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Exploring the Lived Experiences of Career Oriented Military Spouses Pursuing Education for Career Advancement

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**EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF
CAREER ORIENTED MILITARY SPOUSES PURSUING EDUCATION
FOR CAREER ADVANCEMENT**

by

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ABSTRACT

EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF CAREER ORIENTED MILITARY SPOUSES PURSUING EDUCATION FOR CAREER ADVANCEMENT

Melody D. Agbisit
Old Dominion University, 2019
Director: Dr. Tim Grothaus

In the United States, the number of dual career couples has been increasing due to economic and personal growth needs (Pixley, 2009). Furthermore, more careers are requiring specialized education than before (O'Neill & Thomson, 2013). However, there is a limited understanding of the trailing career oriented military spouse as a student population (Gleiman & Swearngen, 2012). This phenomenological qualitative study aimed to explore the lived experiences of 11 military spouses pursuing education to advance their career options. Participants were military spouses who valued career development and who were currently enrolled or admitted in a post-secondary educational or training program. In addition, participants each had experienced at least one relocation as a military spouse.

Data were analyzed with a research team. To increase rigor, four main strategies of trustworthiness were utilized: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Hays & Singh, 2012). Three superordinate themes as well as 10 themes and 28 subthemes were constructed and explained. The first superordinate theme, *the self*, focused on the participants' inner dialog. The second superordinate theme, *the circumstances*, focused more on external factors impacting participants' lives. The final superordinate theme, *the choices*, focused on the decisions made given the inner dialog and the external circumstances. The findings suggest that military spouses may have more needs than has been noted in the military spouse literature. Implications for practitioners and institutions, limitations of the study, and future research were

also addressed.

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DEDICATION

To my grandmother who gives me courage,
my mother who gives me strength,
and
to my daughter(s) not yet conceived who give me hope.

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Not everyone has the privilege of pursuing their life passions, let alone completing a dissertation on a topic so meaningful to their heart. And though my journey was long and windy, I made it, and for that I am thankful. Additionally, I had the immense honor of being supported by family, friends, and even strangers. The list below is only a glimpse of the awe and gratitude I have for those who believed in me. And for those I failed to mention, my heart still goes out to you.

To my parents: Thank you for your unyielding love and support throughout my journey of life and my PhD. Though it did not go as planned, you persevered beside me. And mom, thank you for being the inspiration that sparked my advocacy for the career oriented military spouse.

To my participants: I admire your dedication, strength, and courage to be military spouses pursuing education. Thank you for your valuable time you took to participate in my study. I hope this study can highlight your voice and garner the support you need to follow your career and personal goals and dreams. This study is what it is because of you.

To my dissertation committee, Dr. Grothaus, Dr. Reh fuss, and Dr. Carlisle: For the number of hours and years you poured into me in order for me to complete my degree, as well as the number of years we will share in the future, I just want to say thank you. Your expertise, guidance, and encouragement gave me the confidence and courage to push through to the end. Special thanks to Dr. Grothaus for listening, encouraging, and motivating me to stay the course every time I wanted to give up and quit. You taught me the value of the phrase, inch by inch.

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To myself: I just wanted to thank myself for not quitting even though there were years I wanted to quit every day. But every time, I made the decision to continue and fight instead. No one will ever know how many tears I shed during this process, but despite it all, I survived. As I close this chapter, I am reminded of a line I wrote in my poem about high school graduation, “But I know when it’s over, it’s really just begun.” Cheers! And Mabuhay!

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Overview of the Research Problem

Growing up in a military household, I watched my mother pursue her career as a nurse. Professionally, she worked as a civilian nurse in a military clinic serving families. Having longevity in the clinic, she was able to build rapport with patients and also teach the rotating military doctors and staff the protocol for that specific clinic. She, along with other civilian nurses, helped to bring a sense of continuity and familiarity to the clinic. Furthermore, my mom was able to create a program, Nurse Managed Clinic, to provide health education and referrals to local resources for new personnel and patients (Agbisit, 2007). This program was devised as one way to help military families as they relocated to a new duty station.

As a military spouse, my mother had already earned her bachelor's degree in nursing prior to marrying my father. However, she decided to wait until after my father retired before she went back to pursue her master's degree. Watching my mother balance being a military wife, mother, and nurse sparked my interest in studying the military spouse. Through my research, I grew a deeper appreciation of the complexities of military culture and the challenges military spouses face.

I began my military spouse research as an undergrad, however my focus was on military spouse marriage satisfaction. While navigating my career journey during my doctoral program, I became intrigued by career development practice. In conducting a study looking at military student experiences, I found that for the military spouse group each question about education led to a discussion about the challenges of navigating a career and education (Irwin-DeVitis, Moreno, & Levingston, 2012). To my surprise, the number one barrier mentioned by military

spouses that were interviewed was relocation. Prior to this insight, my focus, along with popular research, had been on deployment. This finding magnified my curiosity regarding the career oriented military spouse pursuing education.

Brief Summary of Relevant Research

Career development, a lifelong process, can contribute to personal well-being and identity (Haslerig & Navarro, 2016). Additionally, many individuals join the workforce for personal and financial gain (Bohonos, 2014; Cron, 2001). Although traditional marriages used to involve a breadwinner, usually the male, and a homemaker, usually the female, with the economic climate today, it has become increasingly necessary for both members of a couple to work (Pixley, 2009). In addition, many career and job options are now requiring education where work experience alone was enough previously (Bohonos, 2014).

Career development research can also be more complicated because many studies do not differentiate between individuals who are career oriented versus job oriented (McBride & Cleymans, 2014). Career oriented individuals make a personal, long term commitment to their profession that usually requires specialized knowledge and continued growth, where job-oriented individuals are more focused on earning an income (Bird & Schnuman-Crook, 2005). Furthermore, with more women joining the workforce, the legal recognition of same-sex marriage, and much of the extant career research conducted prior to the 2008 recession, a new look at dual career couples is needed (Cooke & Speirs, 2005; Meadows, Griffin, Karney, & Pollak, 2016).

While the trailing spouse, the spouse who moves to another location to follow his or her spouse's career assignment, is a topic of interest in civilian literature, one area of dual career couples that has spawned limited research is the trailing military spouse (Asbury & Martin,

2012; Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013). While in the civilian world, relocation is usually a choice of the employee, in the military world, relocation is usually the choice of the military (Cooke & Speirs, 2005). In civilian companies, relocation is often a means to advance one's career or to keep one's job (Allen, Eby, Douthitt, & Noble, 2002). Furthermore, a successful relocation may have positive implications for the company and its employees (Blackburn, 2010). Because the trailing spouse plays a key role in a successful relocation, some companies assist the trailing spouse's transition by providing services such as career counseling, job hunting services, relocation allowance, lists of services in the new location, and support groups (Larson, 2006; McNutley, 2012).

Relocation usually has immediate and stressful consequences for the trailing spouse, such as managing the logistics of moving as well as leaving the comfort of home and work, even if the long-term outcome is positive (Whitaker, 2010). Career issues for the trailing spouse are one of the top areas of concern (Meadows et al., 2016). While some companies take into consideration the trailing spouse, others are reluctant to relocate employees who have spouses with careers and will offer the opportunity to an employee who is not in a dual career relationship (Allen et al., 2002).

Typically, the military relocates almost all its employees every three to four years (Marshall, 2014). Even though relocation is a major part of the military lifestyle, literature on relocation and how it affects the family was limited. Furthermore, literature on the career and educational pursuits of the trailing military spouse was also sparse. What does exist was, for the most part, conceptual articles, investigations which used non-rigorous methodology, or reports voiced by service members or employers (Cooke & Speirs, 2005; Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). In one extant study, Meadows et al. (2016) were interested in the employment gaps

between military spouses and their matched civilian spouse. They found that military spouses were at a disadvantage with regards to the number of hours worked and pay received compared to their matched civilian counterpart (Meadows et al., 2016).

Although relocation is the number one cause of unemployment for military spouses, it also has implications for pursuing an education as well (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). The military does not typically give service members much advance notice regarding where or when they will be moving (Cooke & Speirs, 2005). Furthermore, even if they are able to tell service members in advance, orders may still change at the last minute. This makes it difficult for service spouses to plan a move, let alone apply or enroll in a training or education program (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). Some military spouses respond to this by taking online classes (Marshall, 2014). However, many spouses prefer traditional in-seat learning (Dew, 2012). Because of these challenges, Gleiman and Swearengen (2012) argued that the military spouse is an important student population with unique needs.

In addition to the challenges involved in pursuing education, military spouses face continuous instability due to the military lifestyle- namely deployment, relocation, and career transitions (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). Because of the frequently changing dynamics of military life, the military spouse plays an ambiguous and supportive role in the family, often filling the gaps as needed. These dynamic and ambiguous roles along with the instability can be a source of stress. (Asbury & Martin, 2012). This accumulated stress may affect career and educational decisions (Bohonos, 2014; Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012).

Though military spouses may face more added stress than the civilian spouse, they also often have resiliency factors such as utilizing social support and communication skills (Wang, Nyutu, Tran, & Spears, 2015). These resiliency factors may also have implications on career and

educational pursuits. Because of the unique characteristics of the military spouse, this student population is important to study (Bohonos, 2014; Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012).

In addition, since two million military spouses are eligible for the Post 9/11 GI Bill and about 20% of those using the benefit are military spouses, the military spouse student population should not be ignored (Fishback, 2015). Being a unique population with specific needs, a closer look at career oriented military spouses pursuing an education is needed and necessary in career and military spouse literature (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012).

Research Tradition

To capture the experience of this unique career oriented military spouse population, this study utilized phenomenology. Phenomenology entails “elucidating meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of a phenomenon for a person or group of people,” (Patton, 2002, p. 428). The method is not a rigid structure, but specifically designed for each research study to be the most impactful and concise based on the needs of the population and the study (Groenewald, 2004). The phenomenon is investigated in context and the researcher’s experience with the phenomena, the participants, and/or its context is integrated with the participants’ experience (Hays & Singh, 2012). The phenomena studied here is the lived experiences of career oriented military spouses pursuing education for career advancement.

In phenomenology, participants are considered co-researchers as they are experts regarding their lived experience (Hays & Singh, 2012). The ultimate purpose of phenomenology is to shed light on a focused question and discover the meaning and essence of a significant human experience (Douglas & Moustakas, 1985). As such, a homogenous sample of three to fifteen participants is needed to obtain an in-depth description of the essence of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). The participants usually participate in a semi-structured interview to explore

the phenomenon from multiple angles (Hays & Singh, 2012). The method is open to emergent data, yet follows guidelines for rigor and verification (Groenewald, 2004). Researcher self-reflection is an important part of the process, both for insight and to minimize bias (Hays & Singh, 2012). For this study, phenomenology was chosen to illuminate and provide a vivid description of the lived experiences of career oriented military spouses pursuing education for career advancement.

Rationale for the Study

There appears to be gaps in both literature and practice pertaining to the education needs of military spouses (Meadows et al., 2016). Gleiman and Swearingen (2012) argue that military spouses should be treated as a separate student population because of their unique lifestyle. With two million military spouses eligible for the Post 9/11 GI Bill benefit and also with career identity being linked to wellness and life satisfaction, a closer look into this population is needed (Fishback, 2015). Furthermore, with changing demographics of the military spouse, namely the legalization of same sex marriage and an increase of male military spouses, the changing economy, and the changing trends in career development, an understanding of career oriented military spouses pursuing education is necessary.

Research Questions

1. What are the lived experiences of career oriented military spouses pursuing education for career advancement?
2. How does the experience of relocation impact this process?

Definition of Terms

Career- A personal and often long-term commitment to one's life work as an occupation or profession, usually requiring special training (Bird & Schnuman-Crook, 2005; Cron,

2001).

Career oriented- A person who values their career as an important aspect of their person as evidenced by the devotion of time and emotional investment (Bird & Schnuman-Crook, 2005).

Career development- The process of navigating a career path while balancing life responsibilities, economic and political conditions, and personal career exploration, research, training and application (Gomez et al., 2001; Moen & Sweet, 2002; Pixley, 2009).

Deployment- The assigning of military service members to a different location for a specific assignment or training protocol for an extended period of time. The family is not able to accompany the service member.

Duty station- The assigned location for a service member.

Education- Specialized training for one's career, including higher education, community college, trade, and technical programs.

Military- United States military including: Navy, Marine Corps, Army, Air Force, and Coast Guard.

Military affiliated- Persons recognized by the military as having a military status such as veteran, service member, service spouse, and dependent.

Military service member (service member, armed forces) - Active duty service member or reservist who is currently serving in the military on a full-time status.

Military spouse/ Service spouse- Person legally married to military service member as recognized by the military.

Post 9/11 GI Bill- A post-secondary financial education benefit for military service members.

They can designate their spouses and dependent children as beneficiaries.

Pursuing education- For the purpose of this study, this refers to the process of taking actions with the intention of completing a program of education, specifically those who have been admitted, have enrolled, or have graduated within the past twelve months.

Relocation- Permanent reassignment of duty station to different location. In the military, this often happens every few years. Families usually are allowed to accompany the service member.

Overview of Methodology

Phenomenological methodology was used to guide an in-depth exploration of career oriented military spouses (Hays & Singh, 2012). In order to get a better understanding of the phenomenon, a homogeneous, purposive sample of 11 participants were engaged in a semi-structured interview to explore the lived experiences of career oriented military spouses pursuing education for career advancement (Creswell, 2007). Participants were recruited through university, college, and trade schools' military student support offices using purposive sampling criteria. Participants were also recruited through other participants and through friends of military spouses, also known as snowball sampling (Hays & Singh, 2012).

To reduce researcher bias, I employed a research team comprised of another doctoral student and myself (Hays & Singh, 2012). Member checking involved exchanging transcripts, reflective thoughts, and interpretations to make sure the participant voices shone through and researcher bias was minimized (Creswell, 2007). Throughout the analysis process, research team members created and updated codebooks to keep track of the themes that emerged through the analysis of the data gathered via the interviews. At the end, a textural-structural codebook was developed to capture the composite thick description of the phenomenon. A Ph.D. level

independent auditor was also used to review all documents in the audit trail to increase the study's credibility and trustworthiness (Hays & Singh, 2012). Additionally, to increase rigor in the study, I utilized four main procedures for trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the research problem, a brief summary of the salient literature, the rationale for the study, the research questions, operationalized definitions that will be used in the study, and a brief overview of the methodology. The next chapter will review relevant literature concerning career oriented military spouses pursuing education for career advancement.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In order to establish a rationale for this dissertation study, this chapter features an in-depth review of the professional literature regarding career development, education and career advancement, dual career couples, relocation, military families, military culture, military spouses, and career oriented military spouses pursuing education.

Career Development

For career oriented individuals, career development is linked to overall life satisfaction, identity, happiness, and financial survival (Bluvshstein, Kruzic, & Massaglia, 2015; Cron, 2001; Parker & Athur, 2004; Salmela-Aro, & Weise, 2006). Career development is the process of navigating a career path while balancing life responsibilities, economic and political conditions, and personal career exploration, research, training, and application (Gomez et al., 2001; Moen & Sweet, 2002; Pixley, 2009). Navigating a career path can be a complex process because it demands a high level of personal commitment (e.g., emotional and time) while increasing knowledge and skills in order to be upwardly mobile (Eby, 2001; McBride & Cleymans, 2014; Moen & Sweet, 2002; Pixley, 2009). In addition, where experience was once sufficient, more careers are requiring higher levels of education (Bohonos, 2014). Career development is a lifelong process; however, for dual career couples, the complexity may be compounded when you also have to consider a spouse and often a family (Cron, 2001; Haslerig & Navarro, 2016; Parker & Arthur, 2004). When one member of the couple is in the military, another layer of complexity is added (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012).

One important population that is understudied and undervalued has been military spouses (Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013; Marshall, 2014; McBride & Cleymans, 2014). For example, few

studies looked at the career development or satisfaction of spouses in military couples (Anderson et al., 2011; de Burgh, White, Fear, Iversen, 2011; Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013). Due to the unique nature of the military lifestyle, the importance of career development to one's well-being, and the limited understanding and research about the military spouse, it is vital to add to the current literature concerning military spouses and their careers (Castaneda & Harrell, 2008; Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012; Marshall, 2014). The research on the career oriented military spouses pursuing education is even more limited (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012; Marshall, 2014). In addition, the available career development and education research on spouses in dual career civilian couples may not be generalizable to military spouses (Baptist & Nelson Goff, 2012; McBride & Cleymans, 2014; Meadows et al., 2016).

Career development is a lifelong, complex process (Parker & Arthur, 2004). Traditionally it was seen as a linear process- i.e. choose a career path, obtain degrees and training, find a job, and advance within the company (Eby, 2001). However, to explain the changing process of career development, Gomez et al. (2001) created a career development model to factor in the complexities of navigating a career path which includes negotiating sociopolitical conditions, immediate challenges and opportunities, cultural and family obligations and expectations, and personal factors (characteristics, goals, and identity). In today's economy, career development is not seen as linear as it features increasing disruption in careers, changing labor market demands, and advancement in technology (Moen & Sweet, 2002). One specific aspect of career development that may affect military spouses is the need for education for career advancement.

Education and Career Advancement

College and technical education continue to be seen as one way people enhance their career opportunities (Greer & Waight, 2017). Unlike the past when work experience was often

all that was needed to secure a position, in the current economic climate, more careers are now requiring specialized education (Pugalis, Round, Blackwood, & Hatt, 2015; O'Neill & Thomson, 2013). The education requirement has forced many career and job oriented adults to seek additional schooling. But because the economic investment to obtain an education has risen, pursuing an education is now considered one of the most significant financial decisions adults make in their lifetime. Thus, the decision to pursue education is taken more seriously than in the past (Dew, 2012). In addition, adult learner needs differ based on age, reasons for seeking education, and type of education (Bohonos, 2014; Dew, 2012; Hirschy, Bremer, & Castellano, 2011; O'Neill & Thomson, 2013, Walck & Hensby, 2003).

Student needs may differ based on student type (Bohonos, 2014). For example, Hirschy et al. (2011) asserted that two year/technical students differed from students enrolled in four-year institutions in areas such as financial status, skillset, and age. Different student populations may have their own set of needs for success, yet most literature is based on students in four- year institutions (Hirschy et al., 2011). So, it is important to look at specific population needs to better assist adult learners (Bohonos, 2014; Hirschy et al., 2011). Understanding the factors that contribute to students' decisions regarding the pursuit of education may help illuminate the needs of the military spouse population.

In addition, the decision to go to school itself may be complicated. The process of deciding if, where, what, and when an adult learner should go to school is complex. It is impacted by social and personal factors such as cultural and family norms and personal needs (Bohonos, 2014; Patton, Doherty, & Sheild, 2014; Pugalis et al., 2015). For example, adult learners who are financially self-reliant may have different needs than students relying on parental support (O'Neill & Thomson, 2013). Valk, van Engen, and van der Velde (2014) found

that students with family and institutional financial assistance are more likely to pursue education directly after completing high school. Many students in this situation also have family expectations and moral support to attend college or technical training. Older students who are self-reliant, on the other hand, may have financial gain as a main motivation (Bohonos, 2014). In addition to financial pressure, these older students may also have low academic self-confidence and anxiety about enrolling in school and may need extra support to gain confidence and competence (O'Neill & Thompson, 2013). Regardless of student type, however, the main predictor for both enrollment in and completion of an educational program is desire for career advancement (Bohonos, 2014). Continuing education enhances career decision making (Haslerig & Navarro, 2016; Walck & Hensby, 2003). Continuing education may also be a factor in advancing one's career.

In looking at student perceptions of the value of bachelor's degrees, 69% of the sample in a recent study believed that their education contributed to employability (Greer & Waight, 2017). Adult learners who choose to go to school also report to have a positive perception of the value of their specialized education (O'Neill & Thompson, 2013). Furthermore, completing post-secondary education may reduce poverty, improve employability, and increase financial gains by about 20% (Hirschy et al., 2011). However, about 20-45% of adult learners reported to be uncertain about their chosen degree curriculum (Walck & Hensby, 2003). This may be because students may have insufficient information, lack of support, and/or lack of self-awareness and confidence when deciding on a degree (Bohonos, 2014; Walck & Hensby, 2003). This uncertainty may prevent adult learners from starting and/or completing an educational program.

The lack of career clarity may be due to students feeling confused and overwhelmed by the amount of choices and/or a lack of educational guidance (Van Noy, Trimble, Jenkins,

Barnett, & Wachen, 2016; Walck & Hensby, 2003). In contrast, O'Neill & Thompson (2013) found that those who went through career counseling had higher academic persistence and completed schooling at a higher rate. Yet even though 34% of students believed that they had received inadequate assistance in educational decision making, the majority still reported to be satisfied with their degree choice (Walck & Hensby, 2003).

In addition to personal motivation and skills, student success can be enhanced by institutional support (Hirschy et al., 2011). Van Noy et al., (2016) looked at college programs' levels of structure to support student success and found that students were more successful in programs that were intentionally and efficiently structured. This includes clarity and flexibility in describing program requirements, intentionality in design of courses and programs, and the amount of support given to students. Creating and communicating a simple pathway for completion may contribute to positive student outcomes (Van Noy et al., 2016). Positive student outcomes may also benefit the financial stability of institutions (Hirschy et al., 2011). Regardless of the population, institutions need to identify and address the needs of adult learner in order to better serve them (Gleiman and Swearengen, 2012).

It is important to assess the needs and definition of success for students in order to successfully implement policy and deliver education. Assuming that a student's goal is to graduate may be detrimental in assisting them to meet their personal goals (Bohonos, 2014; Hirschy et al., 2011). Understanding student needs based on the population, particularly the military spouse learner, may better support student success (Bohonos, 2014; Van Noy et al., 2016).

There is a need to assist diverse student populations in post-secondary education to be academically successful (Halserig & Navarro, 2016). Because more careers and jobs are now

requiring formal education or training and the needs of students differ, a look at specific populations, such as the military spouse student population, is important (Bohonos, 2014; Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). The complications of pursuing education for career advancement is compounded when considering dual career couples.

Dual Career Couple Research

As the traditional gender roles changed and more women entered the workforce, the term “dual-career couple,” was first coined in the late 1960’s (Burke, 2000; Parker & Arthur, 2004; Rapoport & Rapoport, 1969). The term “dual-career couple,” however, may be misleading (Pixley, 2009). Viers and Prouty (2001) found that there is a major difference between dual-career and dual-earner couples. One key distinction being that dual career couples appeared to be more equal in terms of power. Dual-career couples can be characterized by the commitment of both partners to professional occupations that usually require specialized knowledge and training whereas dual-earner couples are characterized solely based on both partners earning a paycheck (Bird & Schnuman-Crook, 2005). Furthermore, the motivation of being career driven or finance driven could have different implications. For example, a person who is finance driven may need a short-term education program for quick financial gain whereas a person who is career driven may need to take specific courses or even complete several degree programs to pursue their career (Bohonos, 2014). Regardless of how career or employment was operationalized or the motivation for pursuing a career, military spouses were at a disadvantage regarding pay and hours worked (Meadows et al., 2016). However, career concerns are not the only factors to consider for dual-career couples.

In an attempt to better understand and explain the workload for dual-career couples, Levner (2000) offered a reconceptualization of dual-career couples represented by the term

three-career couples, where the family and home acts as the third “career”. He argued that dual-career couples are more than a couple with two careers. Typically, family and home obligations need to be negotiated for dual-career couples to be successful (Cron, 2001; Klute, Crouter, Sayer, & McHale, 2001; Moen & Sweet, 2002; Parker & Arthur, 2004; Spiker-Miller & Kees, 1995). Because of this, much of the literature concluded that dual career couples exhibited more equality, egalitarian communication, and equal distribution of workload and responsibility in contrast to traditional couples (Bird & Shnuman-Crook, 2005; Borman & Guido-DiBrito, 1986; Jordan, Cobb, McCully, 1989; Moen & Sweet, 2002; Quek & Knudson-Martin, 2008).

The three-career conceptualization of dual career couples may be useful in understanding normative life transitions for dual career couples by putting an emphasis on home responsibilities being as important as career considerations (Levner, 2000; Parker & Arthur, 2004). It also speaks to home responsibilities as a developmental process needing specific decision making, planning, and coping skills to manage (Quek & Knudson-Martin, 2008). In other words, the three-career couple encompasses the dynamic of career and family development. Normative life transitions that affect career development include but are not limited to: getting married; household obligations; retiring; and, if they choose and are able, having children; children attending school; and empty nesting (Bluvshstein et al., 2015; Cron, 2001; Klute et al., 2001; O’Neil, Fishman, & Kinsella-Shaw, 1987). During these normative transitions, couples must adapt to the challenges of these transitions, which may in turn affect their careers.

Transition challenges may test the resilience in individuals and the couple. However, since normative transitions, such as getting married or having children, are expected, many couples may be better able to mentally and emotionally prepare and cope with these than with non-normative transitions that are not expected (Bluvshstein et al., 2015). Successful normative

transitions have implications for career success in dual career couples (Upadaya & Salmela-Aro, 2015). Still, dual career couple research may not encompass military couples' unique family lifestyle and transitional needs by not addressing frequent relocation or family separation challenges (Gleiman & Swearingen, 2012; Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013).

Although dual career couples may have an easier time navigating normative life transitions, not all life transitions are common (Eby, 2001; Whitaker, 2010). Non-normative transitions are often unexpected and may be more difficult to manage. Unemployment and relocation are examples of non-normative transitions which may leave individuals feeling lonely, hopeless, and not in control (Eby, 2001; Bluvshstein et al., 2015). Additionally, they may add more stress to dual career couples by increasing a sense of imbalance, a loss of identity, and, in many cases, financial strain (Bird & Schnuman-Crook, 2005; Eby, 2001; Spiker-Miller & Kees, 1995). If handled unsuccessfully, these non-normative transitions may have a negative impact on career trajectory (Meadows et al., 2016).

