A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ON MILITARY SPOUSES WHO ACADEMICALLY

PERSIST TO GRADUATION

by

Lasette Doherty

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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APPROVED BY:

David Vacchi, Ph.D., Committee Chair

Floralba Arbelo Marrero, Ed.D., Committee Member

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenology was to understand the supportive experiences of military spouse students who academically persist to graduation. The theory guiding this study was Bean and Metzner's non-traditional undergraduate student attrition model. Drawing from House's social support definition that defines different types of support, this study's central research question asked what role support played in the academic persistence of undergraduate military spouses. Sub-questions asked how emotional and instrumental support affected academic persistence with military spouse students. How emotional and instrumental support affected academic persistence during military separations was also asked. Eleven current and past military spouse students participated in this study. All participants completed an interview, while most participants participated in focus groups and a letter-writing activity. The data collected was analyzed using Moustakas' modified van Kaam method. The study found that emotional and instrumental support aided academic persistence when military spouse students were aware of and participated in military-provided services and when military units contacted and provided support during military separations or deployments. A sense of community was a welcomed type of support but was lacking with most participants. Finally, most of the participant's extended family was supportive during military separations and significantly influenced the military spouse student's academic persistence. The knowledge gained from participants' experiences can encourage the creation of supportive services that cater to this population's unique needs and challenges and positively affect future academic persistence in higher education.

Keywords: military spouse, social support, academic persistence

Copyright Page

Dedication

I dedicate my dissertation to military spouses who often take on several different roles to ensure their family is continuously supported despite the unique demands the military produces.

Acknowledgments

Many people have graciously supported me throughout my dissertation journey. I want to thank my educational dream team: Dr. David Vacchi, Dr. Floralba Arbelo Marrero, and Dr. Estrada. First and foremost, without Dr. Vacchi's guidance, mentorship, patience, honesty, and encouragement, I would not have been able to complete this tremendous task. The wisdom and care he provides to his dissertation students are a testament to the kind of leader, instructor, and human he is. Dr. Arbelo's timely responses, supportive suggestions, and interest in this topic encouraged me to complete this journey. Dr. Estrada's check-ins kept me accountable, while his encouragement kept me motivated. I thank each of you for your time, wisdom, and support.

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List of Abbreviations

United States Department of Defense (DoD)

My Career Advancement Account (MYCAA)

National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM)

U.S. Department of Defense (DoD)

Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH)

Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19)

Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP)

Canadian Armed Forces (CAF)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states basic education is a human right (Gilchrist, 2018). Post-secondary education, however, is not a right, yet higher education has been shown to create personal, social, and economic benefits for students and society overall (Chen, 2017; Gross, 2019; Heckman et al., 2018; Heller, 2011; Johnson et al., 2020; Keller, 2021; McMahon, 2009; Torpey, 2018). Academically persisting to graduation in higher education is difficult for some populations (Li & Carroll, 2020). Research has shown the military spouse is a population that wants to enroll in post-secondary education and graduate, thereby reaping the benefits higher education produces (Dorvil, 2017). The problem, however, is the unique challenges the military lifestyle creates for the military spouse often prevents enrollment and degree attainment (Dorvil, 2017). Studies have shown military spouses are faced with stress from deployments (Padden et al., 2011), feelings of isolation (Wadsworth & Southwell, 2011), and stress due to childcare issues (Owen & Combs, 2017), among other challenges that differ from civilian spouses. By acknowledging and addressing the needs of the military spouse population through designing and delivering specific programs that aid in academic persistence, higher education institutions can increase graduation statistics and potentially increase additional future revenue from alumni. This study sought to understand the supportive experiences of the military spouse student. The supportive experiences identified the types of support military and higher education institutions could provide that would enable academic persistence to graduation. This chapter addresses the military spouse's background through historical, social, and theoretical contexts. The background section led to defining the study's problem, which is captured in the problem statement section. The purpose and

significance of the research is then discussed, uncovering the research questions designed to understand the experiences of military spouse students and the role different types of support play in their academic persistence.

Background

According to U.S. Department of Defense (DoD, 2016) statistics, there were approximately 624,000 active-duty military spouses in the United States Armed Forces in 2016. Among the 45,077 responders to a 2017 survey of active-duty spouses, close to one-fourth replied that they would like to pursue postsecondary education but could not because of military family obligations (Dorvil, 2017). Military spouses and higher education institutions could benefit if those who desired an education could enroll and persist to graduation.

The military lifestyle produces an array of responsibilities and stressors for military families, particularly for military-affiliated students (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). According to Dorvil (2017), military spouses reported family obligations, finances, childcare issues, and their spouse's unpredictable work hours as the most significant barriers to earning a college degree. Spouses in the midst of a deployment face even more difficult stressors and barriers to education (Padden et al., 2011). Research has shown military spouse students have had to put off or stop their education, creating college retention issues (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). The DoD has attempted to acknowledged these needs and has incorporated programs via the Military One Source (2021) network to help military family members with their educational journeys. There is little to no data, however, determining whether the DoD programs have met the needs of the military spouse.

