

Military Spouses' Perceptions of Their Resilience



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Military spouses face many challenges as a result of the military lifestyle. Much focus has been placed on enhancing the resilience of military spouses by both the military and civilian communities. However, no research currently exists regarding spouses' perceptions of their resilience or how they define resilience for themselves and their community. This qualitative study explored the perceptions of eight military spouses regarding their resilience through individual semi-structured interviews. The following themes emerged: 1) shaped by service member and mission priority; 2) challenges within the military lifestyle; 3) outside expectations of spouse resilience; 4) sense of responsibility for family's resilience; 5) individual resilience; and 6) collective resilience. We discuss ways military leadership and the counseling profession can best understand and enhance the resilience of military spouses.

Keywords: military spouses, resilience, military lifestyle, perceptions, counseling

Because of the unique stressors associated with the military lifestyle, military spouses are at an increased risk for poor mental health (Donoho et al., 2018; Mailey et al., 2018; Numbers & Bruneau, 2017). They may experience mental health concerns, such as anxiety and depression, due to a number of reasons, including separation from their deployed service member, loss of support networks after a relocation, or issues with adjusting to the uncertain and frequent changes of the military (Cole et al., 2021). Additional concerns that arise, such as employment, marital, and financial issues, can also negatively affect the military spouse's mental health (Cole et al., 2021; Mailey et al., 2018). Dorvil (2017) reported that 51% of active-duty spouses experience more stress than normal. Furthermore, 25% of military spouses meet the criteria for generalized anxiety disorder (Blue Star Families [BSF], 2021). Depression in military spouses is also higher than the rate found within the general population (Verdeli et al., 2011). As a military spouse casts aside their own personal needs to support their service member, stressors may continue to increase, which can contribute to the rise of mental health needs of military spouses (Moustafa et al., 2020).

Resilience and Military Spouses

Nature of Resilience

Given the challenges inherent in the military lifestyle and the associated mental health risks, military spouse resilience is essential. Resilience is a complex and multifaceted construct, significant to researchers, practitioners, and policymakers across numerous disciplines, including mental health and military science. The American Psychological Association (2020) defined resilience as "the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or even significant sources of stress" (para. 4). Within the military community, resilience has been defined as the ability to withstand, recover, and grow in the face of stressors and changing demands (Meadows et al., 2015).

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Importantly, determinants of resilience include the interaction of biological, psychological, social, and cultural factors in response to stressors (Southwick et al., 2014). In addition to these salient variables embedded in resilience science, resilience may be operationalized as a trait (e.g., optimism), process (e.g., adaptability in changing conditions), or outcome (e.g., mental health diagnosis, post-traumatic growth; Southwick et al., 2014).

Resilience may also vary on a continuum across domains of functioning (Pietrzak & Southwick, 2011) and change as a function of development and the interaction of systems (Masten, 2014). Accordingly, a definition and operationalization of resilience may vary by population and context (Panter-Brick, 2014). During the post-9/11 era, the resilience of service members and their families received significant attention from stakeholders, including the Department of Defense (DoD) and National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM), both of which expressed a commitment to conducting research and establishing programming to enhance service member and military family resilience, resulting in increased awareness of the importance of service member and family resilience throughout the military community (NASEM, 2019).

Military Family Resilience

Though military families share the characteristics and challenges of their civilian counterparts, they additionally experience the demanding, high-risk nature of military duties; frequent separation and relocation; and caregiving for injured, ill, and wounded service members and veterans (Joining Forces Interagency Policy Committee, 2021). In recognition of the constellation of military-connected experiences military families face, the Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury (DCoE) commissioned a review of family resilience research and relevant DoD policies to inform a definition of resilience for appropriate application to military spouses and children (Meadows et al., 2015). Meadows and colleagues (2015) proposed family resilience may be best defined as “the ability of a family to respond positively to an adverse situation and emerge from that situation feeling strengthened, more resourceful, and more confident than its prior state” (see Simon et al., 2005, for a further exploration of family resilience). Further, Meadows and colleagues identified two groups of policies delineated at the Joint Chiefs of Staff or DoD levels, or within individual branches of the military: 1) existing programs modified to augment resilience or family readiness, and 2) new programs developed to target family resilience. Programs established by these policies support access to mental health services (e.g., DoD Instruction [DoDI] 6490.06); parenting education (e.g., New Parent Support Program, DoDI 6400.05); child welfare (e.g., Family Advocacy Program, DoD Directive 6400.1); and myriad physical, psychological, social, and spiritual resources. The well-being of military families represents a critical mission for the DoD, extending beyond provision and access for families to meet their basic needs to individual service member and unit readiness, and the performance, recruitment, and retention of military personnel (NASEM, 2019).