Regardless of the effects of non-normative life transitions, to maintain a successful career trajectory, individuals experiencing non-normative transitions must remain employable by learning adaptability, being intentional in their efforts to remain employable by engaging in volunteer activities related to their career, keeping training up to date, and having a meaningful goal and purpose (McBride & Cleymans, 2014; Savickas, 2011). Dual career couples have an added layer to consider that is not usually present in traditional breadwinner/homemaker couples. One non-normative aspect of dual career couples that is more common for military couples is relocation (Marshall, 2014; McBride & Cleymans, 2014; Meadows et al., 2016). Though there is some literature on relocation in dual career civilian couples, because of the unique military culture which often features frequent relocation, research on dual career couples may not be

generalizable to military couples (Anderson, et al., 2011; Baptist & Nelson Goff, 2012; Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012; Marshall, 2014; McBride & Cleymans, 2014; Meadows et al., 2016).

Relocation and Civilian Career Oriented Spouses

Non-normative transitions, such as relocation and unemployment, are more prominent recently in career development (Barclay & Stoltz, 2016). These transitions may test a person's ability to cope due to the added stresses, which may be a result of factors such as financial strain, and also self-doubt, lack of control, and feelings of hopelessness (Bluvshstein et al., 2015). In addition, the trend for career paths is no longer linear, where an employee works his or her way "up the corporate ladder". Career paths are becoming more fragmented, meaning there are more interruptions in job and career positions. To address this, a different approach to understanding career development may be necessary (Bluvshstein et al., 2015; Eby, 2001; Forrier, Verbruggen, & Cuyper, 2015; Lent, 2013; Marshall, 2014; McBride & Cleymans, 2014). One suggestion was to reframe the career ladder to the career web, connecting all work, volunteer, and education experience (McBride & Cleymans, 2014).

Though relocation is a growing trend in career development, it is still largely understudied (Upadaya, & Salmela-Aro, 2015). And much of the literature on non-normative career transitions has been conceptual (Bluvshstein et al., 2015; Marshall, 2014; McBride & Cleymans, 2014). Additionally, more research on non-normative transitions is needed for specialized populations, such as military spouses, because research on the trailing spouse in the civilian population may not be generalized to other populations (Barclay & Stoltz, 2016; Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). However, civilian research on relocation may shed light on some of the issues the trailing military spouse may face.

As more civilian companies expand into the national and global market, there is a

growing rate of companies relocating key employees to expand their business ventures (Blackburn, 2010; Larson, 2006). Relocation may also benefit employees by broadening their experiences and increasing their chances of career advancement (Allen et al., 2002; Jeong, Zvonkovic, Sano, & Acock, 2013). Still, companies typically offered single men the opportunity to relocate disproportionately more often compared with women and married men (Allen et al., 2002; Jeong et al., 2013; Whitaker, 2010). This may be a product of social expectations of men being the family breadwinner and women taking care of the household and children. However, the number of males serving as the trailing spouse is increasing (Cooke & Speirs, 2005; Jeong et al., 2013; Meadows et al., 2016). Furthermore, in the civilian world, employees usually have the option of accepting or declining a relocation assignment (Blackburn, 2010). Spouses' attitudes concerning the destination, length of stay, and company assistance all factor into the employee's decision to take the relocation assignment (Challiol & Mignonac, 2005; Konopaske, Robie, & Ivancevich, 2005; Larson, 2006; Stroh, 1999). However, for military couples, families may be relocated regardless of family situation or financial/career needs. Indeed, relocating military families is a norm in military lifestyle (Wang et al., 2015).

For civilians, Challiol and Mignonac (2005) found that the spouse's willingness to relocate was a key factor for the couple's decision, but ultimately the primary career spouse takes priority in the final decision about the job offer. Since the spouse's willingness to move affects the employee's decision (Baldrige, Eddleston, & Veiga, 2006; Blackburn, 2010; Mignonac, 2008), there has been a growing need to consider the trailing spouse (Konopaske et al., 2005; Stroh, 1999; Whitaker, 2010). Relocation assistance, which may or may not include career assistance, acts as a buffer for the non-primary career spouse by addressing needs and helping them cope with the transition (Challiol & Mignonac, 2005; McNulty, 2012). However, since

career concerns are often a major issue for the trailing spouse, relocation may cause distress despite career assistance.

Much of the distress may be caused, in part, by a sense of loss concerning their own career (Eby, 2011; Meadows et al., 2016). Harvey (1998) found that most spouses realized that their career was more important than they anticipated after experiencing a relocation. Other concerns of the trailing spouse may be due to an accumulation of differing degrees of loss, including, but not limited to: career disruption, identity, family disruption, sense of home, connections, sense of familiarity (Cole, 2011; Harvey, 1998; Meadows et al., 2016; Riemer, 2000; Whitaker, 2010). Furthermore, career concerns can elicit negative emotions such as stress, self-doubt, loneliness, anxiety, lack of control, fear of rejection, and hopelessness (Bluvshstein et al., 2015; Cron, 2011; Parker & Arthur, 2004; Shahnasarian, 1991). Though there are both positive and negative reactions to moving, job related relocation is typically stressful on the whole family, with most of the logistical and family stress put on the trailing spouse who is often expected to provide stability for the family and fill the family needs (Riemer, 2000; Shahnasarian, 1991; Whitaker, 2010).

The trailing spouse has unique issues in dual career couples, which may be under addressed (McNulty, 2012). Furthermore, with the increased rate of dual career couples, more spouse studies are needed on non-traditional marriages, namely dual career couples (Allen et al., 2002; Barclay & Stoltz, 2016; Brett, Stroh, & Reilly, 1993; Burke, 2000; Challiol & Mignonac, 2005; Cron, 2011; Klute et al., 2001). One particular population with a high rate of relocation is the military family population (Hall, 2011; Kelty, Kleykamp, & Segal, 2010; Marshall, 2014; McBride & Cleymans, 2014; Meadows et al., 2016). For those in the military, the complexities of dual career families are compounded by the culture and demands of military life, including

relocation (Allen et al., 2011; Bryan & Morrow, 2011; deBurgh, White, Fear, & Iverson, 2011; Gomulka, 2010, Hall, 2011; Marshall, 2014; McBride & Cleymans, 2014; Meadows et al., 2016; Sherwood, 2009; Teachman, 2009).

Military Families

The military family is a research topic of interest for its complex and unique characteristics (Allen, Rhoads, Stanley, & Markman, 2011; Department of Defense [DOD], 2011; Houston, Pfeffermaum, Serman, Melson, & Brand, 2013; Kelley & Jouriles, 2011; Sahlstein, Maguire, & Timmerman, 2009). One of the guiding motivators for this research study was that the military family, specifically the military spouse, is a primary predictor of the service member's success and retention in the military (Asbury & Martin, 2012; Castaneda & Harrell, 2008; Sahlstein et al., 2009). In other words, supporting the military family has implications for national security (Gomulka, 2010). In fact, President Obama instructed the Department of Defense to study the wellbeing and psychological health of the military family (DOD, 2011). However, understanding military spouses, an important component to the military family, has not been prioritized in research and practice (Aducci et al., 2011; Baptist & Nelson-Goff, 2012; de Burgh et al., 2011; Gleiman & Swearingen, 2012; Kelley, Schwerin, Farrat, & Lane, 2006).

Most studies on military families have primarily focused on the service member or dependent children, including child adjustment and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) related to deployment (Bryan & Morrow, 2011; Houston et al., 2013; Kelley & Jouriles, 2011; Kelty et al., 2010; Knobloch & Theiss, 2011; Lowe, Adams, Browne, & Hinkle, 2012). Furthermore, research conducted on the military family and relocation has focused on the family as a whole or on the wellbeing of dependent children, not the military spouse (Lowe et al., 2012). Additionally, the majority of research has targeted traditional military families and does not

account for female service members and male military spouses or same sex couples (DOD, 2013; Renshaw et al., 2011). These gaps in military family research need to be filled, including studying how relocation affects the military spouse (Houston et al., 2013). Yet extant studies on military spouses have primarily focused on deployment and, in addition, most of the studies lack rigor (Renshaw et al., 2011; Verdeli et al., 2011). It is important to understand the complexity of the military culture and lifestyle and its influence on dual career military couples in order to better understand the career oriented military spouse (Castaneda & Harrell, 2008; Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012; Marshall, 2014; McBride & Cleymans, 2014).

Military Culture

The military culture is complex and may be easily misunderstood (Marshall, 2014; Verdeli et al., 2011). One factor may be the centrality of the service member's 24/7 commitment to the military (Asbury & Martin, 2012; Sherwood, 2009). Service members are indoctrinated with military values, such as authoritarian and hierarchical structure, honor and sacrifice, and the mentality to always be prepared (Friesl, Sackmann, & Kremser, 2011; Hall, 2011; Weiss, Coll, Gerlauer, Smiley, & Carillo, 2010). These values may affect the function of the military family (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012).

Not all military values may be conducive to the function of a family. The expectation for service members to be stoic and deny negative feelings may be helpful in the battlefield but may have a negative impact on the family as a whole, especially when other family members do not hold the same values (Hall, 2011). Furthermore, many service members engage in secrecy to protect classified information or to shield the family from stress (Hall, 2011; Houston et al., 2013). Another military value that may impact the family system is the rigid hierarchy such as a top down influence of power or rank (O'Neal, Richardson, & Mancini, 2018). In families, lower

ranked service members may have less access to resources to support healthy coping. Service members with lower ranks may also have less agency in the workplace which may spill into the home (O'Neal, Richardson, & Mancini, 2018). In addition to military culture influencing the family, military lifestyle affects the family as well.

The most common and distinguishable components of the military lifestyle have been deployment and relocation which can be both unpredictable and require lengthy family adjustment periods (Gleiman & Swearingen, 2012; Gottman, Gottman, & Atkins, 2011; Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013; Marshall, 2014; Meadows et al., 2016). How deployment affects military families has been extensively studied and is depicted in the Deployment Cycle, a model of the emotional stages of deployment that families typically experience (Asbury & Martin, 2012; Hall, 2011; Kelley & Jouriles, 2011; Lowe et al., 2012; Merolla, 2010). Although deployment may add stress to the military family, relocation may have a different set of challenges (Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013; McArthur, 2016).

A less researched, but key factor in career development for military spouses is relocation (Meadows et al., 2016; Weiss et al., 2010). One major difference between civilian and military relocation is that the military decides who to relocate, and the service member usually needs to comply (Cooke & Speirs, 2005). So, unlike civilian spouses, military spouses may have little voice in the relocation decision. Though there are some exceptions, military families frequently relocate about every three years, 2.4 times more than the average civilian family (Clever & Segal, 2013; Marshall, 2014). Because many military institutions are located in remote areas, service families may be isolated from family, friends, and viable job and education markets (Anderson et al., 2011; Booth, 2003; Gomulka, 2010; Gottman et al., 2011; Kelley et al., 2006; McCone & O'Donnell, 2006). Frequent and unpredictable adjustment demands can have a

negative effect on coping which can also affect educational pursuits (Asbury & Martin, 2012; Meadows et al., 2016). During family adjustment, the spouse in charge of maintaining the household may endure the cumulative stress effect of single parenthood, legal issues that may rise, family integration issues, along with emotional and physical struggles such as anxiety and depression (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012; Gottman et al., 2011; Houston et al., 2013; McArthur, 2016). For the military spouse, these psychological components which may accompany being part of a military family may also have implications on career development and pursuing education (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012; Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013; Marshall, 2014; Meadows et al., 2016).

Because of the unique job demands and culture of the military, which extends to the military family, more research is being done on the military family (Asbury & Martin, 2012; Kelley & Jouriles, 2011; Sahlstein et al., 2009). However, the study of relocation, specifically relocation and the career oriented military spouse pursuing an education, has received less attention (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012; Kelley & Jouriles, 2011).

Military Spouse Research

Research on military spouses is limited and the conclusions are sometimes conflicting. For example, Lester, Nash, Green, Pynoos, and Beardslee (2011) believed that combat deployment may lead to secondary trauma for military spouses whereas Renshaw et al. (2011) found that military spouse stress is caused by daily life obligation and is not based on their spouses' combat experience. Furthermore, military spouse research, unless otherwise noted, is based on heterosexual relationship with a male service member and a female spouse (Asbury & Martin, 2012; Meadows et al., 2016). More inclusive military spouse research may shed light on the complexity of military spouses pursuing a career (Cooke & Speirs, 2005; Hosek &

Wadsworth, 2013). In addition, the research on military spouses and career development is sparse (Cole, 2011; Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012).

Understanding the unique challenges military spouses face may have implications for career development, such as having inadequate time to enroll and complete a program in a given location (Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013; Meadows et al., 2016). Even though the interest in researching military families has increased since Operation of Iraqi Freedom (OIF) in 2003 and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in 2001, the focus has been related to the effects of the increase in frequency and length of deployment on such factors as coping, quality of marriage, and retention of the service member. Relatively few investigations focus on career development (Anderson et al., 2011; Asbury & Martin, 2012; Baptist & Nelson Goff, 2012; Call & Teachman, 1996; Wescott, 2005). Furthermore, in a literature review of research on military spouses from 2001-2010, deBurgh et al. (2011) found three themes from 14 studies, none of which directly involved career pursuits, but may give insight into how military spouse issues may affect career development. The three themes were (1) mental health issues exacerbated by the deployment of the service member, (2) marital health, and (3) stress and pregnancy, especially during deployment.

Deployment may affect the whole family, not just the service member. Although military spouses do not physically go to war, they may experience added stress while service member is deployed, such as concern for the service members' safety and being the sole caretaker of the household and children (Allen et al., 2011; Asbury & Martin, 2012; de Burgh et al., 2011; Lowe et al., 2012; Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013). There is also a family adjustment period when the service member returns home (Hall 2011; Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013). These changing dynamics may put extra strain on the military spouse, which may affect career and educational

pursuits (Asbury & Martin, 2012).

Furthermore, Lester et al. (2011) speculated that service couples were at high risk for domestic violence and secondary trauma stemming directly from combat deployment related stress. These cumulative stress factors have only been superficially addressed by the military (Cooke & Speirs, 2005). Although deployment stress is higher in couples who experienced a combat deployment, Renshaw et al. (2011) found that 60% of the participants did not attribute stress directly to the military service member or their service to the military. This may allude to other factors not accounted for by deployment.

Military spouses play an ambiguous family role because of the changing dynamics of the military lifestyle (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012; Meadows et al., 2016). The unclear and shifting roles military spouses perform may cause increased emotional and physical stress (e.g. loneliness, missing the service member, concern for safety, managing home, family separation, physical isolation, single parenthood) (Asbury & Martin, 2012; Baptist et al., 2011; Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013). The negative impact of stress on the military spouse can decrease the spouse's ability to problem solve or reach out to available resources (Allen et al., 2011). It is unclear how this added stress affects career oriented military spouses' career and education aspirations and pursuits (Cooke & Speirs, 2005; McBride & Cleymans, 2014; Meadows et al., 2016).

Even though military spouses face stress, many military spouses also utilize coping strategies which may assist with easing stressors and may also assist in their career development and education choices (Asbury & Martin, 2012; Lowe et al., 2012). One coping strategy utilized by military spouses is family communication, which includes both quality and frequency (Houston et al., 2013). Because planning communication with military service members may be

complicated, military spouses may learn how to coordinate schedules, speak concisely, and make decisions on what is important and not important to say. These communication skills may have useful implications when looking for or speaking with an educational program. Another coping strategy military spouses utilize is social support. Social support is the most prevalent coping strategy utilized by military spouse and was found to most strongly correlate to positive mental health, wellbeing, and satisfaction (Asbury & Martin, 2012; Orthner & Rose, 2009; Sherwood, 2009). Furthermore, social support was found to be correlated with problem solving skills and marital satisfaction (Sullivan, Pasch, Johnson, & Bradbury, 2010). Thus, social support may have implications on military spouses' education and career decisions, in addition to normative and non-normative stress.

The military spouse population plays an unclear and complex family role (Booth, 2003; Castaneda & Harrell, 2008). Exploring the demands military spouses face may give better insight to how these challenges relate to pursuing an education for career advancement (Gleiman & Swearingen, 2012). Furthermore, to date, no study has rigorously investigated the impact of relocation on the trailing military spouse with regards to career development (Booth, 2003; Castaneda & Harrell, 2008; Cooke & Speirs, 2005; Wang et al., 2015).

Career Development in Career Oriented Military Spouses

For career oriented military spouses, going to college or technical school may be a way to achieve personal fulfilment, follow ambition, and invest in oneself. Furthermore, 87% of military spouses state that they have personal career goals (Defense Manpower Data Center Survey, 2006). With the enactment of the Post 9/11 GI Bill, services members are now able to pass their education benefits to his or her spouse and dependent children (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2009). This has prompted educational institutions to take a special interest in

targeting military affiliated students, however, many institutions do not differentiate between the needs of military spouses, dependents, veterans, and service members (Fishback, 2015; Ford, Northrup, & Wiley, 2009; Vance, Polson, & Persyn, 2014). The specific needs of the military spouse may be overlooked due to the assumption that all military affiliated students share the same needs (Ford & Vignare, 2014). With this population expected to grow, it is important to look at the military spouse learner population more closely (American Council of Education, 2011).

Two million military spouses are eligible for benefits. Twenty percent of the military affiliated students utilizing the Post 9/11 GI Bill are military spouses (DOD, 2009; Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). Because of the prominence of the military spouse learner, every military branch has created programs, councils, and organizations to assist military spouses in their pursuit of education and career (White House, 2016). Furthermore, most bases have an education center that connects military affiliated students to local and online colleges who have a partnership with the base (American Council of Education, 2011; Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013; Meadows et al., 2016; Vance et al., 2014). Yet, programs for career and education oriented military spouses are based on aged data prior to the 2008 recession and may be inconsistent with the needs of current career oriented spouses (Meadows et al., 2016). Furthermore, there was limited empirical research on this learner population (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). To understand career oriented military spouses pursuing an education, it may be beneficial to look at career development literature on this population and its implications for education.

Career literature on military spouses tends to focus on employment challenges (McBride & Cleymans, 2014). Obtaining employment for military spouses may be difficult due to having to prioritize the primary spouse's career needs above their own (Booth, 2003; Cantaneda &

Harrell, 2008; Cooke & Speirs, 2005). Additionally, the challenges caused by the military lifestyle may be problematic for military spouses in terms of gaining equitable employment or pursuing education (Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013).

Military spouse transitions, such as frequent relocation, deployment, and job loss are often difficult to understand for those who are not military affiliated (Gleiman & Swarengen, 2012; McArthur, 2016). Frequent relocations may force military spouses to restart career endeavors, which affects rank and longevity in the company, pay benchmarks, and sometimes career fields (Marshall, 2014). Military spouses may also face negative stigma from employers for being seen as temporary (Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013). Employers are often able to spot military affiliation due to fragmented employment histories on resumes (Marshall, 2014). Even if service spouses are offered positions, many military spouses may be unable to be flexible in their work schedule due to service member's job requirements or absence (Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013).

Additionally, finding employment may be difficult for service spouses because many military bases are located in rural areas which often have poor labor markets and limited educational opportunities (Booth, Falk, Segal, & Segal, 2000; Patton et al., 2014). The areas with limited job markets, typically low skill level positions, may be more competitive than diverse labor markets because of the demand (Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013). This may cause many service spouses to apply for jobs for which they are overeducated and overqualified (Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013). Due to these factors, the military spouse has a high probability to be unemployed or underemployed (Meadows et al., 2016). These challenges may contribute to the gap between military and civilian spouses.

Utilizing post-2008 recession data, Meadows et al. (2016) found a gap between military

spouses and their matched civilian spouses where military spouses earn less than civilian spouses with same work and education experience. Variables focused on race, age, dependent children under six years old, highest education achieved, and number of relocations. Due to the difficulties finding an exact match, Meadows et al. (2016) used an analytic sample of 1,779 women, where the average pay of several civilian women were matched to each military spouse in order to obtain a composite and equivalent match. Military spouse data was obtained through the Deployment Life Study, which consisted of a generalizable sample of military service members and their families. They focused on women because most military spouses are women, and also because most studies used women as participants, thus, making it easier to compare the two groups. Civilian spouse data was collected through the 2009-2011 ACS Public Use Microdata Sample.

Meadows et al. (2016) found a gap in earnings between military and civilian spouses of 67%. However, the gap lessened to 34% when the study only considered spouses who were employed. One reason is that the study looked at all military spouses and included non-working military spouses and compared them with civilian spouses. They also found that the higher the degree level and age, the wider the gap between military spouses and their matched civilian counterparts concerning earnings and hours worked. Though cumulatively military spouses worked about 15 hours less per week and earned \$17,000 less per year, the pay gap widened with more education. Military spouses with bachelor's degrees earned almost \$25,000 less per year, though this finding was not statistically significant. Another conclusion was that the income gap had a positive correlation with the number of relocations 50 miles or more (Meadows et al., 2016).

These findings, however, may not paint a complete or accurate picture of the difference

between military and civilian spouses (Meadows et al., 2016). The findings between the two groups may not be completely comparable because an analytic sample was used for comparison, meaning that the comparison was not one-to-one, but one military spouse was compared to the average of several civilian spouses. Because of this, there was no way to guarantee that employed military spouses were compared with the average of working civilian spouses. Second, the study only measured employment gaps based on hours worked and earnings and not the meaning of work. Next, the findings are only generalizable to military spouses who make less than \$100,000 because of how the salary ranges were reported (i.e. <100,000). Because it was impossible to match salaries higher than \$100,000, those who reported a salary higher than \$100k were removed from analysis. Finally, due to the nature of the study, the analysis cannot endorse a causality (Meadows et al., 2016).

Previous literature aimed to describe a limited snapshot of the economic conditions of military families and its implications, not causality (Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013). Unlike Meadows et al. (2016), Hosek and Wadsworth (2013) reported the income gap of military spouses to be 14%, much lower than 34%. This could have been the result of utilizing data from before the 2008 recession. Furthermore, earlier studies found that service wives earned less than service husbands (Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013). In looking at 2000 Census data, Lim, Golinelli, and Cho (2007) found that while the pay differential between civilian women married to service members was 25%, it was only 20% for civilian men married to service members. The gender gap among military spouses adds another dynamic to the military spouse. In addition, though many service spouses preferred to work full time, many only worked part time (Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013). This may be due to the inability to find fulltime employment or choosing to work part-time due to military and family demands (Meadows et al., 2016). Due to the gap

between military and civilian spouses, Castaneda and Harrell (2008) aimed to understand how the military lifestyle affects spouse employment and what might be done to address the concerns (Hosek et al., 2002).

Interviewing 1,102 spouses from eight duty stations around continental United States, Castaneda and Harrell (2008) asked both open and closed ended questions concerning employment status, reasons for employment or unemployment, “what they believed the military could do to help military spouses” (p. 391), demographic factors (age, education, years married, and children), and their experience as a military spouse (number of relocations, military housing). Other variables considered included: size of base, unemployment rate of locality, population density, and type of unit (e.g. combat vs. support unit). Castaneda and Harrell (2008) contacted the leadership about the study and then sent out letters and made phone calls to military spouses inviting them to participate. Participants were also recruited from military spouse clubs. Participants were interviewed either in person or via the telephone with the interviews lasting about 14 minutes. The data was analyzed with both a qualitative grounded theory approach, and a quantitative frequency count and means to capture a more complete picture. Four major themes found in the study include: military’s negative effect on work, awareness of employment desserts, reasons for work, and suggestions for support.

Sixty six percent of participants ($n = 727$) reported that the military lifestyle, namely frequent and disruptive moves (about 33%), work schedules and parenthood (about 25%), and employment stigma (about 10%) had a negative effect on career progression (Castaneda & Harrell, 2008). Those with higher degrees were more likely to report higher dissatisfaction with relocation than military work schedules, whereas those with less education were more likely to report the opposite. Hindrances and interruptions in career pursuits affected career trajectories.

This challenge may also affect military spouses pursuing education (Meadows et al., 2016).

Unlike previous studies, Castaneda & Harrell (2008) were interested in the motivation of those pursuing careers. They found that the number one reported reason to work was for financial incentives, with personal fulfillment as the third ranked reason to work. Those with less education were more likely to report that their employment motivation was to ease boredom and to have spending money as a motivating factor than those with college degrees. Participants also shared suggestions to increase the likelihood of employment, such as improved childcare options, increased awareness of employment assistance programs, increased government employment opportunities, reduced relocation frequency, and improved mobility of licenses and certifications (Castaneda & Harrell, 2008). The findings from this study may be indicative of both the challenges and possible solutions for career oriented military spouses pursuing education yet may not address all the needs of military spouse learners.

The challenges military spouses face while pursuing education may be similar to the difficulty obtaining employment (Marshall, 2014). One of the most significant military lifestyle challenges affecting educational pursuits is relocation (Booth, 2003; Bouchard, 2010; Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012; Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013; Marshall, 2014; McArthur, 2016; McBride & Cleymans, 2014; Meadows et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2015; Yakkushko, Backhaus, Watson, Ngaruiya, & Gonzalez, 2008). Similar to the findings noted in the civilian trailing spouse literature, frequent moves prevented military spouses from obtaining degrees and maintaining or transferring licenses and certifications (Meadows et al., 2016). Additionally, military spouses were not always given adequate notice regarding relocation date or location in order to meet institutional requirements to apply to or enroll in education programs (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). Even when service families were informed of a date or location of the new duty station,

the plans sometimes changed at the last minute. These stressors associated with relocation, along with other stresses associated with military life, may affect the military spouses' ability to plan for and enroll in an education or training program (Krieshok, Black, & McKay, 2009). Stress due to deployment along with the lack of available educational opportunities and awareness of resources may also be barriers to educational pursuits (Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013; Marshall, 2014).

Although literature on the military spouse student population exists, it was often based on personal observations and on the generalized military affiliated student population (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012; McArthur, 2016). In addition to giving their own personal stories, Gleiman and Swearengen (2012) believed that the personal narratives of military spouse learners may be more informative than the current limited research available on military spouses and career development.

Reasons for the paucity of research on military spouses and career development may include the assumption that supplementary financial benefits from the military, such as housing allowance and healthcare, are enough to compensate for the pay discrepancy between civilian and military spouses (Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013). Additionally, the inconsistent definition of career vs. job orientation and also the lack of differentiation between military affiliated students may cause misunderstandings and mistaken assumptions about the military spouse as a learner population (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012; Wang et al., 2015). Perhaps due to these assumptions, most programs that exist for military spouses target less educated and younger spouses with the goal to obtaining employment, not spouses who are in their career path, hold degrees, and are older, nontraditional students (Meadows et al., 2016). The limited research on military spouse learners may add to the false notion that military spouses are an insignificant

population as evidenced by limited empirical research and lack of research-based programs for this specific population (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). Due to the different needs of military affiliated students, specific research on the military spouse student population is needed (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012).