Historical Context

Like many roles in society, the role of the military spouse has changed over time. Today's description of a military spouse is vastly different from the description given in the 1950s (Herzik, 2004). For many in the military community, the traditional stay-at-home wife and mother persona are gone (Herzik, 2004). Instead, the military spouse of the 21st century is described as strong and independent, and one who faces challenges such as frequent moves (Borah & Fina, 2017; Herzik, 2004), a constant search for societal and community connections (Mailey et al., 2018), and dealing with stressful situations only those affiliated with the military could understand (Mailey et al., 2018). Military wives have also held prominent behind-the-scene roles throughout history, often propelling their spouse's careers while showing endurance, courage, and strength (Beckett, 2018), yet little is written about their lives and how they helped shape history.

Research regarding the military spouse has also included military retention issues. Although much of the recent literature has focused on studying the current challenges military spouses face (Borah & Fina, 2017; Collins et al., 2017; Friedman et al., 2015), literature has shown that military spouses affect their spouse's career and military retention (Rosen & Durand, 1995). In their study, Rosen and Durand (1995) found that spouses negatively affect military retention when the military spouse had unrealistic expectations regarding military services.

The military spouse student, a subset of the military spouse population, has received even less focus and research. According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (2019), there were 708,069 Post 9/11 GI Bill beneficiaries in 2019. The Post 9/11 GI Bill benefit helps fund education for the military member and, as of 2008, was able to be transferred to a military family dependent. Research has proven a noticeable increase in GI Bill usage since the benefit has been

available to family members (DoD, 2020). The Annual Benefit Report by the U.S. Department of

Veterans Affairs (2019) reported in 2019 that the GI Bill was transferred to 30,694 spouses of

active-duty members. However, postsecondary education institutions are not required to track or

report the number of military-affiliated students currently enrolled in school who do not use the

GI Bill; therefore, accurate numbers of military spouse students are not readily available. While

reasons for enrollment vary among students, Poole and Kim (2017) suggest affordability is a

primary factor when deciding whether to enroll in higher education. Although veteran education

success has been studied (Cate et al., 2017), there are no statistics that show how successful

military spouses are in enrolling in higher education and completing their educational goals. Cate

et al. (2017) suggest statistics that include dependent postsecondary education success is

warranted yet costly and difficult to attain.

Without accurate numbers of how many military spouses are currently attending college,

must disenroll, or postpone completion, reports, such as the 2017 Survey of Active-Duty Spouses

(Dorvil, 2017), are relied upon to provide information on the needs of the military dependent.

This report suggests military spouses want an education but cannot attain it due to family

obligations brought on by military factors, such as deployments and stress (Dorvil, 2017;

Skomorovsky, 2017). Although the increase of GI Bill transfer and usage is promising, without

accurate tracking of what family member is using the benefits and whether they drop out,

postpone enrollment or degree completion for extended periods, or complete a degree,

understanding this population's specific needs are lacking.

Social Context

While identifying barriers to education does not encompass a significant amount of the

research regarding military spouse students, there has been research conducted regarding various

aspects of deployment and feelings of well-being and the military spouse. Padden et al. (2011) found how the military spouse perceived stress during deployment cycles and their identified coping skills predicted their overall well-being. O'Neal et al. (2020) also found the more coping skills military members and their spouses employed during times of stress, the more they reported feelings of well-being.

Past studies focused on social support, sense of community, and well-being regarding the military spouse. Skomorovsky (2017) found the social support military spouses perceived they received from family and friends during deployment was a predictor of well-being. The more the spouse felt they were supported, the more they reported feelings of wellness and less depressive feelings. Wang et al. (2015) studied a sense of community and found military spouses reported higher ratings of well-being from friends than their spouses. Social support and having a sense of community are vital roles to feelings of well-being in military spouses.

Although fewer studies appear to exist that focus on variables other than social support and its influence on well-being, recent studies have assessed perceived social support among various populations and its influence regarding persistence in postsecondary education. Estrada et al. (2019) found emotional social support did not influence a student's intent to persist. This finding is in direct contrast to a study indicating that social support, particularly community social support, plays an essential role in students' persistence (Graham et al., 2013). Another study added loneliness as a variable when assessing the influence of social support on academic persistence (Nicpon et al., 2006) and found students were more likely to persist in college when they perceived they had the support of family and friends. Skahill (2002) found students who lived on campus and created social networks were more apt to attain academic goals and persist in college than students who did not live on campus. Although somewhat varying between

populations, these findings suggest various social support components can influence college persistence.

Theoretical Context

Retention and persistence factors in postsecondary education have been studied extensively within various contexts. In earlier research, Tinto (1975) explained that several components were involved in student attrition and persistence: background, goals, educational experiences, social and academic collaboration, how goals related to external factors, and whether the student dropped out or graduated. Tinto (2006) later included higher education programs implemented for diverse populations as another component of his theory regarding attrition and persistence. This acknowledgment supports the notion that various social support components, from institutions to family members, can positively influence student persistence.