Military Spouse Resilience

Though service member and family resilience are critical for accomplishing the DoD’s mission, focusing on the unique nature of military spouse resilience is key for understanding and supporting this population’s resilience. Counseling, psychology, sociology, and military medical professional research related to military spouse resilience has focused primarily on characteristics associated with resilience. In a study by Sinclair et al. (2019), 333 spouse participants completed a survey regarding their resilience, mental health, and well-being. The results revealed that spouses who had children, were a non-minority, had social support, had less work–family conflict, and had a partner with better mental health were more resilient. Another survey study examined the characteristics associated with resilience in Special Operations Forces military spouses, determining that community support

and support from the service member was essential for spouse resilience (Richer et al., 2022). A study conducted within the communication field also explored spouses' communicative construction of resilience during deployments. Qualitative data analysis of interviews with 24 spouses indicated how spouses use communication to reconcile their contradictory realities, which increases their resilience (Villagran et al., 2013). This resilience has also been found to be a protective factor against depression and substance abuse during military deployments (Erbes et al., 2017). Finally, a survey study of Army spouses ($N = 3,036$) determined that spouses who were less resilient were at higher risk for mental health diagnoses (Sullivan et al., 2021). While these studies explored the nature of resilience demonstrated by military spouses, our searches in JSTOR, PubMed, ERIC, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar did not reveal any studies regarding spouses' perceptions of their own resilience or how they define this resilience for themselves and their community. Our study fills that research gap by exploring active-duty spouses' perceptions and definitions of resilience.

Methods

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of active-duty spouses regarding their resilience. This study was guided by the following research questions: 1) What are military spouses' perceptions of their own resilience? and 2) How do military spouses define "resilience?" Phenomenology seeks to present a certain phenomenon in its most authentic form (Moustakas, 1994). In order to most authentically and openly describe our participants' experiences, we chose a qualitative transcendental phenomenological approach to frame our study. This tradition of qualitative research focuses on portraying a genuine representation of the participants' perceptions and experiences. However, the distinct feature of transcendental phenomenology is its first step, which involves the researchers recognizing and bracketing their biases so they can analyze the data without any interference (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). We selected this design because each of our research team members were military spouses. We therefore recognized the need to mitigate our biases in order to give a true representation of the participants' perceptions, free from our own preconceived notions.

Participants

The participants in this study were selected based on their status as active-duty military spouses and their willingness to participate in the study. There were no other inclusion or exclusion criteria for the participants in this study. After gaining IRB approval, we used convenience sampling to recruit eight participants. In qualitative research, convenience sampling is used to recruit participants who are closely accessible to the researchers (Andrade, 2021). Our research team emailed participants that we knew through living, working, and volunteering on military bases throughout the United States and at overseas duty stations who fit the active-duty military spouse criteria for this study and asked them if they were willing to participate in the study. Once the participants expressed interest, they were provided with an information sheet regarding the study's purpose and the nature of their involvement in the study. Participant demographics are included in Table 1. All of the participants were female and all were between the ages of 30–40. Four branches of the U.S. military, including Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps, were represented in the sample. No reservist, Coast Guard, or Space Force military spouses participated in our study. Five of our participants were White and three were Black. Their tenure as military spouses ranged from 4 years to 17 years. Five of the spouses were married to a military officer, while three of the participants were married to an enlisted service member. After interviewing these eight participants, our research team met and determined that because of the distinct common patterns we found across each of the participants' transcripts, we had reached saturation and did not need to recruit any additional participants for our study (Saunders et al., 2018).

Table 1*Participant Demographics*

Participant	Age	Ethnicity	Gender	Branch	Spouse's Rank	Years as a Spouse
1	33	Black	Female	Air Force	Enlisted	4
2	36	Black	Female	Navy	Enlisted	17
3	31	White	Female	Army	Officer	7
4	34	Black	Female	Navy	Enlisted	14
5	36	White	Female	Marine Corps	Officer	12
6	35	White	Female	Marine Corps	Officer	14
7	40	White	Female	Navy	Officer	16
8	34	White	Female	Navy	Officer	10

Data Collection

Our research team first developed the interview protocol for the study based on a thorough review of the literature regarding resiliency within military culture as well as the challenges of the military lifestyle for military spouses. Our research team members interviewed each of the participants for 1–2 hours. These semi-structured interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by an automated transcription service. The interview questions were open-ended and focused on the spouses' definitions of resilience and their perceptions of their resilience within the military lifestyle and culture (see Appendix for interview protocol). In addition, probing questions such as "Can you explain that a bit more?" or "Can you give any examples of what you mean by that?" were used to gather more in-depth data throughout the interviews.