Proposed Research

The purpose of this proposed phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of career oriented military spouses and how the military culture (e.g., frequent relocation) influenced the pursuit of education for career advancement. The complexities of military life, namely relocation, and career development may be important to the quality of life for military spouses. Exploring the intersectionality of these different roles may be beneficial in understanding the challenges and successes military spouses face when pursuing an education. Furthermore, a better understanding of the career oriented military spouse student may have implications on counseling interventions, military career programs, and military and institutional policies and practices that benefit and include military spouses.

Summary

The military spouse population faces unique challenges and stressors that affect well-being and career development due to the military culture, namely relocation, deployment, and separation and isolation. In recent years, there has been an interest in studying this culture. The military spouse, however, is still understudied. Many studies on military service spouses focused on marital satisfaction, not specifically on the military spouse. Furthermore, there is sparse empirical research on career oriented military spouses.

This review of the literature showed that there were gaps in the research pertaining to military spouses, relocation, and educational pursuit. Furthermore, it revealed some of the

specific cultural differences and needs military families face in comparison to their civilian counterparts (Meadows et al., 2016). With the demographics changing, (e.g., many more women are joining the military and more military spouses pursuing a career), more studies need to be done on military spouses. Exploring career oriented military spouses pursuing education for career advancement may have implications on counseling interventions for military spouses, military career programs, and military and institutional policies and practices. Furthermore, it may provide a better understanding of the needs of military spouses for counselors, and perhaps shed light and understanding on the experience of the career oriented military spouse.

The next chapter will provide details regarding the method of inquiry, protection of human subjects, data collection, data analysis, and methods of verification.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Career development is a primary factor in the wellbeing and identity of the average American (Bluvshstein et al., 2015; Parker & Arthur, 2004; Samela-Aro & Weise, 2006). Planning and navigating a career path may be difficult. It takes time, effort, and commitment (Eby, 2001; Moen & Sweet, 2002). The career process is even more challenging for the trailing spouse in dual-career couples (Parker & Arthur, 2004). Specifically, for the career oriented trailing military spouse, that often means frequent relocations, family separation, and short notices of impending changes, which do not always give the military spouse sufficient time to plan and implement their career path, including the educational pursuits needed to accomplish career goals (Anderson et al., 2011). The research on military spouses and career development was scarce (Booth, 2003; Castaneda & Harrell, 2008). This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of career oriented military spouses pursuing education for career advancement.

Rationale for using Qualitative Research

Qualitative research tends to be utilized for exploratory investigations on topics and phenomena either lacking in research or needing to be viewed with a different lens (Hays & Singh, 2012). The guiding purpose is to generate knowledge through an intentional data gathering and analysis process utilizing the participants as co-researchers (Hays & Singh, 2012). The unique experiences of career oriented military spouses pursuing an education for career advancement lacked extant empirical research, especially from the perspective of the military spouse (Baldridge et al., 2006; Booth, 2003; Castaneda & Harrell, 2008; Cole, 2011; Gleiman & Swearngen, 2012; Challiol & Mignonac, 2005). With the complex qualities of military culture, career orientation, relocation, and the pursuit of education (Gleiman & Swearngen, 2012; McArthur, 2016), this topic reflects the elements of qualitative research, as it is “complex,

dynamic, independent, and textured” (Patton, 2002, pg. 420). Thus, a qualitative approach is appropriate in that it leads to a comprehensive and holistic understanding of the complex dynamics of the career oriented military spouses pursuing an education (Hays & Singh, 2012; Patton, 2002).

Description of Phenomenological Research Tradition

Phenomenology originated with German philosopher Edmund Husserl (Hays & Singh, 2012; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002). At the time, his philosophical approach was based on subjective openness, which espoused that people were conscious of their experiences and able to create meaning with those experiences based on their self-awareness and intentionality. This concept was ridiculed and not initially accepted by the research community (Moustakas, 1994). However, Husserl persisted to create a rigorous method of studying the lived experiences of a phenomenon. He argued that people can be certain in how things appear to them and how they experienced the world, therefore it was important to understand a phenomenon based on the perspective of the people involved (Groenewald, 2004). Thus, research participants become co-researchers, as they are experts of their experience of life (Hays & Singh, 2012). Patton (2002) describes phenomenological analysis as an approach that “seeks to grasp and elucidate the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of a phenomenon for a person or group of people” (p. 482). Though early phenomenology sought to extract the essence of an experience, Douglas and Moustakas (1985) shifted that focus to the essence of the person in experience, not just the experience itself.

The ultimate purpose of phenomenology is to cast light on a focused question and discover the meaning and essence of a significant human experience (Douglas & Moustakas, 1985). The goal is to describe an experience without putting judgment on it (Adams & van

Manen, 2008). In a way, phenomenology is more of an attitude rather than a rigid method, as each phenomenology research study is designed to fit specific needs and context (Douglas & Moustakas, 1985; Patton, 2002). Though phenomenology is open to emergent data throughout the study, guidelines are necessary for rigor and verification (Groenewald, 2004). The process begins with the researcher's self-reflection and then moves to explore the nature of the experiences of the participants under inquiry. Though a general design is created for each study, phenomenology also allows for the study to be open to shift as necessary (Douglas & Moustakas, 1985).

I chose to use phenomenological inquiry to shed light on the unique lived experiences of career oriented military spouses pursuing education for career advancement because of the complex nature of this phenomenon. With this study, I hoped to give voice to this population as well as provide a vivid description of their experience. I hoped to contribute to the literature regarding career oriented military spouses and inspire other researchers and practitioners to take interest in this diverse, complex, unique population.

Research Questions

The main purpose of the study was to explore the lived experiences of career oriented military spouses who were pursuing education for career advancement. The research questions that structured this study were:

1. What are the lived experiences of career oriented military spouses pursuing education for career advancement?
2. How does the experience of relocation impact this process?

Role of Researcher

In phenomenology, the researcher is an important part of the research process (Hays &

Singh, 2012). Understanding the premise of the researcher gives context to how the research inquiry will be handled (Hammersley, 2000). I believed that reality is subjective and that my personal knowledge and bias can affect how I observed the data. Ontologically, I assumed that reality is subjective and contextual, so by obtaining a thick description from a homogenous sample of career oriented military spouses, I can capture the essence of the experience of these career oriented military spouses pursuing an education. This falls in line with the epistemological stance that reality is based on the cultural context of life experiences, hence, the reality of a person is subjective to each person (Patton, 2002). In regard to axiology, I believed that taking steps to manage the biases of the researcher were imperative, however I understand the value laden nature of qualitative inquiry and that there is always some bias. These biases and assumptions are outlined in the section below. Rhetorically, findings of participants in this study are presented in the third person with the exception of direct quotes which are reported in first person.

Researcher Assumptions and Biases

The researcher's biases and perceptions add value and color to the study and his or her influence should not be ignored or denied (Hammersley, 2000). Stating assumptions prior to data collection is one way to manage biases (Creswell, 2007). In this study, I engaged in the role of researcher. I am a 34-year old first generation Filipino-American female who was pursuing my doctoral degree in counselor education and supervision at a mid-Atlantic coastal state university. I have a master's degree in community counseling with an emphasis in marriage and family therapy. I also have strong family ties in the military, as my father, brother, and uncles have served the US military. My grandfather was a soldier in the Philippine military and also fought for America during World War II. My father became an American citizen through the US Navy

and I was born as an American citizen in a naval hospital. I have a lot of gratitude and respect for the military, specifically because it gave my family and me the opportunity to pursue our lives and career passions freely.

In addition to being in a military family, I also grew up in the strong military community (which includes all military branches) in Hampton Roads, Virginia. I have both clinical and non-clinical experience with working with the military community, including specifically with military spouses. I have conducted social science research on the military spouse population in the education and community setting, specifically on military marriages and military spouse happiness. My counseling background includes the treatment of trauma, suicide and depression in a Hampton Roads school system and in community agencies. Many of my clients were members of military families. I have experience in running deployment groups that aimed to assist children adjusting to parental deployment and also the stress of relocation. Furthermore, I have also conducted financial counseling with military service members and their spouses in a military setting. I am a level 2 certified case manager with the Navy Marine Corps Relief Society. With my interest and experience with military families, I was commissioned by a university to conduct research on military affiliated students' experiences and make recommendations to make the institution more military friendly. Through this study, I discovered a gap in both research and practice regarding relocation, especially as it pertained to military affiliated students in the university.

Because of my extensive experience with the military community, I have a positive bias towards military service members and military spouses. I specifically have a strong admiration for the military spouse from watching my mom navigate her career as a nurse, nurse educator, and nurse administrator. Being career oriented myself, I have always had a curiosity and

fascination with military spouses and their career development journey. Also, because of my professional and personal experience with the military culture, I have preconceived notions about what stressors military spouses face when pursuing education. To address this, I will make rigorous efforts to manage my bias by outlining my personal biases and assumptions prior to data collection, utilizing a research team and independent auditor, member checking, creating memos, and constructing audit trail, all of which will be explained in detail below. Furthermore, I will also make a conscious effort to be open to the data and remain aware of and manage my bias.

Research Team

Though not necessarily needed for a rigorous study, having a research team is a method which can enhance trustworthiness and can also help manage large amounts of data (Hays & Singh, 2012). It is also a way to manage researcher bias and keep track of reflexivity and subjectivity (Hays & Singh, 2012). I assembled a research team consisting of myself and one other member. The other research team member was a recent PhD graduate in counselor education and supervision who is currently teaching at a west coast university. She had taken two doctoral level qualitative research courses. Though she had little experience with the military population, she had experience in qualitative research. She reported that she had limited knowledge of the military spouse population prior to the study and that she was unaware of any biases she had towards the populations. She also reported that she was interested in learning more about career oriented military spouses. I was hoping to gain insight from her fresh perspective on the military spouse student population.

To recruit my research team, I sent an email to doctorate students in a counselor education program (see Appendix A). Those who were interested were instructed to contact me via email. Prior to starting the study, she was given a demographic sheet to fill out (see Appendix

B) and an orientation to the study and research team member requirements which included an overview of the investigation and an exploration of each member's thoughts, perceptions, and biases of the research topic. I conducted a training regarding the coding process that was utilized in the study and then we practiced the coding method together.

The research team member did not take part in the data collection process or in transcribing interviews. She participated in the coding process and analysis, both individually and collectively, with me to reach consensus coding and to refine and finalize the codebook. We supported each other's process of introspection and challenged biases in ourselves and each other throughout the process in order to increase trustworthiness.

Independent Auditor

Another strategy for trustworthiness and type of triangulation is the utilization of an independent auditor (Hays & Singh, 2012). The independent auditor increased the rigor of the study by reviewing the audit trail to see if the researcher and research team followed rigorous methods. The audit trail was a record of the steps taken during the research project outlining the planning, development, and findings of the study (Hays & Singh, 2012). For the purposes of this study, the audit trail included: raw data, all stages of code books, notes and memos, and research study material (timeline, forms, emails, and documents relating to the study) (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The independent auditor was a first-generation European-American female in her mid-thirties who had recently completed her Ph.D. in Counselor Education and Supervision. She had completed several doctoral level qualitative courses and conducted numerous qualitative research studies including IRB approved and grant funded studies. Additionally, she has completed research on supportive programming for military-connected K-12 students. The independent

auditor was not a member of the dissertation committee or research team. For this study, the independent auditor reviewed all documents in the audit trail as well, as the dissertation document, to assess rigor and trustworthiness of the study. She found that there was substantial evidence of strategies of trustworthiness and that all criteria of trustworthiness were apparent in the methodological approach and execution of the research.

Research Plan

In order to investigate the lived experiences of career oriented military spouses pursuing education for career advancement, I conducted interviews using an in-depth semi-structured protocol in order to obtain a thick description of the phenomena (Hays & Singh, 2012). Once the proposal was approved by my dissertation committee and the college human subjects exempt committee, I selected participants as noted below.

Sample

In order to obtain a rich and informed data set, phenomenology primarily utilizes individual semi-structured interviews which are used to elicit description of the essence of a phenomenon (Hays & Singh, 2012). Patton (2002) called it the guided interview, which consisted of a protocol of questions, but also allowed for further exploration of the answers. In addition, it is common for qualitative analysis to interview a small homogenous sample of people in depth. Patton (2002) stated that a sample size between three and fifteen participants is sufficient to research saturation for a phenomenological study. I attempted to obtain a sample of 10 military spouses through mixed purposeful sampling, meaning participants were chosen based on several purposeful sampling criteria to obtain a rich context of data, however the final number was determined by data saturation (Groenewald, 2004). For this study, I obtained 11 military spouse participants.

The criteria for selection as a participant in this study were as follows: having a career oriented identity and being a current military spouse. Additionally, military spouses had to have experienced at least one relocation as a military spouse. Finally, participants were required to meet at least one of the following criteria: having been admitted, enrolled, or graduated from an educational program or specialized training program specifically for career advancement within the twelve-month period prior to the interview. At the time of the interview, all 11 participants were currently enrolled in school. Criteria was verified through the demographic form. Participants who did not meet the criteria were not used in the study, however, if they agreed, they were put in a database for future research.

Sampling Procedures

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of career oriented military spouses pursuing education for career advancement. I aimed to find typical cases to ascertain trends regarding the experiences of career oriented military spouses pursuing education. After IRB approval, I began to solicit participation from military spouses through colleges and training programs in the mid-Atlantic region through military student support offices. I then branched out to colleges and training programs in all US time zones. After this, in order to obtain more participants, I solicited recruitment from military spouse support groups.

Purposeful sampling is a technique where participants are specifically and intentionally selected to expose and explore a phenomenon from a homogenous sample to gain a more complete description and understanding of said phenomenon (Groenewald, 2004). Though I attempted snowball sampling, a technique where participants recruit other participants who may meet participation criteria, I obtained enough participants through my contacts with colleges and military spouse support groups. Though the sample had met a set of criteria to participate in the

study, there were some variations in the sample due to military spouses being at different stages of pursuing an education, family cycle, professional development, branch of service, and years in military. I believe that the participants selected exposed the phenomenon by sharing aspects of their life stories. Their stories also provided a reasonably complete and complex picture to describe career oriented military spouse experiences in pursuing education. Participants were not discriminated against based on age, gender, religion, sexuality, or ethnicity.

Potential participants were given an email (see Appendix C) which provided them with a description and purpose of the study, criteria for participation, and an explanation of what will be done with the findings (Groenewald, 2004). Furthermore, a copy of the informed consent document, (see Appendix D), was explained and agreed upon by each participant in order to ensure safety of the participant and researcher. Interested participants were asked to return the completed informed consent document and descriptive data sheet (see Appendix E) via email provided prior to scheduling the first interview. This process was repeated until the researcher reached data saturation. As indicated previously, data saturation was achieved with the 11 participants represented in the study.

Measures to Ensure Participant Confidentiality and Safety

To ensure the privacy and confidentiality of participants, I took precautionary steps while working with participants. First, participants signed an informed consent (see Appendix D) which outlined the purpose and procedures of the study, right to quit, and consent to record. Next, interested participants filled out a demographic worksheet that did not ask for uniquely identifying information. This ensured from the beginning that participants will not be identified with their corresponding data. Then once interviews were recorded, the participants' names were changed to pseudonyms to conceal the identity of each participant from the data collection

process to the final report. Additionally, pseudonyms were applied to all notes, transcriptions, and coding. Furthermore, participants were given updates and written reports upon request. I also utilized member check with each participant to ensure their voice was being captured correctly. Finally, during and after the study, all materials used, including consent forms, demographic forms, audio recordings, audit trail, and any other material were stored in a secured electronic file that is password accessible. All materials will be destroyed five years after the study.

Data Collection Sources

Data collection sources used in this study included: descriptive data questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, journal reflection entry, and memos.

Descriptive Data Questionnaire. Each participant completed a simple demographic worksheet (see appendix E). The purpose of the worksheet was to obtain demographic information as well as to verify criteria needed for participation. The questions included items such as: age, gender, relationship to the military, military affiliation, marital status, years married, rank and job information of service member, prior military service, number of relocations, family economic status, stage of education, and career orientation. The demographic sheet also featured questions about relocation frequencies.

Semi-structured Interview. Interviews are commonly used in qualitative research and they are a preferred data collection method for phenomenology (Hays & Singh, 2012). Semi-structured interviews provided a starting point for investigating the perspective of participants but also allowed for each interview to take its own direction while exploring various aspects of a phenomenon. An interview protocol (see Appendix F), consisting of 12 questions, was utilized to gain an in-depth description of the lived experiences of career oriented military spouses pursuing an education to advance their career (Hays & Singh, 2012). Questions aimed to elicit details and

emotions regarding the journey of a military spouse pursuing education for advancement in their career.

Journal Reflection Entry. The combination of interviews and diary entries in academic work has been used to acquire an expanded understanding of the complex relationship of personal experiences and meaning (Spowart & Nairn, 2013). Additionally, participants may gain additional understanding while reflecting in the privacy and comfort of their own home without a time limitation or researcher present. After the interview, participants were asked to share feedback regarding the verbatim interview and to respond to reflection prompts (see Appendix G). As data emerged, however, and in keeping with the spirit of phenomenology, I was open to the possibility that I may have needed to change the journal prompts in response to the data (Moustakas, 1994). If the journal prompt were to have changed, I would have asked for approval from my dissertation chair. However, no changes in the journal prompt were made. The purpose of the journal reflection entry was to elicit further understanding and meaning for both the participant and the researcher (Spowart & Nairn, 2013).

Memos. In phenomenology, the researcher's reflexivity becomes part of the research itself (Hays & Singh, 2012). Furthermore, intersubjectivity, where the researcher's knowing is connected to the subjects knowing and both experiences are important to the overall study, is valued (Douglas & Moustakas, 1985). Memoing also adds to the rigor of the study and assists in managing biases. There are four types of memos that I utilized throughout the research process: (1) observations- observations and impressions of participants' affect and the process, (2) reflections- attempts to derive meaning from thoughts and reflections and reactions regarding my interactions and affect with the participants, including my personal biases (3) methodological notes- reminders, instructions, and critiques, and (4) analytical notes- end of the day field notes,

summary or progress notes, and immediate thoughts and insight about the study (Groenewald, 2004). The purpose of the memos was to remain self-aware of my thoughts and any biases that may interfere with the study.

Data Collection Procedures

Potential participants were given a letter or email (see Appendix C) which provided them with a description and purpose of the study, criteria for participation, and an explanation of what would be done with the findings (Groenewald, 2004). Interested participants who met the criteria were instructed to contact me to set up an interview appointment. From there, I emailed them the informed consent (see Appendix D) and the descriptive data questionnaire (see Appendix E) to review prior to our interview. Due to the nature of online interviews, all participants completed and returned the informed consent (see Appendix D) and the descriptive data questionnaire (see Appendix E) prior to the meeting. Once I received the informed consent and the descriptive data questionnaire and re-verified that each participant met the criteria, I asked each participant to send me three dates and times they were available to meet.

Once meeting dates and times were confirmed, interviews were conducted over a secured connection using technology (i.e., Skype and FaceTime). Additionally, I conducted the interview in a private location. Participants typically chose a room in their house and were interrupted from time to time with their family members, including pets. Interviews lasted between 30 to 70 minutes which gave participants time to fully explore the phenomena and generate rich data (Hays & Singh, 2012). At the beginning of the interview, I verbally explained the consent to participate and consent to record and answered any questions the participant had. I also answered any remaining questions they had concerning the descriptive data questionnaire and the study itself. After all the questions were answered and once the participant acknowledged they were

ready to begin, I initiated the interview protocol.

The semi-structured protocol (see Appendix F) consisted of 12 interview questions and allowed me to ask follow-up questions during the interview. The semi-structured nature of the interview provided a guide, but also allowed me to explore the topics and themes that came up during the interview (Hays & Singh, 2012). Throughout the interview process, I took notes regarding observations, reflections, critiques, and analysis about the interview, process, and my internal monologue (Groenewald, 2004). In addition, I recorded the session to be able to transcribe and refer to as necessary (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Due to the time-consuming nature of transcribing, I personally transcribed five interviews and utilized a professional transcriptionist for the remaining six in order to allow for a fast turnaround time for member checking purposes. Prior to transcribing, the transcriptionist filled out a confidentiality agreement (see Appendix H). The criteria for the transcriptionist was that she had computer literacy, access to a private setting to transcribe, and experience transcribing qualitative research featuring interviews. After the interview, I changed identifying information, such as noting base names as U.S. states instead of duty stations. Additionally, I asked participants to choose a pseudonym to be called. For those who did not indicate a pseudonym, I assigned one prior to transcribing. For the interviews transcribed by the transcriptionist, I sent audio files within three days of collection through a secure HIPPA compliant file sharer. After all the interviews were transcribed, I reviewed the transcription and recording word-by-word to ensure accuracy. It was important that I assisted in transcribing interviews as well as double check the interviews in order to immerse myself in the data and ensure accuracy.

Within two weeks of the interviews, I emailed the interview transcript to the corresponding participant to member check and ask for feedback regarding the accuracy and

clarity of responses prior to analysis. Specifically, participants were asked to read the transcript and check for accuracy, make notes and corrections where deemed necessary, and expand any comments in the transcript (Hays & Singh, 2012). Though I had to send multiple reminder emails to participants, nine participants ultimately agreed with the transcription and one participant altered one of her responses by adding additional information to a part of the recording that was difficult to understand. Additionally, in a combined and single email, I gave participants a journal reflection prompt to complete within three days of receiving the email (see Appendix G). Only seven participants completed the journal reflection and none of the participants complied with the timeline of the journal entry. Once the transcript was approved, I utilized Moustakas' (1994) process of phenomenological data analysis.

Data Analysis

This study utilized Moustakas's (1994) modified phenomenological data analysis steps: (1) bracketing biases; (2) coding; (3) description.

Bracketing Biases

In phenomenology, data analysis procedures begin prior to data collection, as personal biases, literature reviews, and research questions are also included in analysis (Hays & Singh, 2012). Therefore, I began my analysis prior to data collection by memoing about my full experience with the phenomenon along with my thoughts and biases. I then discussed these with the research team member who also memoed about her assumptions and biases (Moustakas, 1994). The research team member also stated her biases and assumptions about the phenomenon and we engaged in discussion about these biases, how we anticipated they would interfere with the research process and analysis, and ways to manage biases. Furthermore, I encouraged the research team member and myself throughout the process to be cognizant of biases, also known

as bracketing (Hycner, 1999). The research team member also pointed out my positive biases and we discussed how and why different biases affected each other as they surfaced. Throughout the research process I utilized other trustworthiness strategies explained below such as: use of a research team, independent auditor, member checking, and keeping an audit trail to ensure my personal bias were not overshadowing data collection and interpretation (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Coding

Once data was gathered, interviews were transcribed, and member checking occurred, each transcript was coded individually by each member of the research team. Each research team member read and reread each transcript to get an overall feeling for them (Creswell, 2007). This started the process of horizontalization (Hays & Singh, 2012). Horizontalization consists of selecting and listing relevant and unique units of meaning and giving each statement equal value while eliminating clearly redundant units (Moustakas, 1994). This was done as each member read the transcript line by line and marked each relevant meaning unit with a code. Coding was done individually and independently at first. I copied and pasted meaning units into an Excel sheet while the other research member practiced horizontalization using notes in Word. We coded all 11 transcripts as individual sets prior to collapsing the codes. During our individual coding process, the research team was encouraged to record notes, questions, and observations concerning the transcript.

After the first interview was coded, the research team came together via Skype and compared notes, discussed emerging themes and discrepancies within the individual interview, and clarified any questions concerning the coding process. We also spoke about our thoughts, feelings, and biases that came out during the coding process. After the first consensus coding session, we also met after coding the sixth and eleventh participant. During the third coding

session, the research team also came together and had an interparticipant coding session where we discussed the common themes that emerge among all of the participants

Then, the research team met two additional times to code the journals with the same process. Only seven participants submitted journal entries, sometimes months after the interview. First, we met after we individually coded the first two participant journals, then after the seventh participant journal. During the second consensus coding session, the research team also came together and for an interparticipant coding session to discuss the common themes that emerge among all of the participants in the interviews and journals.

From there, the research team met another three times formally to discuss the topics that emerged from the resulting horizons. Additionally, the research team was in constant contact to informally discuss the themes that emerged. Each member clustered each statement into meaning units. Once agreed upon, phenomenological descriptions were organized into large categories of meaning units, themes, and subthemes (Hays & Singh, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). During the final meetings, the research team refined and fine-tuned the codebook until it was finalized.

Throughout the analysis process, the research team engaged in frequent communication. We continued to compare notes, discuss emerging themes, and solidify salient themes that appeared to be at the core of the phenomena during each meeting. The purpose of the meetings was for the research team to achieve consensus coding where both members of the research team agreed upon the prominent themes that emerged from the data. Once codes and themes were agreed upon, I created a codebook. The codebook served as a reference guide and assisted in organizing thoughts and process (Hays & Singh, 2012). The code books were continually updated and refined throughout the process to ensure rigor and trustworthiness of the analysis (Patton, 2002).

Description

Next, I used the themes from the codebook to create a textural description, which aimed to understand and describe “the meaning and depth of the essence of the experience,” (Hays & Singh, 2012, p.355). Textual descriptions were supplemented with direct quotes from participants to further capture the essence of each category. Finally, from there I created “composite textural-structural descriptions of the meanings and essences of the experience, integrating all individual textural-structural descriptions into a universal description for the experience representing the group as a whole,” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122). This final code book focused on the “core phenomenon” and how relationships within the themes are sought and identified (Creswell 2007; Hays & Singh, 2012). All codebooks were labeled as they were updated, a total of 11 codebooks were created. The codebooks were reviewed by the independent auditor to ensure rigor and trustworthiness. Research team members also had access to an updated copy of the codebook to use and review.