Bean and Metzner's (1985) theory expounded on Tinto's (1975) theory incorporating non-traditional student persistence in education with environmental components, such as social integration factors. Community, defined as family members and people within a student's social network, and social integration were negatively tied to persistence among non-traditional students (Bean & Metzner, 1985). These theories suggest that specific social components can influence whether a student persists in postsecondary education, but the types of support needed to be successful differ among the various student populations.

Different types of support can be received from several entities. Community, family, friends, and institutional supports are often cited as sources of educational support in literature. This study uses House's (1981) definition of social support to identify the types of supportive environmental factors that influence a student's academic persistence. House's definition includes four types of social support: emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal.

Emotional support includes feelings of love and empathy from others, instrumental support involves receiving physical or tangible assistance, informational support is supported through guidance from others, and appraisal support refers to feedback and evaluation (House, 1981).

Past military spouse research has focused on social contributions and how the contributions could affect the active-duty spouse's career while often leaving out the power and courage that significantly helped their active-duty spouse accomplish great things in history (Beckett, 2018). Recent literature has also focused on specific challenges this population faces, yet the challenges of being a military spouse student have not been heavily researched. Through descriptions of different experiences, understanding these challenges could contribute to the literature and help this population persist in their academic goals.

Problem Statement

The problem is data shows that while 34% of military spouses have earned a bachelor's degree, more than 85% of military spouses have only some college and may experience obstacles to completion (U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, 2017). Studies show many military spouse students desire to enroll and complete a degree in higher education, but due to military lifestyle constraints, are unable to accomplish their educational goals (Dorvil, 2017; Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). Higher education institutions miss current and future enrollments, future success statistics, and revenue opportunities by not capturing this large demographic. As previously stated, students in higher education have been shown to often acquire more intrinsic, social, and economic benefits than individuals without post-secondary education (Chen, 2017; Gross, 2019; Heckman et al., 2018; Heller, 2011; Johnson et al., 2020; Keller, 2021; Torpey, 2018). Society, overall, also benefits when individuals attend and graduate from post-secondary education (McMahon, 2009). Societal long-term benefits include reduced poverty levels and

increased political stability and social cohesion (McMahon, 2009). Specific challenges, however, often limit higher education enrollment and persistence for diverse populations (Li & Carroll, 2020). Studies have been conducted addressing these challenges for various populations such as veterans (Belanger et al., 2021; Jones, 2016; Lim et al., 2018; Niv & Bennett, 2017) and non-traditional students (Darney & Larwin, 2018; Kearney et al., 2018; McCall et al., 2020; Mc Taggart, 2016). Many higher education institutions have implemented programs that help specific populations, like veterans and non-traditional students, overcome their identified challenges. The military spouse student's challenges are unique and differ from those of the veteran and typical non-traditional student (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012), however, indicating a gap in the literature. Once identified, the challenges and needs can be addressed, and programs can be designed and delivered to assist the military spouse student's academic goals, thus increasing higher education institutions' current and future success and revenue.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenology was to understand the supportive experiences of military spouses who academically persist to graduation. Persistence is generally defined as re-enrolling each academic year until degree completion (Browning et al., 2018, Seidman, 2005). The theory guiding this study was Bean and Metzner's (1985) non-traditional undergraduate student attrition model using House's (1981) definition of social support to identify the support military spouse students experienced during their educational journeys.

Significance of the Study

Understanding the challenges military family members encounter that are different from non-military-affiliated students can lead to the development of supportive services enabling military spouse students to persist to graduation in higher education. More directly,

understanding the support military spouse students perceive they receive or do not receive that influences academic persistence can lay the foundation for helping future military spouse students persist in higher education. Past research has studied students' educational journeys using infinite variables to predict and understand various social support aspects students perceive they have or need to persist in postsecondary education (Estrada et al., 2019; Graham et al., 2013; Skahill, 2002). The significance of this current study expounded on past research and sought to understand the military spouse student's emotional and instrumental support needs and how those perceived needs played a role in their academic persistence to graduation.

Theoretical Significance

Drawing on House's (1981) definition of social support to explain the types of supportive factors contributing to academic persistence, this study is framed by Bean and Metzner's (1985) non-traditional undergraduate student attrition model. Bean and Metzner (1985) suggest the non-traditional student does not have the same stressors as the traditional student and cannot be correlated to other attrition theories, such as Tinto (1975), that suggest student involvement on campus is a significant contributor to attrition. Bean and Metzner (1985) argue that non-traditional students have other variables that contribute to their attrition, such as background, academic and psychological variables, and environmental factors. Solely using the environmental factor variable within Bean and Metzner's (1985) model, this study aimed to understand the supportive experiences military spouse students received from their environment that led them to academically persist to graduation. House's (1981) definition of social support incorporated four variables: emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal. This study explored emotional and instrumental variables to identify the supportive factors the military

spouse student perceived they received from entities within their specific environment that contributed to their academic persistence throughout their educational journey.