Data Analysis

We followed the steps of the transcendental phenomenological data analysis process to analyze our study's results (Moerer-Urdahl, 2004). First, each member of our research team engaged in epoche, in which we bracketed our biases as military spouses so that our own thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and experiences did not influence our interpretation of our participants' experiences. The next step in the process was horizontalization. During this step, each member of our research team read through the interview transcripts and noted significant statements throughout so we could better understand how the participants perceived, understood, and experienced resilience. Next, we met as a research team to discuss these significant statements and organize them into themes (Moustakas, 1994). Our research team then developed textual and structural descriptions of the themes, describing not only a list of the participants' perceptions, but also an in-depth analysis of what their perceptions of resilience entailed and how they have experienced it throughout their tenure as military spouses (Moerer-Urdal, 2004; Moustakas, 1994). We then constructed a comprehensive description of the participants' perceptions of resilience, encapsulating the "essence of the experience" (Moerer-Urdal, 2004, p. 31).

Research Team and Strategies to Increase Trustworthiness

Our research team consisted of four university faculty members, all of whom possessed extensive experience in conducting qualitative research. Three of our research team members possess PhDs in

counseling and one research team member possesses an EdD in counseling. All team members had extensive experience conducting research with military-connected communities. In addition, all of our research team members were active-duty military spouses, with years of experience as a military spouse ranging from 1–23 years.

We used several strategies to increase the credibility of our results. First, the use of an experienced research team to collectively analyze the data resulted in diverse perspectives on the emerging themes of the study. However, because each member of our research team was a military spouse, we recognized the need to bracket our own experiences and biases so that they did not interfere with our interpretation of the data. Each team member took notes on their individual biases, and our research team discussed these biases when interpreting themes. Biases held by research team members included a predisposition to believe that spouses of special warfare service members endured greater stressors and were better supported by their military communities; a belief that spouses of higher-ranking service members possessed greater knowledge of and access to resources to support social, behavioral, and mental health needs; and personal experience within the military spouse community. These biases were challenged throughout the research process by each member of the team. As each theme was identified, the team referenced individual transcripts to ensure that the interpretation was justified. We found that our biases were rightfully challenged.

Additionally, to avoid leading questions, our research team made the conscious decision not to define resilience as part of the interview and follow-up process. The team wanted to derive an organic definition of spouse resilience that was not clouded by a formal definition. In addition, we used member checking, in which we emailed the interview transcripts to the participants and asked them to verify the data. The participants responded to our request with minimal change requests related to grammatical errors in the transcriptions and validated our data. Several offered additional insight related to their definition of resilience, which was included in our data analysis.

Results

The following themes emerged from our data: 1) shaped by service member and mission priority; 2) challenges within the military lifestyle; 3) outside expectations of spouse resilience; 4) sense of responsibility for family's resilience; 5) individual resilience; and 6) collective resilience.

Theme 1: Shaped by Service Member and Mission Priority

Military/Service Member Definition

When discussing their definition of resiliency, the spouses first considered what resiliency meant for their active-duty spouse. The participants varied in their perceptions of what resilience meant for their active-duty service member, though all defined resilience as an active process of adapting or persevering when faced with adversity, rather than a personal trait or characteristic the service member possesses. Participant 3 noted that, for their spouse, resilience was “the ability to adapt to changes that are beyond your control . . . adapting to situations in an optimistic and positive way.” Participant 6 stated that resilience for their spouse meant an “ability to bounce back from a hardship.” One participant asked their spouse to comment specifically about their definition and provided the following definition in a follow-up with the interviewer: “Resilience is how you persevere in difficult circumstances. It’s not about how hard you fall, but how quick you can get back up from being knocked down” (Participant 2 [P2]).

Some participants cited specific notions of resilience that are embedded in the service members' military community. One Navy spouse remarked that resilience, to their spouse, meant "Don't give up the ship" (P8). Another Navy spouse mentioned that for their spouse, resilience was "knowing how to weather the storm" (P7). Yet another spouse noted that resilience "the Marine Corps way" meant their service member must "do their job" (P4). Other participants noted that the root of resilience for the military service member stems from a place of selfless service. Participant 8 commented that the resiliency of their spouse was "more about the man standing next to me, the family I'm fighting for at home, the country I'm fighting for at home, than about their own personal needs."