Throughout the whole process, I continually took the data and compared it to emerging themes (Creswell, 2007). Through this process, I looked at my notes and memos, read and reread the transcripts, and consulted with the research team member to compare and triangulate the data. In the final report, themes and subthemes were supported by direct quotes from the data. A frequency count was also utilized to show the magnitude of these themes found in the participants (Hays & Singh, 2012). In order to be considered, a theme or subtheme must be present in the data in at least three participants. Themes present in at least three participant interviews did not guarantee a spot in the final codebook. Themes that are potentially significant but are not deemed vital enough to be placed in the final codebook were discussed in the discussion section of chapter five.

Verification Procedures

To manage as much bias as possible and to strengthen rigor of this study, I utilized four main verification procedures to increase trustworthiness as outlined by Hays and Singh (2012): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility

One of the main criteria for trustworthiness is credibility (Hay & Singh, 2012). Credibility refers to the how well the researcher is able to capture the true essence of the phenomena based on the perspective of the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Some strategies for enhancing credibility that were utilized for this study include bracketing, member checking, keeping an audit trail, and utilizing an auditor (Creswell, 2007; Hays & Singh, 2012). First, to establish credibility from the start of the research, I utilized bracketing to manage biases. I was aware that my strong ties with and biases about military spouses could interfere with my investigation, and therefore, acknowledging these biases and being open to the emerging data was important. Discussing and journaling about these biases both privately and within the research team also helped to strengthen the study. Second, I used member checking to ensure participants' voices were understood. Member checking also ensured the accuracy of transcripts.

Additionally, I utilized an audit trail to establish credibility by documenting and organizing the research process, memos, and codebooks to improve clarity of the qualitative research and provide physical evidence of the rigor of the study and the ethical and professional research procedures used (Hays & Singh, 2012). I established the audit trail prior to data collection and kept it up to date throughout the research process. Finally, an independent auditor with expertise in qualitative research audited the study to add rigor and credibility. For this study, the independent auditor reviewed the audit trail and themes supported by the data to

ensure rigor and credibility in the process.

Transferability

Transferability refers to describing a phenomenon, its participants, and its context with enough details that readers can decipher which information is useful to a given population or setting in a given context (Hays & Singh, 2012; Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Transferability can be achieved through thick description and triangulation. I provided a thick description of the research process, participants, and context in multiple perspectives to aid in the understanding of the phenomenon. The thick description also provided a vivid picture of the phenomenon as was evident in the audit trail and the final report (Hays & Singh, 2012; Patton, 2002). Furthermore, the final report used direct participant quotes to add to the thick description. The second method of transferability is triangulation. Triangulation is using multiple sources of evidence to support the findings (Hays & Singh, 2012). Triangulation was used between the data sources (comparing the interviews and journal entries), research team members (consensus coding), and participants (member checking) to ensure that evidence for the core phenomenon was found from multiple perspectives (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Dependability

Dependability refers to the consistency of findings and the ability to replicate them (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability was accounted for in both the execution of the research design and consistent findings amongst the research team through time. Dependability was achieved through triangulation, an audit trail, writing memos and use of an auditor as described in previous sections (Patton 2002).

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the themes and findings of the study being derived from the

participant voices and supported by the data collected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Furthermore, confirmability is achieved when participant voices are expressed with researcher bias managed well. To achieve confirmability, I utilized member checking and memos to address and manage biases, triangulation to assure participant voices are evident, and thick description using member quotes.

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of phenomenology and the method that was used to complete this study exploring the lived experiences of career oriented military spouses pursuing education for career advancement. The phenomenological study involved 11 participants and utilized semi-structured interviews and a journal entry. From the interviews and journal entries, the research team systematically analyzed the data until consensus coding was achieved. Rigorous strategies were utilized to ensure trustworthiness such as the use of a research team and auditor, member checking, and keeping an audit trail. The final report was detailed with direct quotes from participants to ensure the essence of the participants' experiences and voices is captured.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative inquiry was to explore, understand, and represent the lived experiences of the participants- 11 career oriented military spouses pursuing education for career advancement. The results may help inform policy, practitioners, educational agencies, counselors, and the military on how to better support military spouses pursuing education. The study focused on two main research questions: (1) What are the lived experiences of career oriented military spouses pursuing education for career advancement? (2) How does the experience of relocation impact this process?

Review of Data Collection and Analysis

To collect pertinent data, I utilized a descriptive questionnaire, semi-structured interview protocol, and journal reflection entry (Appendix E, Appendix F, and Appendix G). First, career oriented military spouses currently enrolled in or recently graduated from an undergraduate or graduate program answered questions concerning their basic demographic information, military affiliation, career orientation, relocation status, and college experience prior to participating in the round one semi-structured interview. Then, during the semi-structured interview, participants shared their experiences as a career oriented military spouse pursuing education. After the interviews were completed, participants were given a journal prompt for their response. I gathered data until saturation was reached at eleven participants (Groenewald, 2004). Of the military spouse participants, eleven participated in the interview and seven of these completed their journal response.

The research team consisted of one counseling doctoral student and one recently graduated Ph. D. in Counselor Education and Supervision. Each research team member was

given copies of the transcripts to code individually, line-by-line, starting with a process called horizontalization, where each meaning unit is given equal weight. We met together after the first interview to gain consensus regarding how we were executing the coding process, to check for biases, and to ensure all the important data were extracted from the raw data. We then followed the same procedure and met after each of us had coded the 6th and the 11th transcripts to consensus code. For the journal responses, we met to consensus code after the first two responses were individually coded, and again after the final entry was coded. Additionally, I kept memos throughout the research process and shared my thoughts with the research team during the meetings. Finally, an independent auditor was provided with all the raw and coded data to verify the trustworthiness of the research process and conclusions. Frequent contact with my research team, reflecting through memos, being immersed in the data, member checking, and using an independent auditor kept me grounded in my understanding and interpretation of the data and faithful to the voices of the participants.

Participant Backgrounds

All 11 participants were career oriented military spouses pursuing education. Table 1 depicts the demographic, military, and school information for each of the participants. Pseudonyms were either picked by the participant or assigned in place of the participant's given names. All of the participants were women married to men. The ages ranged from 21-44, with the average age rounding up to 33. Seven of the 11 participants self-identified as Caucasian/White. The others self-identified as one of each: African, Puerto Rican, Native American, and Filipino/American. Seven of the 11 participants reported to have dependent children and three of the 11 participants reported to have a prior military marriage. Five of the participants' spouses are Enlisted, and six reported that their spouses were Officers. Most of the

spouses' military affiliation was the Army ($n = 6$), followed by the Coast Guard ($n = 3$), and Navy ($n = 2$).

All 11 met the criteria for participation in the study: having a career-oriented identity, being a current military spouse, having experienced at least one relocation, and being enrolled in an educational program. Ten of the participants moved at least one time in the current military marriage, the 11th relocated 10 times while pursuing education in a previous military marriage (see asterisk in Table 1). Four participants were located in the southeast region of the U.S., three participants were in the southwest region, two were in the pacific region, and one participant each from the west and northwest. One participant is completing an associate's degree and the other 10 are currently working on either a bachelor's or graduate degree. Two of the 11 participants are working on their first degree.

Table 1

Participant Backgrounds

Pseudonym	Age Range	Ethnicity	Children	Branch	#Moves	Location	Current Attempt
Susana	35-39	African	4	Navy	4	Southeast	Bachelors
Marie	30-34	PR	2	Army	2	Southeast	Bachelors
Erin	40-44	NA	4	Navy	0 [10*]	Southeast	Masters
Anna	30-34	White	1	Army	2	Pacific	Masters
Gretchen	25-29	White	2	Coast Guard	3	Pacific	Masters
Christina	25-29	FA	1	Army	3	Southwest	Masters/ Doctorate
Andgirl	40-44	White	0	Army	1	Southwest	Associates
Chandra	20-24	White	0	Coast Guard	1	West	Bachelors
Minnie	25-29	White	0	Army	2	Southeast	Masters
Melissa	30-34	White	3	Army	1	Southwest	Bachelors
Samantha	40-44	White	0	Coast Guard	1	Northwest	Masters

Note. For the Ethnicity column: PR= Puerto Rican, NA= Native American, FA=

Filipino/American

Themes

In this section, the three superordinate themes, 10 themes, and 28 subthemes created from the data are explained and represented with direct quotes from participants (see Table 2). The three superordinate themes are *the self*, *the circumstances*, and *the choices*. These superordinate themes depict internal processes, external circumstances, and life decisions made.

Table 2

Themes

The Self	The Circumstances	The Choices
Strengths <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determined • Sense of purpose • Roll with the punches • Strategic • Self-confidence • Values learning Discomfort <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overwhelmed • Frustrated • Doubt • Stigmatized • Feeling alone 	Moving Pieces Uprooted Lifestyle Inconsistent Support <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial support • Student support • Social support • Part-time single parent Time and money drain	Career Choices <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choosing career over job • Credibility • Requirements • Family/work balance • Financial security Program choices <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compatibility • Career positioning • Limited choices • Choosing online education Self-Sacrifice <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Military demands • Family demands • Spouse needs • Trade-off Go for it

Superordinate Theme One: The Self

All 11 participants spoke about internal thoughts and feelings that propel them forward and hold them back as a military spouse student. This superordinate theme was divided into two themes: *strengths* and *discomfort*.

Strengths. All 11 participants spoke of positive personality traits and resilience they possess that help them to succeed at home and in their educational pursuits. Minnie shared that “it really boils down to some kind of this internal motivation.” These strengths appeared throughout their life experiences as military spouses. The research team identified six subthemes under strength characteristics: *determined*; *sense of purpose*; *roll with the punches*; *strategic*; *self-confidence*; and *values learning*.

Determined. All of the participants expressed a sense of dedication and commitment to pursue their goals and push through, regardless of the circumstances. For example, Anna recalled her determination to pursue education despite being pregnant and in the military reserves herself,

I remember when I first joined this program, I was pregnant, actually. And people were shocked to see that a pregnant girl was in the program because they were like, how are you going to do school, and the baby, and your reserves, and all this other stuff? But to me, I was like, I'm going to do it, whatever happens I'm going to do it because I want to do it. And that's what I've done so far.

Similarly, Susana shared her sense of commitment to pursue her education,

I am such a committed and loyal person. Once I'm in it, I'm going to have to see it to completion. And sickness or money or timing, it doesn't matter, you just push. At least that's how I was. I just pushed.

In the same way, Andgirl described herself stating,

I'm persistent. I'm motivated. Like there's nothing in my way, you know. Even if there were road blocks, you know, just kick them out the way, I guess. I always say like perseverance and persistence are the two biggest ones.

Participants identified a strong willpower to persevere though the challenges of pursuing education as a military spouse.

Sense of purpose. The second subtheme in *strength characteristics* was expressed as a striving for a meaningful life and purpose driven career. Eight participants identified this focus. For example, Anna explained, "I need a purpose. I want to feel like I am making a difference whether it's at an organization or with people."

Regarding making a difference, she further expressed, "that is always going to be a passion of mine and I think I will always pursue that regardless of what type of career path that falls in for me." Some participants also expressed making meaning from their past experiences that influenced their future career path. Marie shared, that her purpose is "being able to use [my education] to affect other kids." She went on to say,

My goal is to be in low income areas. That's my passion is to be in a low-income area.

That's why I chose to be a teacher. I grew up in a poor neighborhood. And we didn't have money for stuff.

Likewise, Samantha explained,

I'm a little older. I'm a business consultant now and for me, it's more about getting to a point of really helping leaders. I'm in Human Resources, so I want to do more organizational development, more training development, and helping organization.

For some, purpose was about affecting others as well as the impact the career had on oneself.

When describing her career purpose, Andgirl explained,

The only factor that was important to me was that it's something that I don't think I could live without doing. It has nothing to do with how much money I'm going to make or status or anything like that.

Roll with the punches. Six participants denoted an ability to make adjustments to their life and also their career and educational plans in order to surmount challenges and obstacles to obtaining their goal. Christina, who is currently pursuing her third degree as a military spouse, recalled her experience, stating "I just had to keep rolling with the punches," when challenges arose. She further explains,

To some degree [I had to be] easy going. Like I said before, just kind of having to roll with the punches, you know? We planned originally instead of moving to the southwest, we had planned to go to the south. That's what we were told. You know so, you just have to go with it and pick up and move on.

Likewise, Gretchen, described her process to deal with challenges, she shared

The continuity is all messed up with every [relocation]. The positives with it are more life skills than profession, because it creates a sense of resiliency, [It is] that ability to say okay, [my plan] is not working, so I know I want to work, I know I want to contribute to society so how can I do that? And then it allows you to explore other avenues that maybe you have a little bit of passion towards, but it's not your profession.

Being flexible aided Gretchen in pursuing her career in that when she was faced with a challenge, she was able to look at other solutions to continue her career pursuit. Similarly, in the process of navigating the military lifestyle, Anna shared,

We have our good days and bad days. Then on the good days, you'll make a plan and think you're going to execute the plan. And then on the bad days, you don't like the plan.

At this time, I really am just taking things day-by-day and when I have accurate information from him is when we can temporarily make a plan. Until it gets changed again.

Melissa summarized it like this, rolling with the punches is “to have the attitude that, we'll figure it out when it hits us.”

Strategic. Five participants outlined the strategic and organizational methods that contributed to keeping their lives and their educational pursuit in order. Erin shared the specific skills she used, such as “[my] organizational skills, my ability of being a good administrative person. I really do have to be organized with my time, with my schedule, with my work load, and time management and setting goals.” In the same vein, Minnie spoke about her strategy to pursue education,

Time management, like there's just so much stuff that, especially in grad school, even more than undergrad, that I'm just constantly juggling, and trying to figure out. You know, prioritizing what is important and what is not. What do I have today? What do I have tomorrow? Yeah, so juggling those things.

For others, they described their strategy in choosing a career around the military lifestyle.

Christina shared,

I decided to go nursing because at least we were staying. I knew I could get my degree in the amount of time that I would be stationed [here] and then I would be able to find a job wherever I went.

Self-confidence. Six career oriented military spouse participants expressed confidence in their ability to be successful as a career oriented military spouse in the pursuit of their education. Gretchen reported to gain her self-assurance from questioning herself. She stated that,

My experience being a military spouse really instilled in me, a lot of times, intrapersonally, I've had to ask myself, "Is this worth it?" "Is this what I want to do?" and so I will say that it's kind of forced me to ask myself that a lot and it's reassuring to know that, yes, this is, in my opinion, worth it.

Christina also reported gaining a sense of self-assurance from being a military spouse. She reported that she has "to be [self-assured]. My husband's hardly home. And at the end of the day, I run the household. You know, he has a hard-enough time figuring out where dishes are." For Erin, however, she reported to have gained self-reliance through her experience with education. She explained that education had "made me more confident in my ability to research and form my own opinions and support my own opinions."

For other participants, varied experiences assisted them in gaining self-assurance. Andgirl explained, "I think that my age is helpful now because I'm a lot more sure of myself as opposed to a twenty-year-old lady who didn't, you know?" Likewise, gaining perspective through career transition, Anna stated,

I didn't really know where the path would take me. Getting into this program and then (a) stepping away from the military, so seeing something from a civilian perspective again, and (b) learning again, and not just going through your day-to-day activities, has been amazing to me. Self-reflection helped me to understand more of myself, helped me to understand more of where I want to go and my goals. Just the learning where to get some of the new information and about my new career path has been very motivating.

Chandra, through her experience of patient advocacy, expressed that,

I'm the only one who's going to find these answers for myself. You know, no one is going to [give them to me]. [It is] kind of like patient care, I'm my only advocate right

now. So, I need to be emailing people and asking and looking for every possible way that I can just get through my degree.

For some participants, self-assurance started from a young age, while others gained it through perspective and experience.

Values learning. Five participants believed learning, whether formal or informal education, was a means for personal and professional growth. While some participants shared that the value of education was ingrained in them from a young age, others expressed that they did not value it until they were older. Chandra shared,

I come from an educated household. Both my parents have Bachelor's degrees. It's never been an option to not go to college for us. I think that education is also just something that I want for my personal development. I can't imagine not having gone to college. Unlike Chandra, Andgirl revealed that, "at thirty-five, I decided that I really wanted to go to college. I wanted to have a career and establish myself." She further explained,

My priorities [were different when I was younger]. I really just wanted to get married and have a family. Like, that was my goal. I really didn't care about anything else. I didn't have any direct plans to go to college in high school. Everyone said, oh you need to go to college. You need a good career. And I didn't know what I wanted to do. I didn't you know, I just really wanted to get married and have a family.

Similarly, Erin expressed that her desire to go to college came later in life and arose from supporting her spouse's military career. She shared,

It's also been an extra motivator for me because I did spend so much time supporting my husband's career. So that's why I needed that education for myself. Like this is what you need to do for yourself to build yourself up.

All 11 participants exhibited one or more strength characteristics which aided them in fulfilling their role as a military spouse and also in their pursuit of education. However, the participants also shared aspects of military life that made navigating life and education challenging.

Discomfort. The second theme that emerged as a part of the superordinate theme *the self* highlighted the uneasy thoughts and feelings that many participants experienced as a career oriented military spouse pursuing education. This theme was exemplified by nine participants' experiences of adverse thoughts in navigating life and pursuing education. The five subthemes captured from the data under the theme *discomfort* include: *overwhelmed*, *frustrated*, *doubt*, *feeling alone*, and *stigmatized*.

Overwhelmed. Nine participants spoke about the stresses involved in pursuing education along with the challenges associated with being a military spouse. With everything military spouses face, Marie explains that, "the emotions are all over the place and they're always all over the place. I don't think I've ever felt really secure. I just feel unsettled. I feel unsettled." She further explains,

Mentally I want to just cry. I want to be like, I'm done. I swear I thought about running away at least ten times and my husband is always like, 'are you going to be here tomorrow?' Like, I'm going to be here tomorrow, I promise, but mentally it's just...I have that struggle.

In addition to the general sense of feeling overwhelmed, a few of the participants shared how this feeling of being "all over the place" affected their focus in the pursuit of their education. Erin described,

It's been difficult to stay focused. There's often been times where we had to relocate in

the middle of a semester. Keeping on track with courses, time differences, and setting up the household, getting the kids registered for school. I've had to take semesters off you know. So, it's just an extra stressor.

However, though the participants had different reasons for feeling overwhelmed, the sentiment was best summarized by Samantha who expressed that thoughts and feelings begin “to wear on you mentally.” The feeling of being overwhelmed was sometimes coupled with frustration about not having control of the situation.

Frustrated. The second subtheme, often expressed in conjunction with feeling overwhelmed, was feeling upset for being unable to accurately plan for education due to the instability of military life. Four of the participants explicitly expressed their version of this experience. Anna shared,

It makes me so mad. I'm definitely a planner, I'm definitely someone who wants to analyze the situation. Somebody that wants to figure out what the game plan is, and I can't. And I like to control things, so not being able to control things and not being able to understand, that's really, really frustrating. It's scary, it's frustrating, it makes me angry, like, all these emotions. All these emotions.

Similarly, Christina shared in the frustration due to the lack of control,

Very, very frustrating because you hope you are able to plan and have control of something, but in reality, you have control of nothing and you're not able to plan anything. Whether my husband deploys in March or not, is up in the air and I can't make any plans until we find out. I don't know what's going to happen past November when he comes home from being gone for a month.

Doubt. The third subtheme in *discomfort* was expressed by a sense of self-doubt. Six of

the 11 participants reported questioning their ability or decision to pursue their career or education at least one time. Concerning balancing being a military spouse while pursuing education, Anna explained, “it’s hard to just stay on one path and you get set back sometimes or you question [yourself]. What it is that you are trying to do? And can you actually do it? I’m optimistic, but I’m definitely concerned.”

In the same vein, Marie questioned her ability to go to school and balance being a military spouse. She explained she wanted to be perceived as able to do it all and “not as this dimmed out candle that hasn’t gotten any oxygen.”

In addition to doubting one’s ability, others have expressed a doubt in their decision to go to school because of family concerns. Andgirl expressed her guilt for relying on family funds to start her education in sync with her husband’s military schedule. She questioned her decision in pursuing education, sharing,

When it came down to it, I knew I wanted to start the program in July, but I still needed [to take one prerequisite class before I could start the program] and the only way to do that was to take it through them and it ended up being this enormous amount of money and I felt really, really bad about it. It was only one class, so I couldn’t take out a student loan, so we had to pay cash for it.

Minnie shared her uncertainty in pursuing her education because many military spouses around her are not career oriented. She questioned, “it makes you question is this is the right thing. You know? Am I right in doing this?”

In addition to having self-doubt due to not being around other career oriented military spouses, feeling stigmatized was also an experience some of the participants addressed.

Stigmatized. Six of the participants expressed a sense of feeling ostracized by their

military spouse status in professional and personal circles. Anna spoke of a time she did not get a position she applied for. She recalled,

Even a job that I had applied for, I mean not to say that this was the reason, but I can only imagine that I didn't receive the position because I was a [military] spouse and they knew that I had other obligations.

She further explains that,

[Being a military spouse is] not supposed to [affect the hiring process], but it 100% does.

Oh totally. And especially where the military presence is so predominant, you know?

You could take one look at me and know that I'm a military.

Similarly, Susana also explained feeling stigmatized as a military spouse in the job market. She shared,

The longer you're out, the less you get to put on your resume that makes you desirable.

And the less education you have, the less opportunity you have to get back into the work that is actually going to propel you to somewhere for work. So, it's very circular.

Gretchen shared a similar sentiment when sharing her story about making friends. She recalled her time relocating to a small community,

It was a small town and people often that were raised their stay there, so people have their own networks of people that they grew up with and their families there. And they weren't as eager, I guess, to you know, invite you over for dinner or coffee or something.

Especially if they found out that you were military and you were only there for a short amount of time it was almost like, well, why bother because we will only be here for a temporary amount of time and then we'll be gone.

As the participants expressed a sense of being excluded from work and social opportunities,

others expressed a sense of feeling alone.

Feeling alone. Finally, seven participants expressed a sense of loneliness and isolation. Several spouses reported that they expected their spouses to be home more. Chandra shared, “I was expecting my husband to be home a bit more. He works nights though when we moved over here. So, I was expecting to have a little bit more of a built-in study buddy, but I don’t.” Marie also reported that the challenges of being a military spouse are “being married to a service member who has other obligations and that he is not here most of the time.”

Several participants also shared how they felt alone pursuing their career journey. Minnie shared,

It was a challenge not having that clear example of knowing a military spouse who was also like, ‘yeah, I moved away from my husband to potentially do something or pursue a degree for three years’. I feel like more people I met in the Army spouse world was kind of skeptical of that or I guess were just not pursuing that. They were more OK with, how do I say this tactfully, they were more OK with being influenced by their husband’s career instead of the one they wanted.

She further explained,

When I go back into school, I feel like everyone here is pursuing a common goal. I feel really great about it and it’s good. But, when I get back into that [military] world, I feel like I’m the only person who’s done this crazy thing. Yeah there aren’t examples of people who have done or are doing that.

As military spouses deal with internal strengths and challenges, they also have to deal with external circumstances.

Superordinate Theme Two: The Circumstances

The second superordinate theme the research team identified captured the experiences of all 11 participants discussing the external realities of being a military spouse that impact the pursuit of education. Themes that fall under *the circumstances* include: *moving pieces*, *uprooted lifestyle*, *inconsistent support*, and *time and money drain*.

Moving pieces. The first theme under *the circumstances* exhibited the challenges of navigating life and pursuing education in the midst of the uncertainty and shifts that are part of the military culture. Eight participants reported how the inconsistent nature of military culture affected their daily lives and their decisions to pursue education. Christina, a prior military service member expressed, “everything changes so quickly, you know. Not just the situation, but even like the mindset.” She furthered explained that the moving pieces were not only from the military, but also from her end, too. She shared her hesitance in accepting a program offer explaining,

When I was first offered admittance, I wasn’t sure [where we would be stationed] so I held off [my start date]. They told us a duty station late fall. And then in January, mid to end of January, they called and changed it. And, I found out three months before we were supposed to move.

Marie also shared her difficulties pursuing education with the constant military shifts. She shares,

The impact of being the spouse, the military spouse is that I don’t have a schedule. He doesn’t have a schedule. He doesn’t have a oh well, you know next week I’m going to be good to come home at six o’clock so you can make it to class on time. You know what I mean like, I don’t have that consistency.

She further explained,

The whole point of me starting school semester is because my husband can be home at six, but like last week he had to leave for the hurricane relief and he was gone for a whole week. I didn't have anybody home to watch the kids.

Melissa shared that the frequent change of plans affects her daily routines which she constantly has to change. She explained the hassle of trying to make any plan, saying that “we have time to kind of plan, but the hassle, I would say, is not a surprise. It's more like a kind of surprise. [My husband] going to the field definitely has put a kink in my plan.”

Likewise, Gretchen also shared the challenges of being in a military marriage. She mentioned that relocation orders are “very last minute and sporadic sometimes” and that the military lifestyle as a whole “definitely made it more challenging. There's a lot of moving parts to it.”

Uprooted lifestyle. For the second theme, 10 participants discussed the challenges associated with the inability to establish roots due to frequent relocation. In addition to the uncertainty associated with military changes, military spouses may have additional challenges navigating these adjustments due to not having a sense of roots. Andgirl shared her experience in her transition from her first military marriage to being single, to her second military marriage and relocating again. She explains,

In my first marriage we moved a lot and so we never settled down long enough for me to you know, even get my bearing to decide what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. [Then after that marriage ended,] I thought that I would be in Central Texas pretty much for the rest of my life. Um, I was there five years, which is the longest I've lived anywhere. Made roots and friends and had a great job and you know, it was hard to leave this time.

Gretchen expressed that, “the relocating and having to deal with the logistics of that, like packing and unpacking, and where we going to be staying while we’re in the transition process,” is difficult. She further explained that as a spouse you handle different levels of logistics,

It's added stress. Relocating is probably the hardest part because not only are you managing life as far as when are your household goods going to arrive, and okay, what do I need to cook for dinner tonight, but I'm also like, I've got an assignment.