Research has been conducted to determine academic persistence among various populations, such as traditional, non-traditional, and veteran populations (Bean & Metzner, 1985, Estrada et al., 2019; Skahill, 2002). The military spouse student experiences different and unique situations that cannot neatly be identified using the traditional, non-traditional, or veteran student labels, as the military spouse student has different stressors from these student populations (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). Research conducted with the military spouse student can contribute to the literature to understand their needs more succinctly and ultimately aid in their academic persistence in higher education.

Empirical Significance

Studies regarding academic persistence within a variety of different populations are plentiful. Among those studies, social support as a factor has been a focus with various populations (Estrada et al., 2019; Johnson et al., 2020; Nicpon et al., 2006; Skahill, 2002). Although military spouses have been studied regarding overall well-being (Skomorovsky, 2017), the challenges they face as military spouses (Borah & Fina, 2017; Collins et al., 2017; Friedman et al., 2015) and as military spouse students (Gleimen & Swearengen, 2012) and their academic persistence as it relates to their perceived social supports has not been studied or identified. Understanding the military spouse students' support needs could lead to higher academic persistence and graduation rates and effectively contribute to the literature regarding this unique population.

Practical Significance

Higher education has been directly correlated with higher salaries (Chen, 2017; Heller, 2011; Torpey, 2018) and building strong military couples (Pflieger et al., 2019). Identifying what military spouses perceive they need regarding support to attain their education can help military families financially and emotionally. Also, military spouses have access to supportive programs at various military bases and online sites specifically dedicated to supporting military lifestyle needs, such as Military One Source. This study can provide these resources with further information about what supportive factors influence higher education enrollment and academic persistence with the military spouse student. This critical information can help those who want to earn an education achieve their goals and help maintain their active status as a student during particularly stressful periods.

Research Questions

Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest when designing research questions, there should be one central question with sub-questions that logically follow. The central phenomenon this study provided understanding about was how social support influenced military spouse students' academic persistence to graduation. Bean and Metzner's (1985) non-traditional undergraduate student attrition theory was used to frame the study and develop the research questions.

Central Research Question

What role does support play in the academic persistence of undergraduate military spouses?

The central research question stemmed from this study's purpose, which was to understand the supportive experiences of military spouses who academically persist to graduation. Prior research did not address military spouse students' specific needs (Gleiman &

Swearengen, 2012). Although reasons for academic persistence have been covered extensively with various populations, the military spouse was not one of them.

Sub-Question One

How does emotional support affect academic persistence?

Prior research was conflicted regarding the types of support needed with different populations and at different academic times in a student's life (Estrada et al., 2019; Graham et al., 2013; Skahill, 2002). Estrada et al. (2019) suggest future research is needed to explore and understand how educational situations and different cultures respond to social support.

Sub-Question Two

How does instrumental support affect academic persistence?

Prior research indicated higher education affordability is a deciding factor for many potential college students (Poole & Kim, 2017). Stolzenberg et al. (2020) found students who lacked financial funds were less confident in their ability to complete their degrees.

Sub-Question Three

How does emotional and instrumental support influence military spouse students in their academic persistence during times of active-duty separations?

Prior research has shown that when deployments occur, military spouses' needs can differ from times of non-deployment (Trautmann et al., 2018).

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Definitions

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1. *Academic Persistence* – A higher education student's commitment to enroll each year until degree completion (Browning et al., 2018; Seidman, 2005).

2. *Deployment* – Anytime, up to 15 months, the service member is out of the country conducting official military business (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2020).

3. *Post 9/11 GI Bill* – Military benefit extended to eligible service members to help pay for postsecondary education, housing, and books (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2019).

4. *Military lifestyle* – An unpredictable lifestyle filled with uncertainty, stress, frequent moves, spousal career upheaval, added responsibilities, frequent deployments (Dempsey, 2013).

5. *Military spouse* – A spouse of an active-duty U.S. military member (Dorvil, 2017).

6. *Non-Traditional Student* – A student who attends higher education for academic purposes and not social purposes and can be a part-time student (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

7. *Social Support* – Various components that include four types of support: emotional, appraisal, informational, and instrumental, and used to help relieve stress (House, 1981).