Adapting, Overcoming, and Persevering

Like their active-duty members, spouses indicated that resilience was about adapting, overcoming, and persevering in the face of obstacles. Resilience to one spouse was "being able to rebound or to overcome an obstacle" (P1); to another, resilience meant they must "be flexible, adapt with whatever, overcome whatever it is that you're going through" (P2). Spouses noted that resilience was not a one-time event. Instead, spouses suggested that their own resilience stemmed from continually persevering. Participant 6 stated that for them, resilience meant not just "going through something difficult and making it out on the other side," but that they then had to "keep pushing forward." One participant indicated that their personal definition of resilience and the notion to persevere stemmed directly from their spouse: "I've almost kind of adopted a bit of my husband's thought process, I guess. You just keep going to get things done" (P8).

Mindset

Our participants indicated that resilience was a mindset that one must choose and that when faced with difficulties, they chose to focus on gratitude, positivity, and growth. For example, Participant 8 stated that, although they had faced and would continue to face challenging and stressful experiences as a result of being a military spouse, they believed that "whatever may come, we've been very blessed in our life and we should always be thankful for the life that we have." Another participant noted that for them, overcoming and persevering meant adopting an optimistic attitude. Specifically, the spouse stated, "sometimes you just have to kinda look at the bright side of things, and you have to find the things that work for you at each place" (P5). One participant drew resilience from a growth mindset:

I think it [resilience] is really a mindset switch. I think it's changing from "oh this is happening to me, how horrid" to like "how can I take this horrid situation and turn it into something good?" And I think that is a big mindset switch. (P7)

Resilience Variations

Walsh (2012) described risk and resilience as a process of balancing risk and protective factors over the life span. Participants in our study expanded on that idea by suggesting that they reacted to situational challenges along a continuum:

I think what I'm saying is there's different levels of resilience, like sometimes you have to tap into that different part of yourself. Sometimes you have to let it go and just accept the things that come, and sometimes you just gotta pick yourself up and keep on trucking. (P8)

Likewise, Participant 3 suggested that resilience takes different forms depending on the situation:

Sometimes resiliency just means like surviving day to day and other times, it means figuring out how to continue with your passions to the best of your ability while also supporting your family and your [service member spouse]. I think it's just super unique to every situation. (P3)

Our participants also recognized that their understanding of resilience was often focused on the here and now of their situation but that their reactions to stressors had long-term effects. One participant indicated that resilience is a learning process and recognized that the stressors they overcome now prepare them to address stressors they will face in the future: "I think being able to come out of extremely, extremely stressful situations, be able to come out on the other side and [know] I'm okay and I survived this, and now I'm kind of better prepared for next time" (P6). Participant 3 wondered about the long-term ramifications of resilience in the face of prolonged adversity, stating "I may be resilient right now in the moment, but in the long term, like, how will this affect me?"

Individualized

Finally, participants defined resilience as an individualized process, stating things such as "everybody has their own unique ways of being resilient, and I think that they do what works best for their families" (P7) and "my resiliency may look different than someone else's resiliency" (P2). One participant elaborated on this individualized approach to resilience by recognizing that each person has different risk factors that affect their response to stressors, thus affecting the way each person demonstrates resilience. This participant stated that, when viewing resilience among military spouses as a whole, it is important to

take into consideration somebody's upbringing and the baggage that they bring into this life. We don't know what people have gone through as kids, and that I think would have a big impact on whether or not someone can be resilient, so I don't think it's a one-size-fits-all. (P6)

Theme 2: Challenges Within the Military Lifestyle

Lack of Control

The spouses described the common challenges of the military lifestyle to their resilience. First, they discussed the stress of the feeling of a lack of control in their lives. One participant described how she

just found out yesterday that my husband was getting deployed and he's leaving Sunday. And I keep hearing people say, "You have to be resilient. You're gonna be okay!" You're resilient, but right now, what it feels like is how much can you endure for the sake of the mission? (P1)

Another echoed this sentiment: "I have no control if the Navy says they're going to deploy my husband. There's nothing I can do to change that" (P8).

Constant Changes

Another common challenge mentioned among all of the participants was the constant changes they experience in their lives, including moving, career changes, and changes within their family dynamics. Because they move every few years, the spouses described how they are constantly separated from their support systems: "Even though you meet these great people, you don't get

to stay with them . . . and you're generally not near your family, which is very hard" (P5). Another described how "Once I have started on something and I'm like, 'This is it, we gon' be here for a while,' then my husband is like 'nope. Military said we got to shift and move again'" (P2).