In the same vein, Christina expressed that frequent relocation is “ruining my life. It makes it so hard.” She continued,

[It's] not just school, but my entire life plan depends on where we move. What am I going to do when we get there? What's available? Everything. Life, grocery shopping.

You don't think it's a big deal until you're like far from everything.

However, Susana shared a different experience when relocating inside a military base. She recalled her transition being cushioned by moving to military housing, “we were right on a military base. Our other places, we lived near the base, but we didn't live on a base. But being on a base, there is so much catering to the active duty military [member].” Regardless of their experience, a common sentiment shared by the participants was an ownership in taking care of household responsibilities during the transition, best summarized by Marie who stated that, “relocation for me as a spouse, my job is to take care of home. That is my job.”

Due to the military lifestyle, many spouses expressed the difficulty in changing support systems as depicted in the next theme, *inconsistent support*.

Inconsistent support. The third theme the research team constructed was the differing levels of support experienced at different commands and institutions. Ten participants spoke of inconsistent levels of support. There were four subthemes under *inconsistent support*: *financial*

support; student services; social support; and part time single parent.

Financial support. The first subtheme the research team found involved gathering enough financial resources to pursue education. Seven participants shared their experiences with obtaining the funds to go to school. Andgirl shared that it has taken her so long to go to school because “money was just always my biggest roadblock.” She recalled,

When I was married the first time [to a service member], it was difficult finding money to pay for school because we just made too much money, even though it wasn’t nearly enough. It was still too much to qualify for financial aid.

On the other hand, Christina shared her experience in getting a tuition reduction based on her military status. This reduction made it possible for her to pursue her education. She shared that, “one thing with my school now is I am getting in-state tuition. So, that’s great.” She further explained, “they made me fill out this sheet about my military affiliation. I’m paying significantly less than if I were to be considered out-of-state. I know there’s quite a few colleges that do that.”

In the same vein, several students spoke of their experience with obtaining financial resources through the post 9/11 GI Bill. Samantha noted,

It’s really helped because he was able to pass his GI Bill off to me, so we don’t have to go in debt for me to go to school. If it wasn’t for the GI Bill, he and I would’ve had to look at how are we going to pay for this, especially if I’m going to take a significant pay cut while I’m going to school. So, it was a huge factor for me to go back to school.

Other participants shared a dissimilar experience with regards to using the GI Bill. Chandra expressed,

I wish there was more financial assistance for the Coast Guard spouses. The Coast Guard

is the most underfunded military branch. And because I don't have access to my husband's GI Bill because he hasn't been in for six years, it's all out of pocket.

Student services. The next type of support depicted participants' experiences with seeking assistance through military student support offices. Nine military spouses shared their thoughts on the various programs' abilities to serve the military spouse student. Military support programs were reported to be run by either the military or the educational institution.

A common concern interwoven throughout this theme was confusion regarding whether or not the military support office even serves the military spouses. In seeking assistance, Chandra discovered that, "I did reach out to the veteran's department here and they didn't have anything for military spouses. The services are for active duty members or veterans." Anna shared a similar sentiment, stating,

Veteran's services, or that whatever you want to call them, were for the whole school, not just for the program. So, every program has their own weird nuances of what they do. But that's the problem. If I come to you at the veteran's services office and ask you what do I do in this situation and you can't tell me because you tell me, 'well, I don't know what your college does specifically,' I think you should know what my college does. And that's not the case at all. They had no idea what the college did. I just couldn't believe that this person couldn't tell me what the process was.

She further explained,

They preach all day long that this is for this program is great for military and veterans and spouses and all this stuff, ok, but what were you doing to facilitate the process? But there are no programs. There's nothing that actually helps to keep a spouse able to maintain their career path and keep the family life. There's definitely a lot of challenges

and concerns.

Furthermore, while working in a Military Student Service Support Office, Erin reported that many military spouses are overlooked because it is not denoted in their files. She shared,

I got a list from the Registrar's Office. It was a list of students and the percentage of active duty and veterans compared to the military affiliated family members. There were no comparisons. We're talking about a handful compared to hundreds. The list missed so many military affiliated students.

She explained that military affiliated programs do not always include military spouses, expressing, “while we are gaining more in the ability to go to school and using transferred benefits, we're not necessarily gaining the same recognition as the support programs and benefits that go along with that.”

In addition to questioning whether or not military spouses are included in military student support services, even when these services are available, the support was inconsistent. What Susana discovered was that, “what you get is whatever that person who is working at the desk knows. And if they don't know about it, well then guess what? You don't know about it.” When she tried to find information on her own, she further explained,

Fleet and Family Service, that's for active duty and their families. But within Fleet and Family Services, there is no centralized thing that says, ‘this is for the spouse and their education, and we know of every program that the military offers and every program that is sponsored or supported through the military.’ There is no centralized place like that. Similarly, Anna reported to learn that, “[services for military spouses] will be determined by any type of geographical location. Any place that you go is going to be different.” In addition to geographic location, Susana shared that, military rank also plays a factor in access to services.

She shared, “an example is MYCAA is only for certain ranks. And then there’s, well in one duty station everyone knows about something, and you go to another duty station and no one knows about it.” She further explained,

My first year at the community college here, I should have been getting that [service for military spouses]. And no one knew about it. No one ever told me about it. And I didn't know about it. By the time I found out about it, my husband had made rank, and so I couldn't get it. Are you kidding me? So, this whole time we could have been using that?

However, Marie shared her experience with an undergraduate college institution helping her student success. She explained, “my teachers are great, they understand that they're in a military community. They understand that some people just won't be able to make it. They understand those things that the military brings.”

Social support. Ten participants shared their stories of the moral and practical support they received from friends and family. For some, they did not feel like they had support in the community or school. For example, Erin shared her concerns finding a support system in her university. She stated,

This is my first experience on a big campus and I don't really fit in with the younger crowd because I'm not young anymore and I haven't gone the traditional path. A lot of people have that normal university experience or at least a college experience of being on campus and knowing how everything works. And for me I just didn't fit in with any group.

While some shared their experiences on making friends, others shared their negative experiences with family support. Susana shared,

I think the relocation just killed our support system. At one point, we even tried to get his

sister to come and stay with us and help with our son because she was single and was just living with her parents. But it didn't work out and it was really frustrating because that was the support that I had back home before we moved and it wasn't there anymore.

In the same vein, Andgirl shared her experience with an unsupportive husband. She explained that, “when I was married to my ex-husband it was huge. He would have just said, ‘too bad. Sorry, we are moving to Alaska and there’s no school there so whatever.’” However, for her current spouse, she experienced a partner who was supportive to her educational journey. She expressed,

He’s like, ‘oh, you have to go to school and we're going to pay for this and you're going to do it.’ And it got me on fire again for school and back on track. Then, we started making goals together. So, my current husband has made it a very much positive thing you know.

Similarly, Minnie, as well as other participants, also shared positive support from her spouse. She stated,

Going away for school is a decision that I made and that he supported throughout all the steps in the process. So, there was never a doubt. He never made me feel guilty for wanting to do this, but he understood. There was a level of sadness, like ‘ok, we’re going to live apart again for a certain amount of time’. And that was a bummer, but he’s been very supportive of my decision and understands my decision to be here instead of somewhere closer to him.

She further shared,

Creating that support community was so important to me. So, I think that some of it happened organically, in the sense that I came here, for some of the people in my

program, we'd share studio space was by proxy I saw them a lot and we became friends.

Anna had a similar sentiment. She shared,

In a new duty station, I'm an extrovert, so I need people. I need that support and so having met other people here, other spouses, other moms, and stuff, it gets me through. We're able to vent. We are able to talk. Even just joining the program to make friends in school and different networking connections and stuff has been a very positive experience for me. And I'm really glad that I made the decision to do that.

Part-time single parent. In addition to lack of social support, five participants shared specifically inconsistent support at home with regards to caring for children, especially when the spouse has to act as a single parent. Christina shared,

They're gone a lot. So, he would be home for a week, gone for a week, home for a week, gone for a week. And now, he's gone for a month with a possible deployment in March. So, I'm a single mother. Because before, he would be home every day for the most part and if he left, it was something expected. It was like that for a chunk of time and I knew when he would be home. It wasn't a big deal because it was just me. So now, this whole situation [being a new mom in a new location] is just a hundred percent different from what we've been used to.

Erin recalled,

When my son was a newborn, I was just starting this really enthusiastic program and my husband was gone for eight months. The first eight months of my son's life basically, and I did it by myself. Not only did I pursue my education, but I also flew home with him on an international flight by myself.

She summarized her experience saying, "I did it while basically being a single parent a lot of the

time, but it helped me grow a lot faster.”

Time and money drain. For the final theme in *the circumstances*, all 11 participants explained how challenges as a military spouse contributed to their elongated educational process. They invested time, effort, and money to pursue education, but faced many delays in their process, thus extending their education journey. Erin summarized her education as, “challenging because it’s really been spread out over a matter of more than twenty years now in my pursuit of education.” Like Erin, several others named relocation as a challenge to completing educational requirements. Susana, who took more than a decade to finish her associate degree and is currently working on her bachelor’s degree, expressed,

I busted out of community college, but I felt like I've been going to school forever. So, when I got here [for my bachelors] and I still had so many things to complete because I've taken so many remedial math classes. Also, I took English like, seriously, looking at my transcript, I took English at every college that I've attended. So, all together I've taken eight English courses, for an associate degree. You know? So, I felt like I just done that so many times, and yet years had gone by, but the degree was at the same exact level. The same exact level.

Similarly, Marie, expressed that relocation has complicated her graduation date. She explained,

That’s why there is no graduation date on my transcript because the last two classes I needed to finish were a state constitution class and I was like, well I’m not going to do a [southwest] State Constitution class when I am going to move [the south].

Not only did participants report a difficulty in transferring credits from school to school, some programs are not accessible in different states. Christina shared her experience being offered admittance into an online graduate school. She reported her hesitation with accepting the

offer, as she explained,

This graduate program doesn't work in some states, so before I could even give an answer, I had to wait and find out whether or not we would be stationed in [an ineligible state that was not compatible with the program] because that was a possibility.

In addition to moving across state lines, Gretchen shared her concern with potentially relocating to another country. She explained,

So, it would very well change the path of how I complete my Master's program if there is no approved supervisors [where we relocate]. Then, I would have to wait and finish [internship] hours when we come back to the States.

As Chandra stated, the prolonged education journey due to relocation and military commitments can be summed up as, "another financial drain and a time drain."

Based on the circumstances military spouse students face and what is going on in their inner world, military spouses make career and educational decisions.

Superordinate Theme Three: The Choices

The third superordinate theme the research team identified captured the experiences of all 11 participants discussing the career, educational, and life choices military spouses made given their circumstances. Four themes that fall under *the choices* include: *career choices*, *program choices*, *self-sacrifice*, and *go for it*.

Career Choices. The first theme in *the choices* was denoted by all 11 participants identifying goals and beliefs that influence their career choice. There were five subthemes under *career choices*: *choosing career over job*; *credibility*; *requirements*; *family/work balance*; and *financial security*.

Choosing career over job. The first subtheme distinguished between a goal of pursuing a

fulfilling career over a job that they are not passionate about. Five of the 11 participants shared their understanding of the difference and their desire for a career. For Chandra, she mentioned that although her current work experience is in the healthcare service industry, she did not count it as a career because of the lack of an education requirement. Chandra shared,

Right now, I wouldn't say that I have a career. I'm speaking as a radiology secretary. I want an education so that I can have that ideal career [of being a healthcare administrator]. I know a lot of administrative positions require just a minimum of a master's, which I will want to get my master's.

Other participants spoke of their journey discovering what makes a job and a career. Minnie described her journey in the field of art discovering that even though she was teaching full time, without time to be creative in the art studio, teaching art in itself was considered to be a job to her and that she needed to supplement that with creating art for it to be considered a career. She explains finding the right balance of her career,

Being out in the real world and working led to the following different career opportunities that kind of led me to shift to this different... balance between the things that I wanted. Umm, so it was from just teaching full time, this isn't exactly what I want do, then then being a studio artist full time, I went, oh, I need a little more structure than just all this time to just manage by myself.

For Andgirl, when trying to describe the difference between having a job and pursuing a career, she explained just having a job as, "I would do it because it makes money, but it would be like remarrying my ex-husband. I would do it because it's comfortable and familiar, but I would be miserable." For her, just making money did not define career.

Credibility. Four participants spoke to the added value and marketability education gives

them as a professional as denoted by *credibility*. Christina believed that seeking a higher degree may offset the stigma that comes with being a military spouse. She explained,

By continuing my education, it helps make me look a little bit more marketable. So that when people look and say, “oh, she was only working there for six months” and then there's a gap as well, at least I was doing something [during the gap].

Samantha, on the other hand, focused on how education would help her career.

Being the expert, but at the same time going in and working with organizations to learn about them and what best works for them and that's where I feel like I'll have really been able to do what I want to do. But I need to have the credibility behind me with you know, the education to say that not only do I have experience, but I have some education behind me to back that up.

Requirements. While some participants spoke to the added value of education, seven participants expressed that a significant motivation to pursue education was that it was a professional requirement for their career. Although most of the career oriented military spouses expressed a positive feeling towards pursuing education for career advancement, Melissa had more negative feelings towards education. She stated that, “I’m not a huge fan of the requirement. I’m just getting through it because it’s required.” Melissa further explained,

I basically always planned to do bedside nursing. That what I enjoy in life. I have no desire to go into management or no really a desire to go into education or anything like that. I prefer the hands on and being with the patient. That type of nursing. But for what I want to do now, how just requirements are changing, it just requires a Bachelor's [degree]. So that's what kind of pushed me to go ahead and get my Bachelor's. I wanted to go ahead and do the Associate's first because you can work as a Registered Nurse with

an Associate's. At the time, I was a single parent with two daughters, so I needed to be able to start working as soon as possible.

For the rest of the participants who noted the educational requirement for their profession, it can be summarized by how Andgirl explained, “[Education is] huge in my new career because I have to have it.”

Family/work balance. Another subtheme noted by five participants was expressed as a sense of balance between personal, family, and career life. Considering the needs of the military lifestyle, Chandra shared,

My husband wants to be in the Coast Guard as a career, so he’s going to be in for a minimum of twenty years. So, my idea of a successful career is one that I would be able to do on the go and have a healthy future family/work balance.

She further explained, “I have had to find a healthy work/school balance which I am still struggling with and that’s not going to be a problem that [goes away].”

On the other hand, Samantha expressed her concerns with family/work balance because of her returning student status. She shared,

Just going back to school after being out of school for basically twenty years and getting back into the mode of studying again and balancing. I still want to spend time with my friends and with my husband. So, the hardest thing has been just going back to school again and getting into that mindset because things have changed and [everything is] online. And I would say the next thing is just balancing work, life, and school, because you have to say no to things.

Financial security. The final subtheme focuses on financial concerns. Because of the lack of job security for military service members, seven participants expressed a drive to pursue

education to financially support their family. Susana recounted the time when her husband was taken out of active duty before he was reinstated,

[Part of it was] actual financial need. What do we do now? And I mean yeah, he still had a job, he went directly in active reserve, so he was technically still in the military at the time, but it changed my focus, because now it became so real that one day we might not have that [military job]. So that changed a lot and that made my drive stronger.

In the same vein, Christina expressed her career goal in anticipation of her husband not being in the military. She stated that, “it’s going to be depended on me because his job isn’t very marketable in the civilian world. I’m plan B.” She further explained that,

his career’s unpredictable. We don’t know if he’s going to be able to renew when he’s done with his contract. I think he signed up for another four to six years. But if they don’t take him, then what? It’s so hard. I feel like I want to give up a lot, but I know that I can’t because whatever unpredictable future I have is relying on [my career].

Program choices. The second theme found in *the choices* was labeled *program choices*. Ten participants discussed weighing different options when deciding about their education. Four subthemes include: *compatibility*, *career positioning*, *limited choices*, and *choosing online education*.

Compatibility. Nine participants expressed the desire for their education to be flexible to withstand obstacles of military life such as relocation, isolated geographic location, and family obligations. Gretchen shared that she tried to be proactive with her education choice. She stated, “I knew it was going to be difficult because we moved around a lot. I tried to alleviate that factor by finding an online program.” Christina added that it was important to find “a program that works with our lifestyle. You know, being a military family.” She explained,

It was important that it was online because of moving and with a baby and not being able to leave the house as much. Also, being in a new area, I don't know anybody, so childcare is something that I'm still nervous about.

In addition to thinking about mode of education, Melissa shared that she also chose her degree with the military in mind. She stated, "nursing works out really well with the military lifestyle because you can do it anywhere." Then added,

The online option, being able to go to class from home, it's an accelerated program. But you can take five weeks off at a time if you need to, which I did when I had my son. Just knowing that I have that ability for this program is a lot off my mind because if we did have to relocate, then I would still be able to continue the program.

Career positioning. Five of the participants expressed a focus on career aspirations when choosing an educational program. Gretchen spoke of the professional value that the program offered. She explained, "I needed it to be accredited. I didn't want to spend and invest our time and our resources into a program that wasn't going to be taken seriously in the professional world." In the same vein, Samantha reported to look at the cost benefit analysis of the highest level of education she wanted to pursue. She said, "I did consider a Ph.D. program, but the GI Bill is just not going to stretch that far and again, to me at my age, it's not going to pay itself back if I were to pursue it." She continued,

When I looked for a program, I wanted it to still keep me connected to the Human Resource side of things, but also connect me with the business side. Help the organization as we move forward and help leaders to create better organizations. So, I had to find a program that would allow me to do that. An MBA would make me a good number cruncher or help me with the business focus, but it wouldn't give some of the aspects that

I really enjoy about what I do. So, that was a big factor for me was to find a program that again, really focused me to continue to grow which this is allowing me to do. There were people at the organization that I was at that has taken this program and really liked it and spoke highly of it. So, the reputation of the college was a big factor as well.

Furthermore, one participant shared her experience in moving cross country away from her spouse to pursue her education. Minnie explained,

I have looked around at a lot of universities and I was looking at the work that the professors were making. And that was the most important thing to me in finding a program where my advisor was somebody who was making art, not exactly, but maybe in a similar vein, and somebody that I wanted to work with and learn from.

She added,

One of my friends from undergrad just started a program an hour away from where my husband lives right now. And he was like, ‘oh so there is a program close to me. But the difference being that I wanted to come out here to study with this person. I didn’t like what that other program offered. I didn’t want what I could get from it. So that’s what led me out here.

Limited choices. When considering a program, four of the participants spoke of the limited number of educational programs and schools available from which to choose. Not only did participants have to consider what type of educational program to pursue, participants also had the disadvantage of having a limited selection of schools to choose from. Often, this was due to the remote location of military bases. Wanting an in-person program, Chandra explained that the program she enrolled in was “the only on-campus option that I had. They have a community college here, but I already have my two-year degree and my college is the only four-year college

within a hundred miles of where we are stationed.” Christina shared a similar explanation as to why she chose to go to a college that was an hour and a half away. She said, “I really didn’t have a choice because that was the only accelerated program in the area and it was the closest one to me.”

Choosing online education. The final subtheme in *program choices* specifically addressed the limitations of choosing online education. Five participants expressed their experiences of the drawbacks of choosing this type of learning. Christina shared her complaint about being a distance learner in a hybrid programs that has both in-seat and online participants. She explained that the class she is in offers walk-in tutoring sessions during open lab. She shared, “I can’t go to those labs. I can’t get the extra help from my professors because I’m not there.” In the same vein, Erin revealed her struggles with some specific courses she had taken online. She said,

I tried to take statistics online because my undergrad program was completely online. Statistics online for me was impossible. I attempted it online three or four times and I just couldn’t do it. So, I had to get special permission to go to a local community college just to complete those courses that I really needed to do face-to-face. I really was burnt out on the online experience.

Andgirl also shared positive sentiments towards online learning. She stated, “at this point [relocation] hasn’t [influenced my education] because I’m doing the online.” However, she continued,

But, I really wish that there was a classroom here. You know, that there was a school with that program just right down the street. I loved classroom setting. I need an instructor to see face-to-face or to see things written on a blackboard.

In addition to limited program choices, some military spouses discussed putting others before themselves.

Self-sacrifice. In the fourth theme, seven participants acknowledged the choice to put others' needs above their own. For some participants, this sentiment also had a hint of feeling defeated, or succumbing to having to prioritize others, as if it was a forced choice. Although the subthemes often overlapped and influenced each other, each subtheme represents unique experiences in some fashion. Four subthemes for choosing *self-sacrifice* include: *military demands*, *family demands*, *spouse needs*, and *trade-off*.

Military demands. Four participants specifically acknowledged that they prioritize the military's needs above their own due to the nature of the military. Anna, who is prior military, understood through experience that the demands are high. She stated,

They know I'm in school, but well, forget about the baby. I have a small baby. But I am in school and my husband's unit is aware that I cannot (a) watch our daughter because I have to be at school and (b) I'm working on my thesis for my master's degree and that's a priority to me. But his unit doesn't care. He's been gone the last 30 days... there are things that just have to happen because he's a soldier and because of where the military stands on readiness. I don't know that they have to, or will ever, want to help the soldier make sure that their families are where they also need to be.

Likewise, Susana shared her resolve, "That's one of the biggest things, just not being able to count on him because I know emotionally he supports me, but physically, his job trumps my education, his job trumps everything that I've got going on. Because that's just what it is."

However, Christina expressed a different perspective. She and her husband used the military demands for her advantage. She shared, "we decided that with the new relocation it would

probably be easier for me to stay home and just go to school and save money as opposed to [working and] putting [the baby] in childcare right away.”

Family demands. In addition to choosing to put the military as a priority, five participants shared specifically how the military shapes the family’s needs with regards to caring for children. Gretchen shared the impact of relocation on parenthood and the need to choose to prioritize the needs of her family. She said, “after the baby came, it was a struggle to go from having no children to having a child for me personally being all the way across the country, away from family and friends.” Another part of childcare mentioned by Marie, involved daily tasks such as putting children to sleep. In her experience balancing her spouse’s career, going to school, and raising her children, she shared,

I have to sacrifice and put them to sleep at seven. My daughter, she tries to go to sleep later and then I’m like, I’m reading my kids my books. Like, I’m going to read you a bedtime story and it’s going to be about science education.

She further stated, “I’m stuck at home taking care of the kids and the whole house while he is gone and I’m still trying to do school full-time.” On the other hand, Susana, mentioned the effect of deployment on childcare need stating that, “when he's not home, like his deployment now, that totally shifts things because I have to scramble to find anyone who can help watch my kids. And that's not easy.”

Spouse needs. Similar to putting the needs of the military and family above their own, four participants also shared prioritizing the needs of the spouse over their own. Anna explained that “we [military spouses] tend to want to put our spouses’ needs first because [he’s in] the military, which I think is horrible”. She elaborated,

When you're taking care of the service member or the house or the children, or the things

or whatever, then you're not taking care of school or yourself. And that has fallen on my plate several times since I started school.

Christina also revealed a similar sentiment. She shared that, “everything is revolved around his career. When I work, when I go to school. Even planning our baby. It was around his career.”

Concerning the emotional and financial needs of the family, Susana further added, “I think just the blend of focusing on his school and knowing that my husband has this career and that he was able to provide for us made me push my career to the background.” Furthermore, concerning the emotional needs of her spouse, Minnie, who chose to attend school away from her husband’s duty station, shared,

His Green Beret graduation ceremony [on the East Coast] is a week before my finals, so that’s obviously not something I’m going to miss. So, I’m having to leave school here [in the West Coast] for four or five days before my finals start. And it’s challenging to weigh those two things. I need time to physically be in school. But also, it is important for me to show up for him and be there for him in this important event in his life.

Trade-off. The final subtheme in *self-sacrifice* was changing their career aspiration in order to fit into the military lifestyle. Six participants spoke of the influence of the military lifestyle on their career goals. Gretchen explained the difficulties of finding a job, let alone a career. She shared, “it’s hard to find employment. The career outlook based in different communities is different based off what the need is over there.” And when military spouses do find employment, the needs of the military still come first. Andgirl shared how relocated affected her. She said that, “[before] we moved, I worked in two of the most amazing offices where I could have spent the rest of my life. But, you know, when the Army says, it’s time to go, it’s time to go.”

Though some spouses changed their aspiration as challenges arose, for some spouses, they decided early on to match their careers to the military lifestyle. Chandra explained,

I started off wanting to major in chemistry and organic chemistry. And then I got married to a soldier. Being a chemistry major and going for a Ph.D. in chemistry would have been extremely difficult to almost nearly impossible when moving around so much and with intense on campus requirements for labs. Not to mention the actual intensity of the workload would have been, perhaps, a little overwhelming if I had to be moving around with it. So, I changed my major and I compromised to go into Healthcare Administration, which I really like the healthcare field.

Even with having to prioritize others' needs before the self, in reflecting upon the interview, a common sentiment shared by the participants was the choice to pursue education regardless of the challenges.

Go for it. The final theme exemplified in *the choices* was garnered from the journal entries shared by seven participants and captured the sense of pride in their decision to pursue education and a desire to encourage others to pursue education despite the challenges. Marie reported that she wanted to be a role model for her daughter, so she can be empowered to go to pursue her career goals. Close to her graduation she exclaimed, "Hat and gown! We can do this!"

Susana wanted to encourage other military spouses pursue education and career goals. She expressed,

Go to college!! Even if you only attend one class per semester; attend. Don't stop attending college until you've reached, at the very least, your Master's degree. That way, when your spouse's military career ends, no matter if it's after 4 years or 20 or some place in between, you'll have education to fall back on. Your skills and knowledge will

be more up to date than if you'd only been at home or only working and you'll stay more in-tune with your peers and the community at large. You'll also be more employment ready.

In the same vein, Minnie shared,

Go for it! I think it's really easy to put your life on the backburner as a military spouse when the military so overwhelmingly dictates your life. Where you live, for how long, who your friends are, what your job is. Take control of your life, your career, and your passions. Given educational opportunities that open doors to new careers where you find meaning and purpose in life, it's truly worth the sacrifices.

Military spouses expressed a desire to encourage other spouses to pursue their career passions despite the challenges and obstacles.