Summary

The problem this qualitative study identified is that while 34% of military spouses have a bachelor's degree, a more significant percentage declared they only had some college (U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, 2017) and have not earned a degree, indicating specific challenges may make degree attainment difficult. Studies have shown military spouses desire to earn an education, but due to military lifestyle constraints, are unable to accomplish their educational goals (Dorvil, 2017; Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). Military spouses who can overcome military lifestyle challenges, enroll in higher education, and persist to graduation will be more apt to reap higher education's benefits. Increased enrollment and persistence statistics would also stimulate higher education institutions' success statistics and revenue. While basic education is a human right (Gilchrist, 2018), higher education is not. Challenges for some demographics, like the military spouse population, make enrolling and persisting to graduation

difficult or nonexistent (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). Although much research has been

devoted to identifying the needs of specific groups, such as veteran and non-traditional students,

the military spouse's challenges are unique to their specific population (Gleiman & Swearengen,

2012). The military spouse students' challenges needed to be identified and addressed so more

opportunities for support during the academic journey could assist in academic persistence. The

purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the military spouse

student's supportive experiences as they relate to academic persistence.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The military spouse student is underrepresented in literature. This population is unique in the challenges they face due to the lifestyle the military imposes (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012; Ziff & Garland-Jackson, 2020). To better address these challenges and potentially alleviate the pressures that may inhibit military spouses from attaining their educational goals, a review of the literature that leads to a comprehensive study describing these challenges was conducted. This chapter utilizes Bean and Metzner's (1985) non-traditional undergraduate student attrition model as its theoretical base when reviewing recent literature regarding military spouse students and academic persistence. A thorough review of this theory, followed by literature describing the challenges military spouses face, how military spouses cope with the identified challenges, the educational opportunities the military spouse has available, and the persistence factors associated with higher education students, led to identifying a gap in the literature.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework in a dissertation supports and justifies the need for a study through various proposal components, such as the problem statement and research questions (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). This portion of the dissertation is also critical in establishing the basis for the literature review and will ensure the study successfully flows from one chapter to the next (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). To ensure a sequential flow, a review of academic persistence and how it relates to social support theories was conducted to establish the base from which all further sections were built.

Past studies did not always make the distinction between persistence and retention. Ruecker et al. (2017) described retention as focused on the financial aspect of retaining students

and the statistics that accompany student retention at the same institution. Students' reasons for persisting in higher education can differ dramatically (Ruecker et al., 2017). Vincent Tinto is the name most often associated with persistence, and he developed his theoretical framework (1975) from Emile Durkheim's (1961) suicide and social systems theory. Tinto theorized that college students, who did not fully integrate into social systems at school, would be more likely to drop out and not finish their education. Tinto believed a thorough examination of a student's background characteristics, motivations, academic expectations, goals, and institutional commitment could successfully predict whether a student will drop out of college (Tinto, 1975).

Tinto's (2006) later research included the educational institution and the school's programs as another predictor of student persistence. Using Tinto's (1975) theory to build from, Bean and Metzner (1985) believed non-traditional college students would not have the same predictors of persistence as the traditional student Tinto (1975) referenced. Bean and Metzner (1985) theorized that the non-traditional commuting student did not have the same option or desire to integrate into the social system at college as the traditional student. The non-traditional student had challenges that included extra environmental factors, such as finances and family responsibilities, that the traditional student did not have. According to Bean and Metzner (1985), these external, environmental factors played a more significant role in student attrition. Bean and Metzner believed that reviewing the student's background, several academic variables, the student's intentions to leave school, and environmental factors could predict academic persistence. This theory advanced literature with several student populations, such as Pearson's (2019) study that suggested adult students' backgrounds, marital status, and problems often affected academic persistence. The military spouse student was not a population that had been significantly advanced in the literature. Bean and Metzner's (1985) non-traditional undergraduate

student persistence model aligned with the military spouse student population because several environmental factors within the military lifestyle were identified as preventing enrollment (Dorvil, 2017) and potential persistence in higher education for this population. As a result of these environmental factors, Bean and Metzner's (1985) model was chosen as the theoretical framework of this study.

While Bean and Metzner's (1985) non-traditional undergraduate student persistence model framed this study, it was essential to understand the role of social support and how it was connected to the theoretical framework. Social support theories and definitions are numerous. Cobb (1976), Cohen and Wills (1985), and Folkman and Lazarus (1985), among others, have provided their interpretations of what social support entails and are described in-depth in the following paragraphs. House's (1981) definition of social support labels and identifies various types of support and was used in this study. House identified four types of support: emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal. These definitions found a relationship between academic persistence and the supportive environment that enabled the military spouse student to enroll and persist to graduation.

Cobb (1976) and Cohen and Hoberman (1983) suggested a buffer to stress is social support. Cohen and Hoberman (1983) specifically found that when individuals perceived they had access to social support, their stress levels decreased. They identified self-esteem and appraisal supports were positive buffers to stress. Well-being (Skomorovsky, 2017), a sense of community (Tang et al., 2017), and persistence (Johnson et al., 2020; Roksa & Kinsley, 2019; Skahill, 2002), among other factors, were positively correlated with social support. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) explained people adapt more effectively if they feel social support is available at critical times.