These constant changes resulted in career struggles for the spouses. One asked, "How can I get this [job] if I'm never at one place for long? . . . How do I uproot everything that I know or everything that I am doing to follow my service member?" (P2). Another described how "moving, changing jobs, not being able to have a secure profession, you do it because you have to . . . but that doesn't mean that there's not a whole lot of emotional and mental load that goes with it" (P3).

Another challenge for military spouses was constantly changing family dynamics. One described the difficulty in constantly changing work schedules: "We have to kind of get into this routine without him and then when he comes back, because it's different while he's away. We gotta kind of try to fit him back into our routine when he gets back" (P4). Another discussed the challenge of transitioning to being the sole caregiver during a deployment: "If I go down with COVID, what am I going to do? Because, like, I was literally IT. No one is going to want to take my kids. . . . That was the first time I ever felt, like, fearful" (P7).

Mission Priority

In addition to constant change, the spouses also mentioned the challenges of the military's clear prioritization of the mission above military members and their families: "If something is going on at home, we're going to take care of our active person first and worry about your family later" (P2). The participants described how this focus on the mission is so intense that it affects service members physically, which increases the burden on military spouses to care for them: "My husband's health suffers because the mission is most important to him" (P1).

Theme 3: Outside Expectations of Spouse Resilience

Expectation to "Suck It Up"

The spouses described others' expectations for their resilience. First, they described the military's expectation that they "suck it up." One described how "you have a lot of the 'suck-it-up' mentality, and I would say when you have the leaders who kind of fall under that, whether it's seeking the mental health treatment or having stigmas with that" (P6). Another explained that "there's so much focus and emphasis on just being resilient and sucking it up" so there is often a mindset of "'Oh well, military spouses are resilient so they signed up for this, they know what it takes and they just have to get over it'" (P3). Another spouse described how "they put so much pressure on you to be like, just make it work, that you've gotta figure out the way to make yourself happy, and that's hard to do" (P5). Participant 7 summed up the military spouse mentality as a whole: "You toughen up and you make it work. You know?"

The participants felt their overall resilience would be enhanced if individuals outside the military community better understood the challenges faced by military families. One participant felt the "suck it up" mentality stemmed less from the military community itself and more from outside communities who might not understand the struggles of military family life: "So when . . . you're going through another stress of a PCS [permanent change of station], you can't find a house, they say, well, at least you get a house allowance, at least you get free health care" (P6). Participant 3 expanded on this idea by stating, "I just honestly think that a greater understanding of what sacrifices that military spouses make . . . would increase resiliency, because there's just so much lack of understanding what it actually entails." Lastly, one participant mentioned a sentiment they

frequently hear from others in a civilian community, expressing that it was frustrating when friends outside the military told her, “I don’t know how you do it,” to which the participant responded, “I don’t know, you just do it!”

Pressure to Be Resilient

The spouses also expressed frustration at others’ misperceptions of the expectation that they and their families demonstrate resilience: “When we call military spouses or children resilient, it just seems like a cop out and relinquishes any type of burden . . . or feeling of guilt about a situation that may cause emotional or mental damage” (P3). Another participant echoed this frustration: “Sometimes I don’t feel like I’m being resilient. Sometimes I feel like I’m just doing what needs to be done because that’s what needs to be done” (P8). Another participant described how her friends

call me Superwoman because I have all these different things going on and I always seem like I got it together. . . . It’s like saying to me that I have to keep going, no matter what, and I think people should be able to just feel defeated sometimes. Or be able to say “that was just too much for me” or “I don’t really feel like being resilient today, I kind of want to lay in bed and just be upset or sad.” (P4)

Given these expectations, one spouse pointed out the danger of expecting military children to consistently demonstrate resilience:

It’s so easy for everyone to say that military kids are always so resilient and sometimes they’re not. Sometimes they are stressed out. They are feeling the crushing weight. They feel sad but everyone keeps telling them that they’re resilient. So it almost makes it seem like . . . they aren’t allowed to feel those hard things or talk about those things or act on those feelings and emotions. (P8)

One spouse proposed a solution to these misperceptions, emphasizing that resilience is unique for military spouses and should be defined to accurately reflect the way they uniquely overcome challenges:

