them to positively cope with being separated from the service member. Social support is central to mediating stressful situations and relationships (Whelm, 1993). Additionally, the military spouses in this study used other coping mechanisms such as work, school, and working out to cope with separation. Furthermore, the military spouses in this study used emotion-focused coping during the voluntary separation.

The findings indicated that the military spouses in this study used emotion-focused coping to manage the stressful situation of being separated from their service member. Unable to change the situation, the military spouses in the study changed the way they perceived the separation. Participants in the study viewed their choice to separate as "what was best for our family," "necessary for being ahead," and "better future for our family." Participants Hotel and Golf viewed the separation as "the set up or preparation for our family after retirement" and "while the past 2 years have been up and down, this is putting us ahead after retirement," respectfully. For Alpha, her perception and experience of the separation has been vital for her marriage "because we were straight talking divorce and talking you know separation for the next two years and then when he gets back finalizing. Whereas now we're talking more lovingly toward each other." More importantly, viewing the separation crucial for her health. Being diagnosed with a rare neurological disorder, her spouse's new duty location "was just not conducive to the disorder I have" thus making the choice for voluntary separation for medical care and family support. The military spouses in this study were able to take a stressful

situation and reframe for a positive outcome. This coping mechanism was demonstrated among all the military spouses in the study despite demographic factors.

I was unable to show if demographic factors such as age, ethnic backgrounds, or young mothers were more inclined to utilized ineffective coping skills. The age of the participants in the study ranged from 21 to 52, all of whom utilized social support and other coping mechanisms to positively cope with being separated from the active duty spouse. Due to the study lacking a diverse population, no conclusion could be made regarding ethnic backgrounds and the use of coping skills. Furthermore, all but one of the participants in this study answered "yes" to having a child or children. No conclusion on young mothers using coping skills were made. While the military spouses in the study experienced negative impact (stressed, overwhelmed, symptoms of depression), they engaged in positive coping skills to help manage their symptoms and stressors associated with the voluntary separation. The military spouses in the study demonstrated resiliency in their separation from the service member.

The theoretical framework for this study was Kaplan et.al theory on resiliency. An individual can prove to be resilient when protective factors are in place. The military spouses in this study experienced separation stressors and negative psychological effects because of the voluntary separation from the service member. However, the participants in the study took certain actions, such as planning for the separation and identifying protective factors they would access during the stressful situation. The military spouses in this study used protective factors (family, church, work), which Orthner and Ross (2007) described as "assets", to positively cope while they are separated from the service

member. These actions by the military spouses in this study has proven that military spouses can be resilient during a voluntary separation. While the study indicated resiliency among the military spouses in this study, the study does present with limitations.

Limitations of the Study

The study had two limitations. One limitation of the study was the sample population. The participants in the study were military spouses. The second limitation of this study was the military spouses selected due to a specific situation. The military spouse had to be married to an active duty service member and currently voluntarily living separate from the service member.

Recommendations

From the data collected from this study, the following recommendations was identified for future research. With future research the scope of the participants can be widened. This study only considered and accepted spouses married to active duty service members. Another consideration could be spouses or partners of individuals whose jobs require travel away from the home for lengthy periods of time such as merchant seaman and cruise ship workers. Do the spouses of these workers experience separation stressors such as military spouses separated from service members? Additionally, what type of protective factors and coping skills are utilized by these spouses to manage negative symptoms they may experience? Another recommendation would be to conduct a study with active duty service members who are separated from their spouse due to voluntary separation. Do service members experience the same type of stressors and negative

psychological effects because of the voluntary separation. Study findings from the above recommendations can provide additional knowledge on separation and protective factors.

Implications for Positive Social Change

Separation from one's spouse can produce separation stressors and negative psychological effects. In this study, all but one military spouse experienced feelings of being stressed, overwhelmed, lonely, and sad due to the separation. Participants with a separation period of 7 months and longer experienced symptoms of depression and anxiety. One participant's symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder were exacerbated by the separation. Being employed and having financial security was highlighted as the main factor choosing not to relocate with the service member. These spouses choose separation, knowing the possible risk of experiencing separation stressors and other adverse psychological effects over being unemployed. The implication for positive social change includes the military family and keeping the family unit together.

In understanding that the service member can be called to serve across the United States or abroad, military spouses may sacrifice family togetherness and voluntarily separate. Implications for military spouses from this study have provided knowledge on what they may experience because of the voluntary separation. Understanding that planning for the separation and identifying protective factors to have in place prior to the separation promotes resiliency.

This study provided knowledge regarding the stress of voluntary separation for military spouses. For mental health professionals, this study helps to bring awareness of this phenomenon. Mental health professionals gain the knowledge that military spouses

are making difficult decisions which may increase their potential for experiencing adverse psychological effects in addition to everyday stressors. Due to this, military spouse voluntarily living separate from the active duty spouse may be more inclined to reach out for professional help to cope with the separation. This study also provided information on the role protective factors, such as social support, played in the military spouses' resiliency in this study. When mental health profession work with military spouses, such as those in this study, they will have the knowledge to help military spouses voluntary separated from the active duty spouse maintain positive mental health.

For policy makers to including military and government officials, this study provided knowledge on the lived experience of eight military spouses voluntarily living separate from the service member and reasons for making this difficult decision. Policy makers have the capability to review and change policy on relocations for service members and family. This can result in laws designed to assist career spouses and the transition to and from different locations. State officials can also assist in initiating policies to assist military spouses relocating to their state. Policies that allow for reciprocity between all states for jobs that require licensure such as that required for nurses, teachers, and mental health professionals could make applying for jobs less stressful. In doing so, states supporting military spouses in their careers, may incline military spouses to relocate with the service member keeping the military family together.

Summary

In summary, the data in this study indicated that military spouses who are voluntarily separated from the service member can be resilient through the separation. The findings indicated that when military spouses are separated from the service member, they experience separation stressors such as being stressed, overwhelmed, lonely, and sad. Additionally, those military spouses who were separated from the service member for seven months and longer, also experienced depression and anxiety. While separating the family was not preferred by the military spouses in the study, they saw it as best for their families and their families' future. Having protective factors, such as social support (family and church) in place prior to the voluntary separation and using other coping mechanism (work, school, working out) while separated was beneficial for military spouses to positively cope during the voluntary separation, being resilient.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

How long have you and your spouse been married?

Did you marry before or after your spouse joined the armed service?

How long has your spouse been in the military?

How long have you been separated, voluntarily, from your spouse?

What was the reason(s)/factors to not relocate with your active duty spouse?

Prior to deciding not to relocate, how many times had you relocate with your active duty spouse?

How did you plan for the separation?

Do you have children?

If yes, how many?

How does having child/children impact the way you cope with the voluntary separation?

How much time did you have to make the decision?

How often do you see your spouse?

Do you work outside the home?

What has been your overall experience with the voluntary separation?

Since the voluntary separation, have you experienced any negative psychological effects such as anxiety, depression, problems with sleep, etc.?

If yes to any, are you/have you experience any therapy/counseling to help?

If yes, was the provider on or off base?

How much information about home do you share with your spouse?

What type of support do you have?

What do you feel is helping you cope with the voluntary separation?

Do you live close to a military base/installation?

If yes, what services do you access/use on base?

How often?

Do you feel connected with your spouses' unit?

Do you receive support from your spouse's unit?

If yes, what type of support do you receive and how often?

How has the support from your spouse's unit help you during the voluntary separation?

If you had to make the decision/choice over again, what decision would you make?