As previously stated, House (1981) identified four key features that encompassed social support: emotional support, instrumental support, informational support, and appraisal support. However, throughout literature, different definitions exist to describe social support. Cobb (1976) defined social support from an emotional framework, as people may feel supported when they believe they are loved or part of a community. Cohen and Wills' (1985) interpretation of social support involves feelings of acceptance and can indicate esteem or emotional support. Their interpretation also identified social support as receiving help from others to cope or identify problems and resembles informational or appraisal support. Cohen and Wills' interpretation of support also includes feelings of affiliation with a group that reduces an individual's worries, indicating social companionship or belongingness support. Finally, Cohen and Wills interpret social support as receiving help with environmental factors such as financial aid or other services, indicating instrumental or tangible support. Folkman and Lazarus (1985) defined social support as an individual's coping resource encompassing only emotional, informational, and tangible support dimensions. Although it may be challenging to identify one single definition of social support, of the theorists previously mentioned, all believe social support involves dimensions that cater to the needs of an individual and helps them in some specific way.

This study's theoretical foundation is rooted in Bean and Metzner's non-traditional undergraduate student attrition model. House's (1981) definition of social support, specifically emotional and instrumental support, helped identify the supportive factors that led military spouse students to academically persist. Although this study focused on emotional and instrumental support, House recognizes four types of support. House describes emotional support as involving feelings of love, trust, and care provided by others. Instrumental support, as

described by House, involves receiving tangible assistance, such as obtaining funds to help with a problem or giving an individual's time. Informational support, House states, is given by providing advice or suggestions that help the receiving individual. Finally, an individual receives appraisal support when receiving feedback (House, 1981). Academic persistence factors are reviewed later in this chapter and addressed these concepts.

Academic persistence and social support are consistently studied together in literature. Academic persistence is correlated with family support (Roksa & Kinsley, 2019), community support (Johnson et al., 2020), and academic advising (Tippetts et al., 2020). Social support and whether it can predict academic persistence can be generalized to several populations, including military spouses. Tinto's (1975) theory regarding the academic persistence of college students focused on students' tendencies to drop out of school if they did not fully integrate and participate in the college culture. Expounding on Tinto's research, Bean and Metzner (1985) included the community college student population when looking at college persistence, as that population has different needs than the traditional student.

Many studies incorporate Bean and Metzner's (1985) theory with military veterans and the various factors affecting their college experiences unique to their specific population, such as transitioning (Jones, 2016) and diversity (Vaccaro, 2015). Kim and Cole (2013) studied the military veteran population and looked at the services implemented and used by veterans while they attended higher education institutions. The closest student populations the military spouse student may identify with are the non-traditional and veteran or military student groups. Although there are similarities between these populations, such as military lifestyle experiences, the military spouse student faces a unique set of challenges that differentiates them from classic non-traditional students and veteran and military students (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012).

There are different challenges among military spouses, as well. Lufkin (2017) suggests men and women have different challenges as military spouses, and these different needs and challenges have been cited as why military spouses are not pursuing higher education (Dorvil, 2017). The costs of education, family responsibilities and cost and lack of childcare all pose challenges to the military spouse population (Dorvil, 2017). While these may not appear different from the civilian, non-traditional student population, the barriers to education can be amplified when adding in the unique family responsibilities that military spouses face.

Educational research including non-traditional, veteran, and military students is abundant, and studies including these populations have covered topics such as academic persistence (Alschuler & Yarab, 2018; Chung et al., 2017; Cotton et al., 2017), educational experiences (Ostler et al., 2018), academic satisfaction (Ghosh et al., 2019), and how faculty can assist and meet the needs of these populations (Gibbs et al., 2019; Morrison-Beedy & Rossiter, 2018). Different types of social support have also been studied to increase academic persistence in these non-traditional and military student groups (Nehring et al., 2019; Wild & Mahapatra, 2018). Although the military spouse student population does not have the depth of research as the non-traditional, active-duty military, or veteran student, studies conducted regarding different aspects the military lifestyle imposes, such as stress (Padden et al., 2011), communication (Wilson et al., 2018), and deployments (Carter et al., 2019; Kritikos et al., 2020) shed light on the unique challenges the military spouse population faces.

As stated, the military spouse experiences various unique barriers when dealing with day-to-day military life and when faced with deployments and separations from their military spouses. As shown by Skomorovsky (2017), social support can contribute to the well-being of military spouses during times of deployment or work-related separations, especially when stress

is elevated. House's (1981) definitions of the various types of support, specifically emotional and instrumental support, can help determine a relationship between academic persistence and the supportive factors that enabled, or could have enabled, the military spouse student in their academic persistence.

Related Literature

Persistence in higher education is a subject that has been studied with a variety of populations, yet the military spouse is not one of those populations. There are consequences for both students and higher education institutions when dropouts occur, as well as communities and societies overall (Bernardo et al., 2016). According to a National Student Clearinghouse report (2020), 2.6 million first-time students enrolled in higher education in the United States in 2018. Of those, 75.9 % persisted and enrolled in their second year of higher education, and although this represents an above-average academic persistence rate, of the 2.6 million students who started their higher education journey, more than 600,000 students were not retained. Students who fall into the unretained category deserve to be studied to understand their reasons for quitting to prevent future dropouts. While National Student Clearinghouse statistics do not delineate the military spouse student population within their study, Dorvil (2017) showed military spouses want to attain an education but cannot because of the military lifestyle. In another study with 1,100 military spouses, over half of the respondents stated their education and educational opportunities suffered due to the military lifestyle (Harrell et al., 2002). A look at their lifestyle challenges is needed to understand their possible reasons for attritting or persisting to graduation.