I think it’s important for military spouses to reappropriate that term [resilience] so that it is not weaponized, and I would like to see some sort of guidance as to how we can be resilient but in a way that positively impacts our mental health and physical health and not having to endure all of the things and all of the frustration and uncertainty that comes with the onset of having to be resilient. (P1)

Theme 4: Sense of Responsibility for Family’s Resilience

With their partners focused on the mission, the spouses described their sense of responsibility to maintain their resilience so they can care for their children in the absence of their active-duty spouse: “We have our husband or our spouses gone so much, we need to be a solid parent at home for our kiddos or our family” (P7). Participant 4 likewise described how “I kind of see myself as holding down the fort, you know, because when my husband is not home it is just me and the kids.” Another explained how “I have three little ones that’s looking up to me and I can’t slip away, depressed, because daddy’s not home” (P2). In the end, the spouses defined resilience as an obligation to their families. Participant 3 described that “I have to be that way for my children.” Participant 4 added that “I think that’s what resilience is like, knowing that you kind of have to carry the load, you know, for your whole family to try to keep us afloat.”

The participants described how this resilience is especially obligatory when the active-duty spouse is unable to be resilient:

I'm kind of taking the lead with our kids . . . but I've also kind of had to pour into my husband, you know, because he has those times you know where things are really, really hard for him. I've also been like his counselor and his doctor sometimes. (P4)

Theme 5: Individual Resilience

In response to being unable to control many aspects of the military lifestyle, most of the spouses described how they have become independent in order to withstand the constantly changing variables within the military lifestyle. One described being “pretty independent, and I think that helps a lot because I don't rely on my spouse to do all these things I do” (P5). Another described how being independent resulted in self-confidence and resilience:

You gotta figure out how to do all of it just because you can't ever rely on the spouse being able to help. But I think being able to come out of extremely, extremely stressful situations, be able to come out on the other side and say “I'm okay, and I survived this, and now I'm kind of better prepared for next time.” (P6)

Another spouse described how maintaining an independent identity was key to separating herself from the stressors of the military lifestyle: “That's a really important part of being a military spouse. It doesn't have to be a job specifically, but just something that you can be your own person separate from your husband or your spouse's job” (P8).

The spouses also described the importance of taking care of themselves physically and mentally in order to maintain their resilience. Many described exercise as key to their mental health and wellness: “My biggest coping mechanism is exercise. I've found that no matter where I go, I can exercise” (P5). Another spouse described how she “tried to find a kickball team every place we've been to since Okinawa because I figured out it's a stress relief” (P6). Participant 7 echoed that “working out . . . just helps me. It lowers my stress.” One spouse explained how she defaults to exercise when facing the challenges of the military lifestyle because she knows her “ability to recover quickly is directly tied to the way in which I care for myself” (P1).

Theme 6: Collective Resilience

The participants described their reliance on the collective military spouse community for their survival. One spouse, for example, described a connection with other military spouses as the difference between “doing well and barely surviving” (P6). Another spouse described her reliance on the military spouse community: “Community is what it's all about. I can't get through anything without community” (P7). Another spouse echoed this survival mechanism: “This is a beautiful community. It's an amazing place . . . we all get each other. So I think there are times where it's really hard . . . but we survive, we get through it. We're resilient. We got the grit” (P7). Participant 1 explained exactly how the military spouse community offers this support to help spouses survive the challenges of the military lifestyle: “When time calls for it, I think, collectively, we bring our resources together to help pull other military spouses up and try to just forewarn them about what the obstacles are and what may have worked for our family” (P1).

The military spouses also described the comfort they found in other military spouses' understanding of the challenges they face: "I think the most important part and coping is finding your community, so making sure you're surrounding yourself with women who are going through similar experiences, or who have gone through similar experiences and similar life stages" (P3).

In the midst of this supportive community, the spouses discussed how they actively seek to comfort each other: "You're not the only one who's in it who's having this issue, I understand that you'll get through this, that we know we've been there, we understand how it goes" (P5). This outreach seemed to be especially helpful from spouses who were more experienced with the military lifestyle: "Having that senior spouse example has been so good. . . . She's always been somebody who said, 'Hey, I've been through a lot. If you ever have any questions, I'm always here for you'" (P8).

In addition to relying on other spouses for their own wellness and resilience, the spouses expressed pride in their ability to contribute to the military spouse community. One described how "I feel like I am a better team player. I feel like I'm more committed to helping others than I have in the past because I know that others will do the same for me" (P7). The participants also described increased self-growth as a result of being a part of a community: "I really don't think I would have allowed myself to receive help if I hadn't been part of this phenomenal community that is constantly supporting each other" (P7). Participant 5 echoed this sentiment: "Learning to get that help from other people is something that I feel like you have to kind of get when you are a military spouse because, otherwise, you're going to have to do everything and you don't have to."