Summary

This chapter presented information about the participants and also the resulting superordinate themes, themes, and subthemes created from the analysis of the interview and journal reflection data gathered. The researchers used direct quotes from the participants to express the various aspects of the core phenomenon of career oriented military spouses pursuing education for career advancement. In the following chapter, these results are discussed.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Career development is a source of meaning and identity for adults (Bluvshstein et al., 2015; Parker & Arthur, 2004). However, the path is no longer as linear as it was traditionally. Modern day career development takes time, effort, and commitment, and it is filled with disruptions such as job loss and relocation (Eby, 2001; Moen & Sweet, 2002). Additionally, the complexities of career development are compounded for the trailing spouse in dual career couples. Career oriented military spouses may face even more challenges due to the demands of the military, their spouses' needs, and home responsibilities (Gleiman & Swearingen, 2012; Parker & Arthur, 2004).

Military families have been a research topic of interest due to their effect on service member success and retention, which impacts national security (Gomulka, 2010). Particularly, the satisfaction of military spouse is the primary indicator in the retention of service members (Asbury & Martin, 2012). Though the military spouse marital satisfaction has been considered, military spouses' career satisfaction, an important source of meaning for many adults, has not (Asbury & Martin, 2012; Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013). Specifically, this study aimed to shed light on the perspective of the military spouse student regarding their pursuit of education for career advancement.

The career oriented military spouse often has to negotiate multiple relocations, family separation, and inconsistent military schedules. The unpredictable military family schedule does not always give the military spouse sufficient time to plan and implement their career path, including the educational pursuits needed to accomplish career goals (Anderson et al., 2011; Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013). In addition, the research on military spouses and career development was limited and focused predominantly on employment, not on educational pursuits

(Booth, 2003; Castaneda & Harrell, 2008; McBride & Cleymans, 2014; Meadows et al., 2016). In fact, only two articles were found that specifically examined the military spouse as a separate learner population. Furthermore, both articles were conceptual and based on the authors' experiences (Gleiman & Swearngen, 2012; McArthur, 2016). This study addressed this gap in the literature by exploring the lived experiences of career oriented military spouses pursuing education for career advancement.

The central questions for this study were: (1) What are the lived experiences of career oriented military spouses pursuing education for career advancement? (2) How does the experience of relocation impact this process?

Using phenomenology methodology, the research team and I constructed three superordinate themes, 10 themes, and 28 subthemes from data gathered through interviews with and journal reflections by the participants. The first superordinate theme, *the self*, focused on the participants' inner dialog. The second superordinate theme, *the circumstances*, focused more on external factors impacting participants' lives. The final superordinate theme, *the choices*, focused on the decisions made considering self and circumstances. The findings are discussed and compared to current literature on career development and military spouses. It is followed by a delineation of practical implications, suggestions for future research, and limitations of the study.

Discussion of Findings

Extant civilian, career, and military spouse literature tended to highlight only one or two aspects of the military spouse experience at a time (e.g. stress and pregnancy during deployment) (deBurgh et al., 2011; Lester et al., 2011). However, this study added a new lens to view military spouses in a more holistic fashion. As Levner's (2000) three career concept noted treating the family as the third career, this current study also considered the military lifestyle as part of the

participants' lives. Furthermore, the complex relationships of the superordinate themes, as explained below, are an attempt to depict the multifaceted nature of the role of military spouse. Each superordinate theme was distinct, yet also impacted the other two.

The Circumstances

There are many circumstances surrounding the military spouse that influence their educational choices. Namely, the moving pieces of military life, the uprooted lifestyle due to relocation, inconsistent support in several aspects of life, and the time and money drain from the elongated educational journey are external circumstances that may add to the challenges of military spouse students.

Moving Pieces. The inconsistency of the military lifestyle has been documented in existing literature as well as in this investigation (Hall, 2011). However, this study added a more holistic view regarding how these inconsistencies affect educational choices, not just a singular aspect such as deployment or relocation. Similar to existing literature, the most frequently mentioned aspects of military life that affected educational choices in this study were inconsistent and unexpected military schedules, deployment, and relocation (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). Unfortunately for many military spouses in this investigation, the moving pieces of the military lifestyle seemed to be associated with the military spouse pausing or adapting educational pursuits (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012).

Due to the moving pieces of the military lifestyle, military spouses in this current study expressed numerous challenges when pursuing education. In civilian career literature on the challenges of the trailing spouse, these unpredictable changes such as unemployment and relocation increased negative feelings including loss of identity, financial stress, and hopelessness (Bluvshstein et al., 2015). However, the studies regarding the trailing spouse tended

to be focused on one relocation assignment, not multiple moves like the military trailing spouses in this study. But due to the constant changes in the military lifestyle, including a high frequency of relocations, this sense of loss appears to be amplified by the nature of military life (Clever & Segal, 2013). Moreover, participants in this current study reported feeling overwhelmed, frustrated, and alone. These feelings were oftentimes associated with the military spouses sacrificing or changing their educational goals to fit the demands of the military and their family.

Coping with moving pieces is not impossible, however, it may take both internal and external resources, such as being flexible and having a social support system, to successfully navigate around the moving pieces to pursue education (Wang et al., 2015). Another coping strategy suggested by Bluvshstein et al. (2015), was to mentally and emotionally prepare for unexpected changes. However, for military spouses in this study, they shared a difficulty in emotionally preparing because the information, from daily schedules to relocation assignments or deployment schedule, often changed multiple times before it happened. Prioritizing the needs of the family during a move or even during the daily schedule meant that the amount of time military spouse students had to pursue their education was even more limited. With multiple unanticipated changes, military spouse participants in this study may benefit from more internal and external support than just internal mental and emotional preparation.

Other strategies participants used to deal with the changing nature of military life were having strengths, such as organizational and time management skills along with determination and flexibility. These qualities helped participants to stay employable when an interruption of employment occurred. For example, one participant shared that even though she was not able to get a job in her career field, she was still able to gain employment to work with the same population as her ideal career. Working with this population kept some of her job experience

relevant for her future career. This echoed findings from previous career investigations (Savickas, 2011). Savickas (2011) noted that career outlooks have shifted to become more fragmented and short term. This means that the emphasis for career paths is to remain employable by taking temporary job assignments and seeking education when one cannot maintain employment. In addition to the challenges of having to deal with the moving pieces of the military lifestyle, military spouses also experienced not being able to form deep roots.

Uprooted Lifestyle. One of the key findings in this study was viewing relocation as more than just an event military families face. One key difference between this study's conclusions and those in extant literature on civilian and military relocation was the current participants' experience of their lives being uprooted. Where existing literature emphasizes the challenges of relocation on career development (Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013), this study found that relocation affected more than just the participants' careers. It also involved the physical, logistical, and emotional stress of moving. Furthermore, few studies have directly examined the effects of moving on the trailing spouse (Cooke & Speirs, 2005). In the current study, participants shared about experiences of relocation which included an inability to establish roots along with living a semi-nomadic lifestyle. With the frequency of relocations military families experience, the uprooted lifestyle appears to be a significant point to consider.

Ten participants in this study spoke of different aspects of the uprooted lifestyle such as the logistics of moving, keeping a sense of normalcy for the family, exploring and adapting to the new location, and making friends and integrating into the community. Additionally, the military spouse students also shared the tasks for their educational needs such as setting aside education material needed and setting time aside to complete assignments. These tasks addressed by the participants in this study were in addition to the feelings of discomfort, loss, and

instability accompanied by the uprooted lifestyle. In a way, these shared experiences of the uprooted lifestyle may be better understood when compared to the deployment cycle. The deployment cycle is a model used to explain and identify the physical and emotional stages that military families may experience- such as emotional detachment prior to deployment and adjustment after the service member returns home (Gambardella, 2008). Children sometimes take as long as four weeks to readjust to their parent's return from deployment (McFarlane, 2009).

Furthermore, the military spouse needed to constantly adjust their roles to fit the needs of the family during deployment (Gambardella, 2008). This may also be true for the military families being uprooted during relocation where participants of this study expressed shifting roles during the transition. This was in line with the theme 'rolling with the punches' from this study. Additionally, the uprooted lifestyle also was related to the theme 'self-sacrifice' in that military spouses in this study shared that they planned their education and career around relocations and deployments. In addition to having an understanding of the process of relocating and the uprooted lifestyle that accompanies this, those who work with this population should consider increasing the level of support offered to help the military spouses succeed academically.

Inconsistent support. In this study, participants shared experiences accessing different types of support. However, one difficulty in comparing these conclusions to the previously published literature was the lack of consensus regarding a definition of support. But even without a consensus definition, social support and student support have been recommended for academic success in the literature (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012).

Participants in this study expressed that social support from peers, family, and spouse

was an important factor in their educational success. Yet, participants also expressed a lack of support from other career oriented military spouses. Both career and military spouse literature confirms the importance of social support for career success (Asbury & Martin, 2012; Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012; Wang et al., 2015). Furthermore, social support may contribute to resilience and coping with the educational process (Wang et al., 2015). Considering that 87% of military spouses consider their career to be important (Defense Manpower Data Center Survey, 2006), one would assume that it would be easy to find another career oriented military spouse for peer support. However, more than half of the participants of this current study reported difficulty in finding career-oriented peer support during at least one point of their career journey. This finding also seems to be contradictory to Castaneda and Harrell's (2008) finding that military spouses' number one reason to work is for financial gain which was also noted by seven participants in this current investigation. Not only did participants in this study report to have difficulties connecting with other career oriented military spouses in the community, some participants also reported difficulties connecting with other career oriented military spouses in their educational setting.

Though social support is one aspect of academic success, another is student service support. Congruent with Gleiman and Swearengen (2012), participants in this study reported that a barrier for student service support was the ambiguity regarding their status as a military affiliated student. Though institutions offered military affiliated student service support, the definition of 'military affiliated' is inconsistent across institutions and does not always include military spouses (Ford & Vignare, 2014). And similar to Gleiman & Swearengen, (2012), even when military spouses were included, it was assumed that their needs were the same as service members and veterans.

Inconsistent support oftentimes was connected to military spouses' decisions to delay their pursuit of education. This delay frequently caused an elongated educational journey which often featured not only a longer duration but also the use of additional resources.

Time and money drain. Participants in this current study shared their stories about taking additional time and money to pursue education. The pursuit of education for these participants paralleled literature on employment and relocation for the military spouse (Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013; McBride & Cleymans, 2014). In investigating the economic conditions of the military spouse, Hosek and Wadsworth (2013) found that when compared to civilian spouses, military spouses were less likely to work, more likely to be unemployed, and worked fewer hours a week than they desired. Meadows et al. (2016) also stated that the earnings gap between military and civilian spouses increased with additional education. Participants in this study shared a similar sentiment regarding their education journey. For example, several participants shared that they did not attend school as regularly or with as full a load of coursework as they desired. They also reported that many times they had to take a break from school to take care of the military family demands. In career literature, the employment gap between military and civilian employees increased with education. However instead of wages and hours worked, participants in this study shared that the amount of time and money spent on pursuing education was more than they anticipated.

To address the time and money drain, McBride and Cleymans (2014) suggest reconceptualizing career as a multidirectional process instead of a ladder. By utilizing employment gaps as opportunities to volunteer or go to school as well as emphasizing strengths and accomplishments from seemingly unrelated professional experiences, career oriented military spouses can take ownership and pride in their journey. Likewise, several participants in

this study expressed a similar sentiment about their educational journey, taking educational goals in smaller chunks, such as obtaining an associate's degree and then going into a bachelor's degree instead of going straight into a four year institution. Other participants, however, expressed a difficult time piecing together their educational journey which resulted in pausing education or changing educational and career goals.

Though this study documented many challenges presented by military spouse students' circumstances, the impact of these factors may have been influenced by each participant's internal strengths and also areas of discomfort (Asbury & Martin, 2012).

The Self

Participants shared two inner forces, strengths and discomforts, that push and pull spouses towards or away from pursuing education. These forces appeared to be influenced by both inner thoughts and feelings as well as outside circumstances, which appeared to often change.

Many of the discomforts expressed by participants in this study were also represented in existing literature. For example, when looking at military marriages and deployments, Aducci et al. (2011) found discomforts such as feeling like a single parent, feeling alone, and self-doubt. During deployment, feeling alone was described as having to make important household decisions without input from the spouse or feeling left out because of the strong bonds formed amongst the military comrades (Aducci et al., 2011). However, military spouses in this current study described feeling alone in different terms. It included being away from family and friends, not having role models of career oriented military spouses, and feeling distant from spouses whether they were home or deployed due to work schedule and job demands. Furthermore, the participants shared how these discomforts due to military life affected the educational process

itself as well as their educational decisions and life choices. For example, some participants reported that the social aspect of attending school was an added benefit while others shared that the discomforts of feeling alone resulted in being sometimes too overwhelmed to pursue education because of the lack of support and childcare.

Another discomfort expressed by participants was self-doubt. One reason for self-doubt concerning education may be the instability of the military lifestyle. Similarly, Walck and Hensby (2003) found that the complications of pursuing education correlated to self-doubt in college student's degree choices. Another reason for self-doubt found in this current investigation may stem from factors such as having to give up preferred career and educational choices in order to fit the needs of the military family and also having limited educational options from which to choose. Furthermore, this doubt may also be related to frustration which seemed to accompany the current participants' elongation of their academic journey and the cost in time and money.

As expressed by the participants in this study, this doubt and frustration may be further exacerbated by insufficient support and stigmatization (Bohonos, 2014). Extant career literature noted how stigmatizations limited employment opportunities (Castaneda & Harrell, 2008; Marshall, 2014). For example, military spouses may be overlooked based on their fragmented work history or may have difficulty establishing friendships due to frequent relocations. However, this stigmatization may also affect the military spouse student in several other aspects of life. Several military spouses in this current study reported that their needs were not recognized by military student services even with the military affiliated student designation. These frustrations added to the discomfort military spouse students reported in this current study.

Despite the challenges, participants shared a number of strengths, such as being strong

willed, flexible, and strategic. Previous literature on military spouses also focused on their strengths (e.g., Aducci et al., 2011). Looking at the qualities of successful military spouse experiences during deployment, Aducci et al. (2011) found that some military wives not only survived, they thrived. This may be explained by military wives finding inner strength and exercising autonomy by taking care of the home and family while the service member was away at service. Perhaps this coincides with the results of this current study, that learning how to navigate the military lifestyle and finding solutions to be able to pursue education reinforced the strengths needed to meet the challenges (Houston et al., 2013).

Furthermore, career literature also focused on the transferable strengths of military spouses, such as communication and organizational skills (Marshall, 2014; McBride & Cleymans, 2014). For example, Marshall (2014) advocates for educating military spouses about effectively communicating their experiences and strengths both written and verbal. In addition, McBride and Cleymans (2014) notes the importance of being organized and documenting all career, education, and volunteer experiences in a career portfolio. This current investigation unveiled similar strengths in military spouse students. In addition, current participants shared a sense of determination, purpose, and growth. Furthermore, despite the prevalence of challenging circumstances, the participants in this current study appear determined to work towards a meaningful goal. This determination to pursue education despite the circumstances was captured in the third superordinate theme, the choices.

The Choices

Career and program choices. In accordance with Pixley's (2009) recommendation for having one's own definition of a career, this study aimed to explore career oriented military spouses based on the participants' differentiation between job and career, which each participant

shared. Some participants valued careers which allowed them to help others while others sought financial stability. For example, one participant shared her career as an artist but differentiated between teaching art (job) and producing art (career). This differentiation influenced her decision to choose a program that catered to her specific career goal. The military spouse participants also reported to be in different stages of their career, entry level through executive level. Yet current career support programs for military spouses at the schools attended by the participants did not appear to take this into consideration. Many programs are designed to assist young military spouses seek employment and not necessarily to assist military spouses meet their personal career goal (Meadows et al., 2016).

Once a career and educational path was decided, one obstacle participants shared was that the military lifestyle caused their pursuit of a career to be non-linear. Though nonlinear career path was also a growing trend in civilian career literature (Moen & Sweet, 2002), military spouses in this current study also expressed both similar and different challenges while pursuing education for career purposes. For example, career literature outlines the difficulties of obtaining seniority or longevity in a job (Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013). Similarly, for the military spouse student, the participants in this study reported that the nonlinear education path led to an elongated educational journey featuring delays and retaking courses. For example, one participant in this study reported taking the same classes over and over again at different institutions because each required their own version.

Another major circumstance that contributed to nonlinear education and affected career and program choices is relocation. To help military spouses deal with relocation, military researchers proposed looking at career as a web instead of a straight pathway (McBride & Cleymans, 2014). For educational pursuits, this means that, instead of doing one long degree

program to obtain a career, career counselors can encourage military spouses to emphasize transferable skills, volunteer opportunities, and certifications as a means to pursuing career. Looking at alternate ways to get to the same goal may be beneficial.

Another solution to challenges associated with relocation and military lifestyle issues was to promote online education for military spouse students (McArthur, 2016). However, some participants in this study shared that online education may not always be the answer because not all online educational programs are the same. For example, some participants shared that they had littler interaction with their professor, while others shared that they had little interaction with their peers. Though the mode of instruction were both online, the two methods of teaching fit different learning styles and needs. So, the blanket recommendation for military spouses to seek an online education program may not be beneficial without looking at the specific learning modality of the courses. But even if participants opted to take online education to compensate for military lifestyle, many career opportunities may not be as mobile.

Self-Sacrifice. Prioritizing the military, the spouse, and the family's needs was associated with about half of the participants' compromising their pursuit of their own career goals. Military spouses in this study reportedly put the needs of others above their own, however, this choice not only adds to the education time and money drain, but also to participants' discomfort. Self-sacrifice without adequate support may have negative psychological effects such as isolation, resentment, depression, low self-esteem, and loss of identity (Eby, 2001; McNutly, 2012). To support the trailing spouse, McNutly (2012) advocated for companies to provide practical support (e.g. accommodations, home sale assistance); professional support (e.g. job search, resume building); and social support (e.g. introduction to other trailing spouses, networking opportunities). Though military spouses in this study shared that they received practical

relocation assistance such as having household goods shipped free of charge, they also shared aspects where their sacrifice was not supported. For example, a common reason for putting the family first was due to inadequate childcare. For some military spouse students in this study, inadequate childcare was a reason participant they paused or delayed their educational pursuits. Furthermore, six participants in this current study shared that they changed their career plans to put the needs of the military, the spouse, and the family above their own. This appeared to be a coping method to deal with family demands. This changing of career plans may add to loss and discomfort (Cole, 2011).

Go for it. Despite the challenging circumstances and negative thoughts and feelings, seven of the participants still highly recommended pursuing education for career advancement. This attitude of ‘going for it’ may be amplified by career development being a fundamental contributor to quality of life and life satisfaction (Cron, 2001). Eight participants in this study shared that their pursuit of education to achieve meaningful career goals added to their life satisfaction. This value appears to provide participants with the strength and commitment to continue with the pursuit of education despite the challenges.

Implications

The results of this study show multiple factors that influence educational choices of career oriented military spouses. These results have implications for counselors, educational institutions, and education policy. A major overarching need for counselors, educators, and student services assisting military spouses appears to be education and training regarding military spouse needs, military culture, and resources available for military spouses. Participants in this current study shared a frustration when trying to secure educational assistance due to the lack of knowledge about military spouse needs. The training could provide a baseline

understanding of the military spouse and may increase empathy when helping this population.

Next, the counseling profession itself can assist military spouses in their educational pursuits. Policy wise, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) can add a requirement to its career standards to include the military affiliated clients, including spouses. This would allow the majority of the counselor population to have a general knowledge of the military students' career needs. Furthermore, counselor preparation programs creating an elective and possibly certification for counseling military students would provide more in-depth knowledge for those who want more specialized training on this population.

Additional training for counselors may also include knowing about the emotional stages of the deployment and loss experienced during relocation (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). This may aid in alleviating some of the discomforts and challenges noted by the participants such as a sense of feeling alone and being a single parent. In addition, assisting military spouses with acquiring transferable skills such as communication techniques and time management may enhance the military spouse students' abilities to deal with the constant moving pieces of military life. Finally, career counseling may assist military spouses to navigate nonlinear careers and provide guidance in seeking employment as a military spouse (Marshall, 2014). This career counseling should also address educational needs, not just employment (Vance et al., 2014). The specific goals of the military spouse should be addressed (Meadows et al., 2016). For example, several participants in this study shared that money was not their main career objective. Furthermore, more than half of the participants valued a sense of purpose in pursuing their educational and career goals.

Educational institutions can also help military spouses succeed by creating a system to

identify military spouses and offering support for academic success (Ford et al., 2009).

Furthermore, staffing military student support offices with veterans or military spouses may also increase quality of assistance, knowledge, and empathy for military spouse students (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). In addition, offering programming such as a peer support groups and mentoring may assist military spouses with connecting and supporting each other. Wang et al., (2015) found that social support aided in resilience and wellbeing in military families.

Another way to assist military spouse learners is to decrease barriers to education by implementing policies such as a flexible enrollment system, standardized procedures for military spouse education assistance in the military student service offices, and a credit and degree transferability policy (Castaneda & Harrell, 2008; Ford et al., 2009; Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). Furthermore, Van Noy et al., (2016) found that mapping out a simple educational path for students may contribute to student success. Finally, educational institutions can assist military spouses by addressing issues with childcare. Providing childcare is especially useful when military families are relocated away from friends and family. Educational institutions can provide affordable childcare or connect military spouses to affordable childcare services (Castaneda & Harrell, 2008). Offering classes at prime childcare center hours may also aid in military spouses.

Educational institutions may also assist military students beyond the school grounds. In the community, educational institutions can partner with military and civilian organizations to provide information to military spouses about available financial, educational, and support programs (Ford et al., 2009; Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013; White House, 2016).

Limitations

The research team recognized several limitations in this phenomenological study which

examined the lived experiences of career oriented military spouses pursuing education for career advancement. The limitations included researcher bias, research design, and research process.

Researcher bias. First, coming into this study, the research team discussed biases and ways to manage the bias. The primary researcher had a positive bias and discovered throughout the study how strongly she wanted to protect and support the military spouse population. Being aware of that from the beginning, the research team bracketed and frequently biases, utilized an auditor, memoed throughout the process, and remained intentionally aware of the biases. It was surprising how often positive bias appeared in the coding and analysis process, despite efforts to be open and aware. But because of this awareness and the use of a research team, positive bias was minimized.

Research design. A limitation of the research design was the use of semi structured interviews and journal entries for the primary data collection methods. Participants may have felt a need to give positive responses due to social desirability. To combat this, focus groups may have added to the depth of the experience collected. Some of the participants' educational journeys extended more than a decade. With a focus group, the conversation with other spouses may have sparked memories pertaining to education. Additionally, because of the time constraints experienced by participants, sending them the protocol ahead of time may have given them more time to prepare and reflect answers. Another method could have been to gather baseline information ahead of the interview, such as defining career goals, definition of success, and detailed education history, to maximize the interview experience. Finally, for the journal entries, the limited time the participants appeared to have to participate in the research study may explain their short journal responses. Perhaps giving a minimum writing time limit, encouraging bullet points, or creative methods of journaling (e.g. art journal, collage, lists, video or audio

recording), may have facilitated a more in-depth journal process.

Research process. There were several research process issues in this study. First, to fill gaps in literature and to address the changing demographics of the military family, this study aimed to obtain male spouses and spouses in same sex marriages (Renshaw et al., 2011). However, only women married to men participated in the study. Another concern is that all of the participants are currently attending college, with about half enrolled in a post graduate program. According to Bohonos (2014), different types of adult learners have different needs, and the needs of students in a four-year institution differ than students pursuing technical programs (Hirschy et al., 2011). Because no technical students participated in this study, their perspective was not taken into account in the military spouse student experience.

Third, mirroring the findings regarding the nature to the military lifestyle, several participants were preoccupied due to lack of childcare, parenting responsibilities, and military family obligations while being interviewed (Asbury & Martin, 2012). Three of the participants only had 45 minutes to speak to me, while other participants were only able to be interviewed with their children within ear's reach. A few participants were in the process of relocation or deployment, and one participant was in a car traveling at the time of the interview. As a result, those participants who were listening out for their children and/or operating with a strict time constraint appeared to be multitasking and may not have answered the questions as thoroughly as they could have without those constraints. This may have also affected how participants responded (e.g., not wanting to share certain information in case the child hears, giving short answers in order to shift attention to checking on child, or not having enough focus to formulate a detailed response). In the same vein, it was difficult to obtain member checking and journal entries because participants noted that they did not have time to complete the requirements in a

timely manner. Only seven of the 11 shared a journal reflection. Despite the challenges however, participants in this study noted how important it was for them to participate in this study. The participants each shared gratitude regarding the importance of this study by mentioning it at the end of the interview. Some participants even mentioned it prior to the interview beginning.

Future research

To expand on this current study, taking a longitudinal approach by collecting data from the beginning to the end of the educational journey may give more insight to the developmental/cyclical perspective of military spouses pursuing education. Collecting a more detailed educational history and information regarding the service member's military service may also aid in classifying types of military spouse students. Additionally, collecting qualitative and quantitative data measuring career and education satisfaction may be useful to understanding this population, especially their needs as students (Ford et al., 2009; Ford & Vignare, 2014; Gleiman & Swearingen, 2012; Marshall, 2014).

More research is also needed on career oriented military spouses with different cultural identities. With the increase of male spouses and spouses in same sex marriages, further investigation is needed. It would also be interesting to compare the experience and needs of students pursuing technical, associate's, bachelor's, and graduate degrees (Bohonos, 2012; Dew, 2012).

Furthermore, more than 15 additional career oriented military spouses wanted to participate in the study, but they did not meet the criteria. Instead, some of the individuals sent notes expressing appreciation for the study and a short narrative of their career and education experiences. To look at this population from a different perspective, it would also be helpful to look at all types of career oriented military spouses, including analysis of negative cases. These

cases may shed light on additional challenges career oriented military spouses face. Due to the nature of the research criteria being currently enrolled in education, by default all the participants were currently in the pursuit of their education. Military spouses who were unsuccessful in pursuing education, whether being unable to start or unable to complete their educational program, may add value to the needs of military spouse students.