Military Spouse Background

Famous Marine Corps Lieutenant General, Chesty Puller, was credited with saying, "Son, when the Marine Corps wants you to have a wife, you will be issued one" (The Puller House, 2021). In other words, being a military wife comes second to the military and the service member (Ziff, 2017; Ziff & Garland-Jackson, 2020). This remark may explain why early descriptions of what being a military spouse entailed included ideals of being a stay-at-home mother who lived to serve and take care of their military spouse by keeping up the home and entertaining other military spouses (Herzik 2004). Gone are descriptions such as these, and instead, the military spouse is now often described as a strong and resilient individual who must maintain family structure when faced with frequent deployments and separations and an individual who faces numerous career and employment challenges due to frequent moves (Herzik 2004; Huffman et al., 2019). The military spouse is also described as an individual who has to find new social and family connections after each move (Mailey et al., 2018), an individual who must manage the immense stress brought on by all the military lifestyle challenges (Mailey et al., 2018), or a combination of the descriptions. In addition to these challenges, the military spouse may feel pressure to volunteer their time to various military community functions or events (Ziff, 2017). These descriptions come at a price, however, as the military spouse often feels pressure to manage these challenges quietly and, as a result, often places themselves last regarding self-care (Mailey et al., 2018). The examples mentioned are a small fraction of the challenges this population consistently faces, and when the military member is involved in wartime operations, the challenges affect all familial relationships (Paley et al., 2013; Trail et al., 2017). Extensive studies have been conducted describing the challenges of the military lifestyle, which are detailed below.

Military Lifestyle Challenges

Over the last few decades, studies have grown to include military spouse challenges within the literature. The research includes studies regarding stress (Padden et al., 2011), communication (Wilson et al., 2018), different deployment factors (Carter et al., 2019; Erbes et al., 2017; Ormeno et al., 2020; Toomey et al., 2019; Trautmann et al., 2018) and studies explaining the specific needs of military spouses (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). Although studies occur regarding this population, the military spouse remains underrepresented in research (Corry et al., 2021; Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012; Mailey et al., 2018). The results of an online search revealed studies regarding the military spouse pale in comparison to the number of studies conducted with active-duty military members and veterans. Although several issues differ between these populations, they share the commonality of experiencing the hardships the military lifestyle brings, and both warrant research regarding the various aspects of their unique situations.

Education, and the challenges associated with earning a college degree, have not been given a significant focus in the literature regarding the military spouse. Instead, researchers have studied topics concerning active-duty military member retention as it relates to military spouse well-being (Rosen & Durand, 1995), spouse employment (Godier-McBard et al., 2020), and how military family and military spouse health could affect retention (Corry et al., 2019). In a study regarding health, Mailey et al. (2018) proposed that military spouse health could improve with proper interventions and coping techniques for predictable situations, leading to improved overall family health. Corry et al. (2019) found that military spouses who perceived they had access to social support and perceived the military provided sufficient support to military

families displayed more healthy behaviors than military spouses who perceived they did not have social support.

Of the military spouse studies that have included education, Gleiman and Swearengen (2012) revealed that military spouse students experienced different stressors than their civilian student peers. In 2017, over 45,000 active-duty military spouses answered questions in a survey regarding the stressors involved with the military lifestyle (Dorvil, 2017). Of those responding, 22% were in school, while 43% stated they were not currently enrolled in higher education but desired to be (Dorvil, 2017). Respondents stated the cause of their inability to attain education was specifically the stressors and responsibilities associated with the military lifestyle (Dorvil, 2017). Between the stress of deployment, reintegration, long hours, and fear of loss due to military exercises, Gleiman and Swearengen (2012) recommend higher education institutions do more to cater to the unique needs of the military spouse student.

Deployment Challenges

When researching military spouses and stress, Kritikos et al. (2020) found deployments and times of separation were identified as the most difficult challenges for military families. A recent study found the spouse left at home encountered additional stressors and often felt as if they were alone in making all family decisions while their service member was deployed (Ormeno et al., 2020). However, navigating separation due to a deployment represents everyday lifestyle occurrences for many military families. The sheer amount or regularity of deployments does little to relieve all stressors; however, Padden et al. (2011) found spouses who grew up in a military family and spouses of higher-ranking military members reported higher levels of well-being. Padden et al. (2011) studied stress, coping, and well-being with military spouses who experienced a separation from their active-duty spouse due to military deployment. They found

the best predictor of well-being to be deployment status and that military spouses' problem-solving coping abilities decreased when they perceived stress (Padden et al., 2017). The study called for future research to explore the specific causes of stress and how military spouses respond to it. Wilson and Murray (2016) identified social support as essential to enduring deployments in their study. They suggest that more focus must occur with the military spouse during deployments to understand their unique needs to provide valuable and accurate services (Wilson & Murray, 2016).