Finally, our participants frequently indicated that they felt a "sense of pride" (P7), "connection" (P4), or "camaraderie" (P8) from belonging to a group of military spouses who understood their unique situation. When asked how the military could enhance resilience for military spouses, participants commonly indicated that peer support and fostering connections with senior spouses should be a priority for military commands. One participant noted that their ability to be resilient in difficult times was related to the "opportunities" they had "to connect with other people who are going through similar stuff and who are a part of the same small community" and recommended that the military facilitate more opportunities to connect (P7). Another participant suggested that military commands should "have someone that [the spouse] can talk to" that would "help them to understand the military life whether you are a new spouse or a seasoned spouse" (P2).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore military spouses' perceptions of their resilience and the ways in which they define resilience for their community. Our study's results indicate that spouses' definitions of resilience are currently shaped by service member and mission priority. Our participants also described how they often felt burdened by outside expectations of their resilience as well as by a sense of responsibility for their family's resilience. Overall, the spouses relied on themselves and the military spouse community to overcome the challenges they faced. Participants expressed a desire for resources aimed specifically at enhancing spouse resilience and more awareness about resilience resources already in place throughout the military.

While past research has examined resilience factors in spouses such as communication skills, social support, and spousal support (Erbes et al., 2017; Richer et al., 2022; Sinclair et al., 2019; Villagran et al., 2013), our study provided new insight into military spouses' perspectives of their resiliency.

This revelation of the spouses' worldview aids our understanding of ways to best support spouses and areas to focus on to support their resilience. Our participants' definitions of their resilience were shaped by their relationship with their service member and the influence of the military's mission. In addition, while past research has indicated that the military lifestyle and culture is challenging for spouses to navigate (Cole et al., 2021; DaLomba et al., 2021; Donoho et al., 2018; Mailey et al. 2018), our participants' description of their feelings of responsibility for their family's well-being reveals the added burden that military spouses face as they help their families navigate the military lifestyle. Finally, our participants confirmed that resiliency should be viewed as a variation and is unique to each individual (Pietrzak & Southwick, 2011). As outlined in the professional literature (Masten, 2014; Southwick et al., 2014), the participants confirmed the dynamic nature of resiliency, recognizing that sometimes they felt more resilient than at other times.

In the midst of these challenges, our participants emphasized that the military spouse community serves as a protective factor and a source of their resilience against mental health challenges. This perception of the military spouse community aligns with previous research highlighting the supportive role that spouses play for each other, so much so that it is a protective factor against suicide (Cole et al., 2021). Therefore, military leadership and the counseling community might focus on enhancing this community and connecting spouses with one another—especially more seasoned spouses with newer spouses. In addition, because military-sponsored resilience programs are often targeted to better support service member outcomes, community providers might find ways to focus on supporting the spouses and helping them to overcome the challenges they face in their daily lives.

Finally, the participants discussed how they overcame the challenges of the military lifestyle, including constant moving, deployments, and overall uncertainty, through their own individual and collective resilience. These lifestyle challenges that the participants described correspond to career struggles and shifting family dynamics that cause ongoing stress to the military spouse, both of which have been previously documented in the professional literature (Borah & Fina, 2017; Cole et al., 2021; DaLomba et al., 2021; Donoho et al., 2018; Mailey et al., 2018; Numbers & Bruneau, 2017). Currently, since the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, the United States is experiencing peacetime, whereas the nature of future conflicts is uncertain (Marsh & Hampton, 2022). Enhancing the resiliency of military spouses and finding solutions to ongoing stressors is key during this time of peace so that spouses are ready and able to face the stressors of future, potentially large-scale wars (Sefidan et al., 2021).