In addition to looking at different types of military spouse students, more research is needed examining the emotional and educational needs of military spouses, such as dealing with loss and preparing for a career (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). Military spouses in this study expressed several discomforts, such as self-doubt, and circumstances, such as inconsistent support, that affected their emotional state and educational journey. Also, looking at the emotional needs and physical demands of relocation may be beneficial for military spouses' success in their education pursuit (Renshaw et al., 2011). Developing an emotional needs model for relocation may aid military spouses and families cope and thrive with the uprooted lifestyle. In addition to aiding counselors help this population, this research may lead to creating research-based programming to assist military spouses' educational pursuits and also influence educational and military institutional policies.

Conclusion

The career oriented military spouse pursuing education for career advancement faces complex challenges not fully addressed by extant research or by educational institutions and military programs for soldiers' family members (Ford & Vignare, 2014; Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). This study aimed to shed light on the lived experiences of career oriented military spouses pursuing education. The findings of this study show a complex relationship between internal thoughts and feelings, external circumstances, and the educational choices made. Career

development is an important factor in quality of life. With military spouses tending to sacrifice their career and educational goals for the needs of the military family, creating ways to support military spouses during their educational journey may have positive implications for the military spouse student.

Implications for practitioners and institutions, limitations of the study, and future research were also addressed. By delineating the needs of the participating military spouse students, counselors and institutions can better serve this learner population.

CHAPTER SIX**MANUSCRIPT**

Exploring the Lived Experiences of Career Oriented Military Spouses

Pursuing Education for Career Advancement

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Manuscript to be submitted to

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of career oriented military spouses pursuing education for career advancement. Phenomenological methods were utilized to gather and analyze the data gathered from 11 participants. Through semi-structured interviews and journal reflections, the research team found three superordinate themes, as well as 10 themes and 28 subthemes. Implications for counselors, counselor educators, and institutions, as well as limitations and future research were also provided.

Key Words: military spouses, adult learners, career development

Exploring the Lived Experiences of Career Oriented Military Spouses

Pursuing Education for Career Advancement

Career development is a primary factor in the wellbeing and identity of the average American (Bluvshtein, Kruzic, & Massaglia, 2015; Parker & Arthur, 2004; Samela-Aro & Weise, 2006). Planning and navigating a career path may be difficult. It takes time, effort, and commitment (Eby, 2001; Moen & Sweet, 2002). The career process is even more challenging for the trailing spouse in dual-career couples (Parker & Arthur, 2004). Specifically, for the career oriented trailing military spouse, that often means family separation and frequent relocations with short notice, which does not always give the military spouse sufficient time to plan and implement their career path, including the educational pursuits needed to accomplish career goals (Anderson et al., 2011).

Brief Summary of Relevant Literature

Career development, a lifelong process, can contribute to personal well-being and identity (Haslerig & Navarro, 2016). Additionally, many individuals join the workforce for personal and financial gain (Bohonos, 2014; Cron, 2001). Although traditional marriages used to involve a breadwinner, usually the male, and a homemaker, usually the female, it is becoming increasingly necessary economically for both members of a couple to work (Pixley, 2009). In addition, many career and job options are now requiring education where before work experience was enough (Bohonos, 2014). Furthermore, with more women joining the workforce, the legal recognition of same-sex marriage, and much of the extant career research conducted prior to the 2008 recession, a new look at dual career couples is needed (Cooke & Speirs, 2005; Meadows, Griffin, Karney, & Pollak; 2016).

While the trailing spouse is a topic of interest in civilian literature, one area of dual career

couples that has spawned limited research is the trailing military spouse (Asbury & Martin, 2012; Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013). In civilian companies, relocation is often a means to advance one's career or to keep one's job (Allen, Eby, Douthitt, & Noble, 2002). Furthermore, a successful relocation may have positive implications for the company and its employees (Blackburn, 2010). Because the trailing spouse plays a key role in a successful relocation, some companies assist the trailing spouse transition by providing services such as career counseling, job hunting services, relocation allowance, lists of services in the new location, and support groups (Larson, 2006; McNutley, 2012).

Relocation usually has immediate and stressful consequences for the trailing spouse even if the long-term outcome is positive (Whitaker, 2010). Career issues for the trailing spouse is one of the top areas of concern (Meadows et al., 2016). While some companies take into consideration the trailing spouse, others are reluctant to relocate spouses with careers and will give the opportunity to an employee who is not in a dual career couple (Allen et al., 2002). Though, in the civilian world, relocation is a choice of the employee, in the military world, relocation is the choice of the military (Cooke & Speirs, 2005).

The military relocates almost all of its employees every three to four years (Marshall, 2014). Even though relocation is a major part of the military lifestyle, literature on relocation and how it affects the family was limited. Furthermore, literature on the trailing military spouse and career and educational pursuits was also sparse. What did exist was, for the most part, conceptual articles, investigations which used non-rigorous methodology, or reports voiced by service members or employers (Cooke & Speirs, 2005; Gleiman & Swarengen, 2012). In one extant study, Meadows et al. (2016) were interested in the employment gaps between military spouses and their matched civilian spouse. They found that military spouses were at a disadvantage on

hours worked and pay compared to their matched civilian counterpart.

Although relocation is the number one cause of unemployment in military spouses, it also has implications for pursuing an education (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). The military does not typically give service members much advance notice regarding where or when they will be moving (Cooke & Speirs, 2005). Furthermore, even if they are able to tell service members in advance, orders may still change at the last minute. This makes it difficult for service spouses to plan a move, let alone apply or enroll in a training or education program (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). Some military spouses respond to this by taking online classes (Marshall, 2014). However, many spouses prefer traditional in-seat learning (Dew, 2012).

Aside from the challenges involved in pursuing education, military spouses face continuous instability due to the military lifestyle- namely deployment, relocation, and career transitions (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). Because of the changing dynamics of military life, the military spouse plays an ambiguous role in the family, often filling the gaps where needed (Asbury & Martin, 2012). This accumulated stress may affect career and educational decisions (Bohonos, 2014; Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). Though military spouses may face more stress than the civilian spouse, they also have resiliency factors such as utilizing social support and communication skills (Wang, Nyutu, Tran, & Spears, 2015). These resiliency factors may also have implications on career and educational pursuits. Because of the unique characteristics of the military spouse, this student population is important to study (Bohonos, 2014; Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012).

With the growing population of military spouse learners, a deeper investigation of the needs of this population is necessary (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). Since two million military spouses are eligible for the Post 9/11 GI Bill and about 20% of those using the benefit are

military spouses, the military spouse student population should not be ignored (Fishback, 2015). Being a unique population with specific needs, taking a closer look at career oriented military spouses pursuing an education is needed (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). This study was guided by the following research questions.

1. What are the lived experiences of career oriented military spouses pursuing education for career advancement?
2. How does the experience of relocation impact this process?

Method

Phenomenological methodology was used to gain an in-depth exploration of career oriented military spouses (Hays & Singh, 2012). In order to get a better understanding of the phenomenon, a homogeneous, purposive sample of 11 military spouses participated in a semi-structured interview and were invited to share a written response to post-interview questions (Creswell, 2007). Participants were recruited through university, college, and trade schools' military student support offices and through military spouse support groups using purposive sampling criteria (Hays & Singh, 2012).

To reduce researcher bias, a research team comprised of a counselor educator and the primary researcher coded all data and discussed biases (Hays & Singh, 2012). Member checking involved exchanging transcripts, reflective thoughts, and interpretations to make sure the participant voices shine through and researcher bias minimized (Creswell, 2007). A Ph.D. level independent auditor was also used to review all documents in the audit trail to increase the study's credibility and trustworthiness (Hays & Singh, 2012). Additionally, to increase rigor in the study, procedures to address four main aspects of trustworthiness were employed: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Hays & Singh, 2012).

All of the participants were women married to men. The ages ranged from 21-44, with the average and median age rounding up to 33. Seven of the 11 participants identified as Caucasian/White. The other participants each identified as one of each: African, Puerto Rican, Native American, and Filipino/American. Seven of the 11 participants reported to have dependent children and three of the 11 participants reported to have a prior military marriage. About half of the participants' spouses were Enlisted ($n = 5$), and the other half had spouses who were Officers ($n = 6$). Most of the spouses' military affiliation was Army ($n = 6$), followed by the Coast Guard ($n = 3$), and Navy ($n = 2$). Pseudonyms were either picked by the participant or assigned in place of the participant's given names.

All 11 participants met the criteria for being career oriented, and about a quarter ($n = 3$) reported to have prior military service. All the participants, except for one, moved at least one time in the current military marriage. The participant who reported zero moves in the current military marriage noted that in her previous military marriage, she had relocated 10 times while pursuing education. Four participants were located in the Eastern Time Zone, three in Mountain Time Zone, and two each from West Coast and Pacific Time zone. All participants were currently working on a college bachelors or graduate degree, and two of the 11 participants were working on their first degree.

Participants were interviewed individually regarding their lived experiences of being a career oriented military spouse pursuing education for career advancement using a semi structured interview protocol. Interviews lasted between 30-70 minutes. After the interview, participants were given a journal prompt to complete in private and submit via email. Prior to analysis, the research team met for training on coding and analysis procedures. The research team utilized initial line-by-line coding, known as horizontalization, which give equal weight to meaning units.

Redundant lines were discarded. Then, all interview and journal transcripts were analyzed individually and independently by the research team members. The research met for consensus coding five times before the codes were collapsed as one dataset.

Data was interpreted as a hierarchy of three levels including superordinate themes, themes, and subthemes. In order for a meaning unit to be considered a theme, it must have been exhibited in at least three participants.

Findings

The three superordinate themes *the self*, *the circumstances*, and *the choices*, 10 themes, and 28 subthemes depict internal processes, external circumstances, and life decisions made.

Superordinate Theme One: The Self

All 11 participants spoke about internal thoughts and feelings that propel them forward and hold them back as a military spouse student. These were divided into two themes: *strengths* and *discomfort*.

Strengths. All 11 participants spoke of positive personality traits and resilience they possess that help them to succeed at home and in their educational pursuits. The research team identified six subthemes under strength characteristics: *determined*; *sense of purpose*; *roll with the punches*; *strategic*; *self-confidence*; and *values learning*.

Determined. All of the participants expressed a sense of dedication and commitment to pursue their goals, regardless of the circumstances. For example, Anna recalled her determination to pursue education despite being pregnant and in the military reserves herself,

People were shocked to see that a pregnant girl was in the program because they were like, how are you going to do school, and the baby, and your reserves, and all this other stuff? But to me, I was like, I'm going to do it, whatever happens I'm going to do it.

Sense of purpose. The second subtheme, shared by eight participants, was expressed as a striving for a meaningful life and purpose driven career. Marie shared, that her purpose is “being able to use [my education] to affect other kids.” She went on to say,

My goal is to be in low income areas. That’s my passion is to be in a low-income area.

That’s why I chose to be a teacher. I grew up in a poor neighborhood.

Roll with the punches. Six participants denoted an ability to make adjustments to their life and also their career and educational plans in order to surmount challenges and obstacles to obtaining their goal. Gretchen described her process to deal with challenges and how she rolled with the punches. She shared “that ability to say okay, [my plan] is not working, so I know I want to work, I know I want to contribute to society so how can I do that?” Melissa summarized it by stating “to have the attitude that, we’ll figure it out when it hits us.”

Strategic. Five participants outlined the strategic and organizational methods that contributed to keeping their lives and their educational pursuit in order. Minnie shared, “I’m just constantly juggling and trying to figure out. You know, prioritizing what is important and what is not. What do I have today? What do I have tomorrow?”

Self-confidence. Six career oriented military spouse participants expressed confidence in their ability to be successful as a career oriented military spouse in the pursuit of their education.

Gretchen reported to gain her self-assurance from questioning herself. She stated that,

I’ve had to ask myself, “Is this worth it?” “Is this what I want to do?” and so I will say that it’s kind of forced me to ask myself that a lot and it’s reassuring to know that, yes, this is, in my opinion, worth it.

Values learning. Five participants attributed learning, whether formal or informal education, as a means for personal and professional growth. While some participants shared that

the value of education was ingrained in them from a young age, others expressed that they did not value it until they were older. Chandra shared,

I come from an educated household. Both my parents have Bachelor's degrees. It's never been an option to not go to college for us. I think that education is also just something that I want for my personal development.

Unlike Chandra, Andgirl revealed that, "at thirty-five, I decided that I really wanted to go to college. I wanted to have a career and establish myself." She further explained, "My priorities [were different when I was younger]. I really just wanted to get married and have a family. Like, that was my goal."

In addition to strengths, participants also shared internal challenges.

Discomfort. Exemplified by nine participants, the second theme that emerged highlighted the uneasy thoughts and feelings that many participants experienced as a career oriented military spouse pursuing education. The five subthemes captured include: *overwhelmed*, *frustrated*, *doubt*, *feeling alone*, and *stigmatized*.

Overwhelmed. Nine participants spoke about the stresses involved in pursuing education along with the challenges associated with being a military spouse. With everything military spouses face, Marie explains that, "the emotions are all over the place and they're always all over the place. I don't think I've ever felt really secure. I just feel unsettled. I feel unsettled."

Frustrated. The second subtheme, often expressed in conjunction with feeling overwhelmed, was feeling upset about being unable to accurately plan for education due to the instability of military life. Four of the participants explicitly expressed their version of this experience. Anna shared,

It makes me so mad. I'm definitely a planner, I'm definitely someone who wants to

analyze the situation. Somebody that wants to figure out what the game plan is, and I can't. And I like to control things, so not being able to control things and not being able to understand, that's really, really frustrating. It's scary, it's frustrating, it makes me angry.

Doubt. The third subtheme was expressed by a sense of self-doubt from six participants. Concerning balancing being a military spouse while pursuing education, Anna explained, "it's hard to just stay on one path and you get set back sometimes or you question [yourself]. What it is that you are trying to do? And can you actually do it? I'm optimistic, but I'm definitely concerned."

Stigmatized. Six participants expressed a sense of feeling ostracized by their military spouse status in professional and personal circles. Anna spoke of a time she did not get a position she applied for. She recalled, "I can only imagine that I didn't receive the position because I was a [military] spouse and they knew that I had other obligations." Gretchen shared a similar sentiment when sharing her story about making friends. She recalled her time relocating to a small community,

It was a small town and people often that were raised there stayed there, so people have their own networks of people that they grew up with and their families there. And they weren't as eager, I guess, to you know, invite you over for dinner or coffee or something. Especially if they found out that you were military and you were only there for a short amount of time.

As the participants expressed a sense of being excluded from work and social opportunities, others expressed a sense of feeling alone.

Feeling alone. Finally, seven participants expressed a sense of loneliness and isolation. Several spouses reported that they expected their spouses to be home more. Chandra shared, "I

was expecting my husband to be home a bit more. He works nights though when we moved over here.” Marie also reported that the challenges of being a military spouse are “being married to a service member who has other obligations and that he is not here most of the time.”

As military spouses deal with internal strengths and challenges, they also have to deal with external circumstances.

Superordinate Theme Two: The Circumstances

The second superordinate theme identified by the research team captured the experiences of all 11 participants discussing the aspects of being a military spouse that impacted the pursuit of education. Themes that fall under *the circumstances* included: *moving pieces*, *uprooted lifestyle*, *inconsistent support*, and *time and money drain*.

Moving pieces. The first theme exhibited the challenges of navigating life and pursuing education in the midst of the uncertainty and shifts that are part of the military culture. Eight participants reported how the inconsistent nature of military life affected their daily lives and their decisions to pursue education. Christina, a prior military service member expressed, “everything changes so quickly, you know. Not just the situation, but even like the mindset.” She furthered explained that the moving pieces were not only from the military, but also from her end, too. She shared her hesitance in accepting a program offer explaining,

When I was first offered admittance, I wasn’t sure [where we would be stationed] so I held off [my start date]. They told us a duty station late fall. And then in January, mid to end of January, they called and changed it.

Marie also shared her difficulties pursuing education with the constant military shifts. She shared that “the impact of being the spouse, the military spouse is that I don’t have a schedule. He doesn’t have a schedule.”

Uprooted lifestyle. For the second theme, 10 participants discussed their inability to establish roots when they relocated. Andgirl explained, “In my first marriage we moved a lot and so we never settled down long enough for me to you know, even get my bearing to decide what I wanted to do with the rest of my life.”

In the same vein, Christina expressed that, “[it’s] not just school, but my entire life plan depends on where we move. What am I going to do when we get there? What's available? Everything. Life, grocery shopping.” Despite their uprooted lifestyle, a common sentiment shared by participants was best summarized by Marie who stated that, “relocation for me as a spouse, my job is to take care of home.”

Due to the military lifestyle, many spouses expressed the difficulty in accessing support systems as depicted in the next theme, *inconsistent support*.

Inconsistent support. The third theme discussed by 10 participants was the differing levels of support experienced at different commands and institutions. Four subthemes under *inconsistent support* include: *financial support*; *student services*; *social support*; and *part-time single parent*.

Financial support. The first subtheme involved gathering enough financial resources to pursue education shared by seven participants. Andgirl’s experience echoed five other participants when she noted that it took her so long to go to school because “money was just always my biggest roadblock.” On the other hand, Samantha shared how the military assisted her going to school. She noted,

It’s really helped because he was able to pass his GI Bill off to me, so we don’t have to go in debt for me to go to school. If it wasn’t for the GI Bill, he and I would’ve had to look at how are we going to pay for this, especially if I’m going to take a significant pay

cut while I'm going to school.

Student services. The next type of support depicted nine participants' experiences with seeking assistance through the military student support offices run by either the military or the educational institution. A common concern was confusion regarding whether or not the military support office even serves the military spouses. In seeking assistance, Chandra discovered that, "I did reach out to the veteran's department here and they didn't have anything for military spouses." Furthermore, while working in a Military Student Service Support Office, Erin explained that military affiliated programs do not always include military spouses, expressing, "while we are gaining more in the ability to go to school and using transferred benefits, we're not necessarily gaining the same recognition as the support programs and benefits that go along with that."

In addition, even when these services are available, the support was inconsistent. What Susana discovered was that, "what you get is whatever that person who is working at the desk knows. And if they don't know about it, well then guess what? You don't know about it."

Social support. Ten participants shared their stories regarding the moral and practical support they sought from friends, family, and the community. For example, Erin shared her concerns finding a support system in her university. She stated,

This is my first experience on a big campus, and I don't really fit in with the younger crowd because I'm not young anymore and I haven't gone the traditional path.... And for me I just didn't fit in with any group.

While some shared their experiences on making friends, others shared their negative experiences with family support. Susana shared,

I think the relocation just killed our support system. At one point, we even tried to get his

sister to come and stay with us and help with our son because she was single and was just living with her parents. But it didn't work out.

In the same vein, Andgirl shared her experience with an unsupportive husband. She explained that, “when I was married to my ex-husband, it was huge. He would have just said, ‘too bad. Sorry, we are moving to Alaska and there’s no school there so whatever.’” However, she shared that her current spouse supported her educational journey. She expressed,

He’s like, ‘oh, you have to go to school and we’re going to pay for this and you’re going to do it.’ And it got me on fire again for school and back on track. Then, we started making goals together.

Part-time single parent. In addition to lack of social support, five participants shared about inconsistent support at home with regards to caring for children. Christina shared,

So, he would be home for a week, gone for a week, home for a week, gone for a week. And now, he’s gone for a month with a possible deployment in March. So, I’m a single mother... It wasn’t a big deal because it was just me. So now, this whole situation [being a new mom in a new location] is just a hundred percent different from what we’ve been used to.

Time and money drain. In the final theme, all 11 participants explained how challenges as a military spouse contributed to their elongated educational process. They invested time, effort, and money to pursue education, but faced many delays in their process which extended their education journey. Erin summarized her educational journey as, “challenging because it’s really been spread out over a matter of more than twenty years now.” Like Erin, several others named relocation as a challenge to completing educational requirements. Susana, who took more than a decade to finish her associate degree and is currently working on her bachelor’s degree,

expressed,

I took English at every college that I've attended. So, all together I've taken eight English courses, for an associate degree. You know? So, I felt like I just done that so many times, and yet years had gone by, but the degree was at the same exact level.

Based on the circumstances military spouse students face and what is going on in their inner world, military spouses make career and educational decisions.

Superordinate Theme Three: The Choices

The final superordinate theme captured the experiences of all 11 participants discussing the career, educational, and life choices military spouses made given their circumstances. Four themes that fall under *the choices* include: *career choices*, *program choices*, *self-sacrifice*, and *go for it*.

Career Choices. The first theme denoted by all 11 participants identified goals and aims regarding their career aspirations that influence their career choice. There were five subthemes under *career choices*: *choosing career over job*; *credibility*; *requirements*; *family/work balance*; and *financial security*.

Choosing career over job. The first subtheme, shared by five participants, distinguished between a goal of pursuing a fulfilling career over a job that they are not passionate about. Chandra mentioned that although her current work experience is in the healthcare service industry, she did not count it as a career because of the lack of an education requirement. She shared, “right now, I wouldn’t say that I have a career. I’m speaking as a radiology secretary. I want an education so that I can have that ideal career [of being a healthcare administrator].”

Credibility. Four participants spoke to the added value and marketability education gives them as a professional. Christina believed that seeking a higher degree may offset the stigma that

comes with being a military spouse. She explained,

By continuing my education, it helps make me look a little bit more marketable. So that when people look and say, “oh, she was only working there for six months” and then there's a gap as well, at least I was doing something [during the gap].

Requirements. While some participants spoke to the added value of education, seven participants expressed that a significant motivation was that a degree was a professional requirement for their career. Although most of the career oriented military spouses expressed a positive feeling towards pursuing education for career advancement, Melissa had more negative feelings towards education. She stated that, “I’m not a huge fan of the requirement. I’m just getting through it because it’s required.”

Family/work balance. Another subtheme five participants noted was a desire for a balance between personal, family, and career life. Considering the needs of the military lifestyle, Chandra shared, “I have had to find a healthy work/school balance which I am still struggling with and that’s not going to be a problem that [goes away].”

Financial security. The final subtheme focuses on financial concerns. Because of the lack of job security for military service members, seven participants expressed a drive to pursue education to financially support their family. Susana recounted the time when her husband was taken out of active duty before he was reinstated,

[Part of it was] actual financial need. What do we do now? And I mean yeah, he still had a job, he went directly in active reserve, so he was technically still in the military at the time, but it changed my focus, because now it became so real that one day we might not have that [military job]. So that changed a lot and that made my drive stronger.

Program choices. The second theme found in *the choices* was discussed by ten participants who

weighed different options when deciding about their education. Four subthemes include: *compatibility, career positioning, limited choices, and choosing online education.*

Compatibility. Nine participants expressed the desire for their education to be flexible to withstand obstacles of military life such as relocation, isolated geographic location, and family obligations. Christina shared that it was important to find “a program that works with our lifestyle. You know, being a military family.” In addition to thinking about mode of education, Melissa shared that she also chose her degree with the military in mind. She stated, “nursing works out really well with the military lifestyle because you can do it anywhere.”

Career positioning. Five of the participants expressed a focus on career aspirations when choosing an educational program. Gretchen spoke to the professional value that the program offered. She explained, “I needed it to be accredited. I didn't want to spend and invest our time and our resources into a program that wasn't going to be taken seriously in the professional world.”

Limited choices. When considering a program, four of the participants spoke of the limited number of educational programs and schools available from which to choose. Not only did participants have to consider what type of educational program to pursue, participants also had the disadvantage of having a limited selection of schools from which to choose. Often, this was due to the remote location of military bases. Wanting an in-person program, Chandra explained that the program she enrolled in was “the only on-campus option that I had. They have a community college here, but I already have my two-year degree and my college is the only four-year college within a hundred miles of where we are stationed.”

Choosing online education. The final subtheme specifically addressed the limitations of choosing online education. Five participants expressed their experiences of the drawbacks

choosing of this type of learning. Erin revealed her struggles with some specific courses she had taken online. She said,

I tried to take statistics online because my undergrad program was completely online.

Statistics online for me was impossible. I attempted it online three or four times and I just couldn't do it. So, I had to get special permission to go to a local community college just to complete those courses that I really needed to do face-to-face. I really was burnt out on the online experience.

In addition to limited program choices, some military spouses discussed putting others before themselves.

Self-sacrifice. In the fourth theme, seven participants acknowledged the choice to put others' needs above their own. For some participants, this sentiment also had a hint of feeling defeated, or succumbing to having to prioritize others, as if it was a forced choice. Four subthemes for *self-sacrifice* include: *military demands*, *family demands*, *spouse needs*, and *trade-off*.

Military demands. Four participants specifically acknowledged that they prioritize the military's needs above their own. Susana shared, "That's one of the biggest things, just not being able to count on him because I know emotionally he supports me, but physically, his job trumps my education, his job trumps everything that I've got going on."

Family demands. In addition to choosing to put the military as a priority, five participants shared specifically how the military shapes the family's needs with regards to caring for children. Marie shared her experience as a military spouse balancing her spouse's career, going to school, and raising her children. She shared,

I have to sacrifice and put them to sleep at seven. My daughter, she tries to go to sleep

later and then I'm like, I'm reading my kids my books. Like, I'm going to read you a bedtime story and it's going to be about science education.

She further explained, "I'm stuck at home taking care of the kids and the whole house while he is gone and I'm still trying to do school full-time."

Spouse needs. Similar to putting the needs of the military and family above their own, four participants also shared prioritizing the needs of the spouse over their own. Anna explained that "we [military spouses] tend to want to put our spouses' needs first because [he's in] the military, which I think is horrible". She elaborated that "when you're taking care of the service member or the house or the children, or the things or whatever, then you're not taking care of school or yourself." Christina also revealed a similar sentiment. She shared that, "everything is revolved around his career. When I work, when I go to school. Even planning our baby. It was around his career."

Trade-off. The final subtheme in *self-sacrifice*, was changing their career aspiration in order to fit into the military lifestyle. Six participants spoke of the influence of the military lifestyle on their career goals. Chandra explained,

I started off wanting to major in chemistry and organic chemistry. And then I got married to a soldier. Being a chemistry major and going for a Ph.D. in chemistry would have been extremely difficult to almost nearly impossible when moving around so much and with intense on campus requirements for labs. Not to mention the actual intensity of the workload would have been, perhaps, a little overwhelming if I had to be moving around with it. So, I changed my major and I compromised to go into Healthcare Administration, which I really like the healthcare field.