Implications for Counselors

Professional counselors are called to be trained and ready to meet the unique needs of military spouses, especially in understanding the nature of military culture and its impact on spouse mental health and well-being and enhancing spouse resilience in times of adversity (Cole, 2014). Our study echoes the continued struggles of military spouses described in the professional literature (Cole et al., 2021; Lewy et al., 2014; Runge et al., 2014), suggesting that new and innovative ways of understanding and approaching military spouse resilience is needed within the counseling community. For example, counselors might encourage spouses to explore how their resilience is shaped by the military community in order to increase self-awareness and understanding. They might also help spouses develop their independence and sense of self-efficacy while simultaneously seeking collective support within the military community. Counselors can help spouses examine their social support and help them develop their social skills so they can connect with others around them. Counselors should also help military spouses unpack their perceptions of outsiders' expectations of their resiliency. Encouraging spouses to reflect on others' expectations, and the ways in which these expectations impact their sense of well-being, may help define resilience for themselves and capitalize

on their unique resiliencies during challenging times. Ultimately, because the military culture is so unique, counselors should seek out professional development so they can better understand how to help military spouses navigate this culture and enhance their resilience. When working with military spouses, professional counselors might explore spouses' feelings of responsibility for their family members' health and well-being that were described in our results. In addition, counselors can equip spouses with supportive mental health resources for their family members so they do not feel as if they need to care for them on their own. School counselors, in particular, can provide support for military-connected students at school and can connect military families with resources within both the civilian and military communities to support their mental health and resilience (Cole, 2017; Quintana & Cole, 2021).

Our participants revealed that often the expectation of resilience is burdensome for spouses, which serves as a contradiction to its purposes. Counselors are called to acknowledge the challenges of the military lifestyle and provide support for navigating these challenges, rather than expecting spouses to face these hurdles alone. In addition, counselors might focus on more holistic manifestations of resilience, recognizing that some spouses can be resilient, yet still struggle. Approaching spouses from a strengths-based perspective, rather than from a deficit perspective, can be empowering within the counseling relationship (Smith, 2006).

Limitations

Our recruitment strategy limited our sample size as we only sought participants that we knew through our military spouse networks. In addition, our sample lacked gender diversity, with all of the participants being female. Approximately 91% of active-duty service member spouses are female (DoD, 2022). However, the lack of male participants in the present study is a limitation, and the experience of male spouses is undoubtedly unique and worth exploring in greater depth. Research suggests that stressors and characteristics of resilience transcend gender categories (NASSEM, 2019).

Finally, in qualitative research, the researcher's biases may impact their interpretation of the data. As military spouses, our own experiences may have impacted the way in which we described our participants' experiences. We took several steps to mitigate these biases, including intentionally bracketing them and engaging in peer debriefing throughout the research process.

Implications for Future Research

The participants in our study described a need for resources and programs geared specifically toward military spouses. Future research might determine how to best develop and implement these programs that will help to enhance spouse resilience. Key areas of focus may be ways to leverage the military spouse community and enhance spouse sense of self, which were two protective factors that emerged from our data. In addition, existing resilience programs within the military that are currently aimed at the active-duty population should undergo a program evaluation to determine their effectiveness with military spouses.

As a follow-up to our qualitative research, future quantitative research studies should address limitations noted previously. Specifically, future research should target a larger sample size and broader demographic of military spouses to further explore their understanding and definition of resilience. This larger and more diverse sample size would allow for greater generalizability and would assist with advocacy within the military. Finally, future qualitative research might explore the perceptions of male spouses, in particular, in order to determine their perception of resiliency and any unique areas of needed support.

Conclusion

Military spouses face a wide range of challenges as a result of the military lifestyle. They are expected to be resilient so as to overcome these challenges. However, our study reveals the often burdensome impact of these expectations on military spouses. Our results also illuminate how spouses uniquely conceptualize their own resilience, recognizing the resilience continuum and focusing on the positive impact of their protective community. Overall, the spouses took pride in themselves and their communities for their ability to overcome obstacles. These revelations are key for both the military and the counseling profession in their work to support military spouses wherever they are on this continuum and enhance their community, which is key to their well-being.

Conflict of Interest and Funding Disclosure

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Appendix

Interview Protocol

1. Tell me a little about your identity as a military spouse?
 - a. What have been some of your rewarding experiences as a military spouse?
 - b. What have been some of your stressful experiences as a military spouse?
2. How have you coped with the more stressful experiences as a military spouse?
3. How would you describe the military's definition of "resilience?"
4. What does the term "resilience" mean to you?
5. What does the term "resilience" mean for your military partner/family?
6. How would you describe the resilience of military spouses?
7. In what ways have you, personally, been resilient as a military spouse?
8. What would enhance the resilience of military spouses and their families, from your perspective?
9. How, if at all, has your military experience enhanced your resilience?
10. How, if at all, has the military's focus on resilience presented you with challenges during your military spouse experiences?
11. How, if at all, can resilience be a negative way to describe military spouses/families?
12. Is there anything else about military resilience that is important to you that I did not ask about?