Even with having to prioritize others' needs before the self, in reflecting upon the interview, a

common sentiment shared among the participants was the choice to pursue education regardless of the challenges.

Go for it. The final theme expressed by seven participants captured the sense of pride in their decision to pursue education and a desire to encourage others to pursue education despite the challenges. Minnie shared,

Go for it! I think it's really easy to put your life on the backburner as a military spouse when the military so overwhelmingly dictates your life. Where you live, for how long, who your friends are, what your job is. Take control of your life, your career, and your passions. Given educational opportunities that open doors to new careers where you find meaning and purpose in life, it's truly worth the sacrifices.

Military spouses expressed a desire to encourage other spouses to pursue their career passions despite the challenges and obstacles.

Discussion of Findings

Current civilian, career, and military spouse literature tends to highlight only one or two aspects of the military spouse experience at a time (e.g. stress and pregnancy during deployment) (deBurgh et al., 2011). However, this study tried to view military spouses in a more holistic fashion, considering their personal, military, family, and career life. The complex relationships of the superordinate themes, as explained below, are an attempt to depict the multifaceted nature of the role of military spouse.

The Circumstances

There are many circumstances surrounding the military spouse that influence the inner and educational choices. Namely, the moving pieces of military life, the uprooted lifestyle due to relocation, inconsistent support in several aspects of life, and the time and money drain from the

elongated educational journey are external circumstances that may add to the challenges of military spouse students.

Moving Pieces. In congruence with existing literature, the most frequently mentioned aspects of military life that affected educational choices in this current study were inconsistent and unexpected military schedules, deployment, and relocation (Gleiman & Swearingen, 2012). Furthermore, participants shared that the military lifestyle limited their ability to pursue education (Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013) because they sacrificed or changed their educational goals to fit the demands of the military and their family. This experience is in line with civilian literature, suggesting that the trailing spouse is at risk for unemployment, loss of identity, financial stress, and hopelessness (Bluvshstein et al., 2015). However due to the more frequent changes associated with the military lifestyle, this sense of loss does not appear to be adequately addressed by existing civilian literature (Clever & Segal, 2013).

Uprooted Lifestyle. One key difference between this study's conclusions and those in extant literature on civilian and military relocation was the participants' experience of their life being uprooted. Where current literature emphasizes the challenges of relocation on career development (Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013), this study found that relocation affected more than just the participants' careers. It also involved the physical, logistical, and emotional stress of moving.

Ten participants in this study spoke of different aspects of the uprooted lifestyle such as the logistics of moving, keeping a sense of normalcy for the family, exploring and adapting to the new location, and making friends and integrating into the community. Additionally, the military spouse students shared a separate set of tasks for their educational needs such as setting aside education material needed and setting time aside to complete assignments. These tasks

addressed by the participants in this study were in addition to the feelings of discomfort, loss, and instability accompanied by the uprooted lifestyle.

Few studies have directly examined the effects of moving on the trailing spouse (Cook & Speirs, 2005). However, with the frequency of relocations military families experience, the uprooted lifestyle appears to be a significant point to consider.

Inconsistent support. In this study, participants shared experiences with different types and levels of support. For participants in this study, social support from peers, family, and spouse was an important factor for their educational success. However, they also shared that the support they received was inconsistent. For example, more than half of the participants shared that they had difficulty in finding other career oriented military spouses even though almost 90% of military spouses are career oriented (Defense Manpower Data Center Survey, 2006).

Both career and military literature confirmed the importance of social support for career success and resilience (Asbury & Martin, 2012; Gleiman & Swearingen, 2012; Wang et al., 2015). Inconsistent social support oftentimes was associated with military spouses delaying their pursuit of education. This delay contributed to an elongated educational journey which also often featured additional resources being tapped.

Time and money drain. Participants in this current study shared their stories about taking additional time and money to pursue education. They also reported that many times they had to take a break from school to take care of the military family demands. This experience paralleled literature on employment and relocation for the military spouse (Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013; McBride & Cleymans, 2014). In investigating the economic conditions of the military spouse, Hosek and Wadsworth (2013) found that when compared to civilian spouses, military spouses were less likely to work, more likely to be unemployed, and worked fewer hours a week

than they desired. Though this study documented many challenges presented by military spouse students' circumstances, the impact of these factors may have been influenced by each participant's internal strengths and also areas of discomfort (Asbury & Martin, 2012).

The Self

Participants shared about inner forces, strengths and discomforts, that push and pull spouses towards or away from pursuing education. Similar to existing literature, because of the circumstances, participants shared feeling overwhelmed, frustrated, stigmatized, and alone. For example, military spouses in this current study described feeling alone which included being away from family and friends, not have other career oriented military spouses to model, and feeling distant from spouse even when they were 'home' due to work schedule and job demands. However, when looking at military marriages and deployments, Aducci et al. (2011) described feeling alone more narrowly, specifically as having to make important household decisions without input from the spouse and/or feeling left out because of the strong bonds formed amongst the military comrades.

Another discomfort participants in this study expressed was self-doubt and frustration. This appeared to be associated with the instability of the military lifestyle, giving up preferred career and educational choices in order to fit the needs of the military family, choosing from limited educational options, and the elongated educational process. Similarly, Walck and Hensby (2003) found that the complications of pursuing education correlated to self-doubt in college student's degree choices. Furthermore, doubt and frustration may be further exacerbated by insufficient support and stigmatization (Bohonos, 2014).

Despite the challenges, participants shared a number of strengths, such as being strong willed, flexible, and strategic. Previous literature on military spouses also focused on strengths,

(e.g., Aducci et al., 2011). Looking at the qualities of successful military spouse experiences during deployment, Aducci et al. (2011) found that some military wives not only survived, they thrived. This may be explained by military wives finding inner strength and exercising autonomy by taking care of the home and family while the service member was away at service. Perhaps this coincides with the results of this current study, that learning how to navigate the military lifestyle and finding solutions to be able to pursue education reinforced strengths in order to meet the challenges (Houston et al., 2013).

Despite the prevalence of challenging circumstances, the participants in this current study appear determined to work towards a meaningful goal. This determination to pursue education despite the circumstances was captured in the third superordinate theme, the choices.

The Choices

Career and program choices. In accordance with Pixley's (2009) recommendation for self-definition of a career, each participant in this study shared that their personal career definitions, such as helping others or economic stability. However, even though self-definition of career is important, many career support programs are typically designed to assist young military spouses seek employment and not necessarily to assist military spouses meet their personal career goal (Meadows et al., 2016).

A possible solution to relocation and military lifestyle issues was to promote online education for military spouse students (McArthur, 2016). However, participants in this study shared that online education may not always be the answer because they may have difficulties with the format or prefer the classroom environment. Participants also noted that not all online educational programs are the same. For example, some participants shared that they had little interaction with their professor, while others shared that they had little interaction with their

peers. Though the mode of instruction were both online, the two methods of teaching fit different learning styles and needs. So, the blanket recommendation for military spouses to seek an online education program may not be beneficial without looking at the specific learning modality of the coursework. But even if participants opted to take online education to compensate for military lifestyle, many career opportunities may not be as mobile.

Self-Sacrifice. Prioritizing the military, the spouse, and the family as well as compromising on desired career goals was a choice about half of the participants made. This not only added to how much time and money participants used on their education, but also added to their discomfort. Participants shared that a common reason for putting the family first and pausing educational pursuits was due to inadequate childcare. Furthermore, six participants in this current study shared that they changed their career plans to put the needs of the military, the spouse, and the family above their own. This appeared to be a coping method to deal with family demands. However, self-sacrifice without adequate support may have negative psychological effects such as isolation, resentment, depression, low self-esteem, and loss of identity (Eby, 2001; McNutly, 2012). Furthermore, changing career plans may add to loss and discomfort (Cole, 2011).

Go for it. Despite the challenging circumstances and negative thoughts and feelings, seven of the participants still recommended pursuing education for career advancement. This attitude of ‘going for it’ may be amplified by career development being a fundamental contributor to quality of life and life satisfaction (Cron, 2001). In addition to the seven participants who encouraged other military spouses to pursue education in their journal entries, eight participants shared in their interview that their pursuit of education to achieve meaningful career goals added to their life satisfaction. This value appears to provide participants with the

strength and commitment to continue with the pursuit of education despite the challenges.

Implications

A major overarching need for counselors, educators, and student services assisting military spouses appears to be education and training regarding military spouse needs, military culture, and resources available for military spouses. Furthermore, the counseling profession itself can assist military spouses by adding a requirement to learn about the military family and the military spouse. Creating elective coursework and/or a certification for counseling military students would provide more in-depth knowledge for those who want more specialized training on this population. Additional training for counselors may also cover loss experienced during relocation, as well as enhancing client communication skills and time management with the hopes of improving military spouse students' ability to deal with the constant moving pieces of military life (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). Finally, career counseling may assist military spouses navigate nonlinear careers and provide guidance in seeking employment as a military spouse (Marshall, 2014).

Educational institutions can also help military spouses succeed by creating a system to identify military spouses and offering support for academic success (Ford et al., 2009). Furthermore, staffing military student support offices with veterans or military spouses may also increase quality of assistance, knowledge, and empathy for military spouse students (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). Additionally, offering programming such as a peer support groups and mentoring may assist military spouses with connecting and supporting each other. Wang et al., (2015) found that social support aided in resilience and wellbeing in military families.

Another way for educational institutions to assist military spouse learners is to decrease barriers to education by implementing policies such as a flexible enrollment system, standardized

procedures for military spouse education assistance in the military student service offices, and a credit and degree transferability policy (Castaneda & Harrell, 2008; Ford et al., 2009; Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). Finally, educational institutions can assist military spouses by addressing childcare needs.

Educational institutions may also assist military students beyond the school grounds. In the community, educational institutions can partner with military and civilian organizations to provide information to military spouses about which financial, educational, and support programs are available (Ford et al., 2009; Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013; White House, 2016).

Limitations

First, researcher bias was an area of concern that received attention. Extra precautions were taken to minimize bias such as utilizing a research team, an external auditor, and memoing throughout the process. Next, participants may have felt a need to give answers influenced by social desirability. In addition, there may not be enough time to prepare or recall the information to answer the questions thoroughly. Sending them the protocol ahead of time may have given them more time to prepare and reflect answers.

Finally, there were a few limitations in the research process. First, the sample only captured women married to men who were currently in a college or university. That said, the sample was representative of the gender, sexual orientation, or educational orientation of the general military spouse population. Second, mirroring the findings regarding the nature to the military lifestyle, several participants were preoccupied due to lack of childcare, parenting responsibilities, and military family obligations while being interviewed (Asbury & Martin, 2012). This may have also affected how participants responded (e.g., not wanting to share certain information in case the child hears, giving short answers in order to shift attention to checking on

child, or not having enough focus to formulate a detailed response). In the same vein, it was difficult to obtain member checking and only seven journal entries were submitted because participants noted that they did not have time to complete the requirements in a timely manner.

Future research

Taking a longitudinal approach by collecting data from the beginning to the end of the educational journey may give more insight into the perspective of military spouses pursuing education. Additionally, collecting qualitative and quantitative data measuring career and education satisfaction may be useful for understanding this population, especially their needs as students (Ford et al., 2009; Ford & Vignare, 2014; Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012; Marshall, 2014). More research is also needed on career oriented military spouses with different cultural identities and educational goals.

In addition to looking at different types of military spouse students, more research is needed examining the emotional and educational needs of military spouses, such as dealing with loss and navigating a career (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). Also, looking at the demands for a successful relocation may be beneficial in aiding the military spouses' education pursuit (Renshaw et al., 2011). It is also hoped that this research may lead to creating research-based programming to assist military spouses' educational pursuits and also to influencing educational and military institution policy attending to this population.

Conclusion

The career oriented military spouse pursuing education for career advancement faces complex challenges not fully addressed by extant research or by educational institutions and military programs for soldiers' family members (Ford & Vignare, 2014; Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). The findings of this study show a complex relationship between internal thoughts and

feelings, external circumstances, and the educational choices made. Career development is an important factor in quality of life. With military spouses tending to sacrifice their career and educational goals for the needs of the military family, creating ways to support military spouses during their educational journey may have positive implications for the military spouse student.

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APPENDIX A

Research Team Invitation Letter

Dear Counselor Education Doctoral Students:

My name is Melody Agbisit and I am a doctoral candidate in the Counselor Education and Supervision program at Old Dominion University. I have been studying military spouses for the past 15 years, primarily focusing on military marriages and marital satisfaction. More recently my attention has been on the military spouse and career development.

For my dissertation, I will be exploring the lived experiences of career oriented military spouses pursuing education for career advancement. There has been little research on how the military lifestyle, namely relocation, affects this population pursuing education. I hope that this study will contribute to the understanding of the military spouse experience to better inform clinical practice and institutional policies. The phenomenological study will involve about 10 participants each being given an interview lasting about 30-60 minutes and a follow up journal entry. Research team members will assist in the data analysis process.

If you wish to be on the research team or have any questions, please contact me at magbi001@odu.edu with the subject line: Dissertation Research Team

Thank you,

Melody Agbisit, MA, NCC, ACS
Doctoral Candidate
Old Dominion University
Magbi001@odu.edu

APPENDIX B
Research Team Descriptive Data Sheet

Name: _____

Email: _____

Gender: _____ **Age:** _____ **Ethnicity:** _____

Start date of Counselor Education Doctorate Program: _____

Doctoral Level Qualitative Research Classes Taken: _____

Please briefly provide your thoughts, knowledge, and expertise on the following:

“career orientation” _____

“military lifestyle” _____

APPENDIX C

Introduction Letter to Participants

Dear Military Spouses,

My name is Melody Agbisit and I am a doctoral candidate in the Counselor Education and Supervision program at Old Dominion University. I am writing to request your participation in my dissertation research study. I will be exploring the lived experiences of career oriented military spouses pursuing education for career advancement. There has been little research on how the military lifestyle, and especially relocation, affects military spouses pursuing education. I hope that this study will contribute to the understanding of the military spouse experience to better inform clinical practice and institutional policy. I appreciate your consideration in participating in my study.

For the purposes of this study, in order to be considered a participant, you must meet the following criteria:

- Currently married to an active duty military service member;
- Value personal career pursuits as evident by time and emotional commitment;
- Experienced at least one relocation as a military spouse; and
- Are admitted, enrolled, or have recently graduated within the last 12 months from an educational program or specialized training program specifically for career advancement

Participants will be interviewed in person or via secure distance technology. If you agree to participate in this study, the time commitment required will be approximately 30-60 minutes plus one feedback journal entry that can be completed in the comfort of your own home. The confidential interviews will be conducted at a location and time of your choosing.

If meet the criteria stated above, have any questions, and/or are interested to take part in this study, please email me magbi001@odu.edu with the subject line, MILITARY SPOUSE PARTICIPANT and I will contact you to schedule your interview or answer your questions pertaining to the study.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Melody Agbisit, MA, NCC, ACS
Doctoral Candidate
Old Dominion University
Magbi001@odu.edu

Tim Grothaus, Ph.D., NCC, NCSC, ACS- Dissertation Committee Chair
Associate Professor and Department Chair, Counseling and Human Services
Old Dominion University Education Building II, Room 2101
Norfolk, VA 23529
(757) 683-3007
tgrothau@odu.edu

APPENDIX D
Informed Consent
INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT
OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY

PROJECT TITLE: Exploring the Lived Experiences of Career Oriented Military Spouses Pursuing an Education for Career Advancement

INTRODUCTION

The purposes of this form are to give you information that may affect your decision whether to say YES or NO to participation in this research, and to record the consent of those who say YES. The study aims to explore the lived experiences of career oriented military spouses pursuing education for career advancement and will be conducted in a private office or via secure distance technology.

RESEARCHERS

My name is Melody Agbisit, M.A. (PI) and I am currently pursuing my doctoral degree at Old Dominion University. I am the primary investigator in this study. This study will be supervised by Dr. Tim Grothaus, Ph.D., NCC, NCSC, ACS (RPI), a faculty member in the Department of Counseling and Human Services.

DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH STUDY

Several studies have been conducted looking into the career trajectories for trailing spouses in dual career couples. Relocation has been a notable barrier for securing employment and pursuing education. However, there are limited empirical studies on military spouses pursuing education.

If you decide to participate, then you will join a study involving research to explore the lived experiences of career oriented military spouses pursuing education for career advancement. If you agree, you will participate in one interview. The interview will be conducted face-to-face or via secure distance technology. The initial interview will last approximately 30-60 minutes in length. All recordings will be destroyed five years after completion of this study.

RISKS AND BENEFITS

RISKS: Due to the nature of this study, there is little identifiable risk to participants. However, some questions concerning your lived experiences pursuing education may provoke memories or emotions that may cause discomfort. The researcher tried to reduce these risks by using clinical skills during the interview process. And, as with any research, there is some possibility that you may be subject to risks that have not yet been identified.

BENEFITS: The main benefit to you for participating in this study is that the results of this study could be used to increase the understanding of military spouse learners and inform clinical practice and institutional policies. Others may benefit by sharing their story out loud to a third party.

COSTS AND PAYMENTS

The researchers are unable to give you any payment for participating in this study.

NEW INFORMATION

If the researchers find new information during this study that would reasonably change your decision about participating, then they will give it to you.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The researcher will take rigorous steps to keep private information, such as the information demographic sheet and verbatim transcripts, confidential. The researcher will remove identifiers from the information, secure recordings, store information in a locked filing cabinet prior to its processing. Either the primary researcher or a qualified HIPPA compliant transcriber will transcribe all recordings on a secure server. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, and publications but the researcher will not identify you. Of course, your records may be subpoenaed by court order or inspected by government bodies

with oversight authority.

WITHDRAWAL PRIVILEGE

It is OK for you to say NO. Even if you say YES now, you are free to say NO later, and walk away or withdraw from the study -- at any time. Your decision will not affect your relationship with Old Dominion University, or otherwise cause a loss of benefits to which you might otherwise be entitled.

VOLUNTARY CONSENT

By signing this form, you are saying several things. You are saying that you have read this form or have had it read to you, that you are satisfied that you understand this form, the research study, and its risks and benefits. The researchers should have answered any questions you may have had about the research. If you have any questions later on, then the researchers should be able to answer them:

Melody Agbisit
 Doctoral Candidate
 Counseling and Human Services Department
 Old Dominion University
 Education Building, Room 2101
 Norfolk, VA 23529, (757) 332-2122, magbi001@odu.edu

Tim Grothaus, Ph.D., NCC, NCSC, ACS
 Associate Professor, Department Chair
 Counseling and Human Services Department
 Old Dominion University
 Education Building, Room 2101
 Norfolk, VA 23529, (757) 683-3007, tgrothau@odu.edu

If at any time you feel pressured to participate, or if you have any questions about your rights or this form, then you should call Dr. Tancy Vandecar-Burdin, the current IRB chair, at 757-683-3802, or the Old Dominion University Office of Research, at 757-683-3460.

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL:

This study has been deemed exempt from IRB review by the Human Subjects Review Committee of the Darden College of Education. Approval #???

And importantly, by signing below, you are telling the researcher YES, that you agree to participate in this study. The researcher should give you a copy of this form for your records.

Subject's Printed Name & Signature	Date
---	-------------

INVESTIGATOR'S STATEMENT

I certify that I have explained to this subject the nature and purpose of this research, including benefits, risks, costs, and any experimental procedures. I have described the rights and protections afforded to human subjects and have done nothing to pressure, coerce, or falsely entice this subject into participating. I am aware of my obligations under state and federal laws and promise compliance. I have answered the subject's questions and have encouraged him/her to ask additional questions at any time during the course of this study. I have witnessed the above signature(s) on this consent form.

Investigator's Printed Name & Signature	Date
--	-------------

APPENDIX E

Information Sheet

Please do not write your name on this form. This form will be stored separately from any other information you complete during this study and will not be linked to your participation in this study. The information will allow us to provide a description of the participants of this study.

For the following items, please fill in the blank as appropriate or in multiple choice answers, please choose the best answer.

Gender:___ **Age:**___ **Ethnicity:**_____ **Number of dependent children:** ___

Marital Status: Married____ Married but separated____

Number of years in this military marriage: _____

Have you been in a previous marriage to an active duty military service member:

Yes No

Military Status of Service Member:

Active Duty: Yes No **Years of Service:** _____

Rank: Officer Enlisted **MOS:** _____

Gender: _____

Affiliation (e.g. Army, Navy, Air Force): _____

Do you have prior active duty military service? If so, which branch and for how long?

Career Orientation of self:

Do you dedicate time to planning, pursuing, and evaluating career goals?:	Yes	No
Are you emotionally invested in the success of your career?:	Yes	No

Family Economic Orientation: Working Class Middle Class

Upper Middle Class Upper Class

Relocation during current military marriage:

How many times have you been relocated? _____

What is your current duty station? _____

In the box provided below, please indicate all of your experiences in college, technical, trade school, or specialized education program. (Use back if needed)

Education: Program and School (Please note if it was traditional [T], online [O], hybrid [H], or other)	Dates attended	Duty Station Base -or- City, State -or- Country	Education Status (Include Dates)			Importance of pursuing education (1 low-10 high)
			Accepted	Enrolled	Graduated	
School: Program/Degree: Learning modality:						
School: Program/Degree: Learning modality:						
School: Program/Degree: Learning modality:						
School: Program/Degree: Learning modality:						

Comments:

Pseudonym: _____

APPENDIX F

Interview Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study on military spouses. I am interested in learning more about your experiences as a career oriented military spouse who has been relocated and is pursuing education to advance your career. As I stated in the informed consent, your participation is voluntary and you can choose to share as much or as little information as you'd like. Feel free to ask any clarifying questions, share thoughts that come up, or comment throughout the interview.

1. What is your vision of a successful career for yourself?
2. How, if at all, has this vision changed over the years? Can you describe what led to the change in career vision for yourself?
3. How, if at all, has being the spouse of an active duty military member influenced or impacted your pursuit of your career?
4. Specifically, what impact, if any, has relocation had on your pursuit of your career?
5. What role, if any, has education played in your career?
6. What factors were most important to you in deciding to pursue education?
7. Which traits or characteristics, if any, do you have that help you be successful in your education?
8. What, if anything, would you like to change about your educational experience?
9. What impact, if any, has relocation had on your pursuit of education?
10. Can you please describe the challenges you've experienced in pursuing your education? How have you dealt with these challenges?
11. As a military spouse, what, if any, surprises did you encounter while pursuing education?
12. Is there anything that I didn't ask about that you feel is important to mention about your experience as a career oriented military spouses pursuing education for career advancement?

APPENDIX G

Journal Reflection Prompt

Dear (participant's name),

Thank you for participating in the research study: Exploring the lived experiences of career oriented military spouses pursuing education. Attached is a copy of the verbatim of the interview. Please review the verbatim for accuracy and reflection. You may add notes to the document concerning the following:

- Corrections
- Explanations and expansion of responses
- Changes to thoughts and opinions
- General thoughts or feelings pertaining to the study
- Any notes or comments you feel would be beneficial to add to the study

Please mark all notes using a dark color other than black. Alternatively, you may add comment boxes via the review tab (e.g., track changes) in Microsoft Word.

Additionally, please take the time within the next three days of receipt to answer the following three questions. You may use an electronic format or write out a journal entry and scan it to me. There is no required length, however, please respond to all three questions:

- 1. Thinking about your journey as a career oriented military spouse pursuing education, what is something that you've learned during this journey?*
- 2. What would make your experience more meaningful or helpful?*
- 3. If you could give advice to other career oriented military spouses, what would it be?*

Please email your completed prompt, and any questions or concerns, to magbi001@odu.edu.

Thank you again, so much, for your participation in this study. Good luck to you and your future career and educational pursuits!

Respectfully Yours,

Melody Agbisit, MA, NCC, ACS- Doctoral Candidate
Old Dominion University
Magbi001@odu.edu

Tim Grothaus, Ph.D., NCC, NCSC, ACS- Dissertation Committee Chair
Associate Professor and Department Chair, Counseling and Human Services
tgrothau@odu.edu

APPENDIX H
Transcriber Confidentiality Agreement

I, _____ transcriptionist, agree to maintain full confidentiality in regards to any and all audiotapes and documentations received from Melody Agbisit related to her research study on the researcher study titled Exploring the Lived Experiences of Career Oriented Military Spouses Pursuing Education for Career Advancement. Furthermore, I agree:

1. To hold in strictest confidence the identification of any individual that may be inadvertently revealed during the transcription of audio-taped interviews, or in any associated documents.
2. To not make copies of any audiotapes or computerized titles of the transcribed interviews texts, unless specifically requested to do so by the researcher, Melody Agbisit.
3. To store all study-related audiotapes and materials in a safe, secure location as long as they are in my possession.
4. To return all audiotapes and study-related materials to Melody Agbisit in a complete and timely manner.
5. To delete all electronic files containing study-related documents from my computer hard drive and any back-up devices.

I am aware that I can be held legally responsible for any breach of this confidentiality agreement, and for any harm incurred by individuals if I disclose identifiable information contained in the audiotapes and/or files to which I will have access.

Transcriber's name (printed) _____

Transcriber's signature _____

Date _____

VITA

Melody D. Agbisit obtained her Bachelor's of Science degree in Psychology and Human Services from Old Dominion University in 2006 and her Master's of Arts in Community Counseling from Regent University in 2009. She is a National Certified Counselor and an Approved Clinical Supervisor.

Melody has 20 years of experience in the human services field including clinical, administrative, research, teaching, supervisory, and leadership roles. Her professional and research interests include: career development, cultural issues, spirituality, leadership, and expressive and creative techniques in counseling. While at ODU, she has presented locally, nationally, and internationally on topics such as military deployment, military marriages, spirituality in counseling, creativity in counseling and supervision, and leadership.

During her dissertation, Melody accepted an international leadership fellowship with the Asia Pacific Leadership Program at the East West Center in Hawaii. As part of the fellowship, she traveled around Asia giving trainings on positive thinking and self-awareness to leaders of all ages. After the completion of her Ph.D., Melody hopes to continue to pursue giving trainings and workshops on mental wellness around the world. Her passion is in making mental wellness more accessible in work and school settings.