The literature has captured some of the military spouse's mental health challenges. Toomey et al. (2019) found military spouses reported higher depressive symptoms during deployments than spouses of non-deployed service members. In comparison, Erbes et al. (2017) found during the deployment lifecycle, stress occurred, but close to 80% of spouses in the study remained resilient and were not prone to clinical depression or did not seek alcohol as a refuge. The study also found distress levels were higher at different points throughout the deployment cycle, and attention to pre- and post-deployment times should be reviewed and attended to with screening occurring throughout the deployment lifecycle (Erbes et al., 2017). While all deployment portions or segments can be stressful, Mallonee et al. (2020) found post-deployment stress was particularly taxing. In addition to the excitement and anticipation of an emotional reunion, post-deployments are often laden with stress brought on by several factors, such as financial issues and diminished communication throughout the deployment (Mallonee et al., 2020).

College student mental health research is also a topic that is rich in literature. In a study regarding depression among non-traditional students who dropped out of college, Thompson-Ebanks (2017) found several reasons for their attrition. They described reasons such as students'

perception of whether faculty lacked knowledge regarding mental health issues or students not feeling part of the college community (Thompson-Ebanks, 2017). Experiences with depression are not the same for all spouses during deployments (Erbes et al., 2017), but studies have acknowledged depression and stress do ultimately occur and can elevate throughout the deployment lifecycle (Erbes et al., 2017; Ormeno et al., 2020; Toomey et al., 2019). Understanding these issues and relating them to spouses who are attaining higher education while experiencing a deployment can steer programs to alleviate the challenges of this population. The lack of consistent research regarding mental health, deployment, and the military spouse is evident. Acknowledging military spouses' stressors during deployment, while offering support that mitigates the challenges, may lead to higher academic persistence rates in this population.

Non-Deployment Challenges

As stated earlier, much research has focused on active-duty military members but not their spouses (Corry et al., 2021; Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012; Mailey et al., 2018). Although many military spouses experience stress and depression during deployments and at different times during the deployment lifecycle (Erbes et al., 2017; Ormeno et al., 2020; Mallonee et al., 2020; Toomey et al., 2019), the demands, challenges, and stressors the military lifestyle produces are not felt just while their spouse is deployed. One study with active-duty military members found significant health hazards in current non-deployed military work environments (Brooks & Greenberg, 2018). Much of the research conducted with military spouses and the stressors they face as a result of the military lifestyle has focused on factors regarding deployments or dealing with post-traumatic stress disorders and their veteran spouse (Yambo et al., 2016). However, Borah and Fina (2017) found military spouses reported feelings of isolation and abandonment

when their spouse was not deployed due to their long military work hours. These spouses felt the military came before their needs (Borah & Fina, 2017; Ziff, 2017).

Stress due to finances can affect any population, including the military. The latest financial survey conducted with military members and their spouses occurred in 2012 (FINRA Investor Education Foundation, 2012). While over half of the 1000 military member respondents in the survey stated they were able to pay their bills each month and had money set aside for emergencies and long-term goals, of those who had credit cards, over half reported they only paid the minimum due and were subject to late fees. Obtaining cash advances and payday loans were also reported by one-third of the respondents. Of the survey participants who were homeowners, over 35% stated they owed more on their home than it was worth, and 50% believed they had too much debt overall (FINRA Investor Education Foundation, 2012). The stress induced by the above challenges can pose taxing situations in families. Ross et al. (2017) suggested that mental and emotional capacities to communicate in a non-combative way may disintegrate when financial stressors occur in a relationship. Addressing finances and communication regarding financial stress is needed in the military community.

Student stress as it relates to the college setting has been studied extensively. College stress has been linked with depression, which Arbona et al. (2018) found negatively affected whether students intended to persist in completing their educational goals. Tran et al. (2018) found that financial stress was positively related to anxiety symptoms in college students, but when men college students perceived they had family support, their anxiety symptoms decreased. The perception of family support was not an anxiety modifier with women students who experienced financial distress (Tran et al., 2018). The study called for more research regarding women college students and the stress buffers that could decrease anxiety regarding

finances (Tran et al., 2018). A connection between college and stress is apparent. A military

member or spouse who attends college can experience both college stress and the financial

stressors brought on by the military, potentially inhibiting persistence in college. Supportive

services directed toward this demographic and area are needed.

Like college and stress, the connection between community, academics, and persistence

has also been studied thoroughly, Tinto (1975) leading the research. Having a sense of

community is essential to the military family, as Mailey et al. (2018) found military spouses

desire to have that connection. In their study, O'Neal et al. (2016) suggested the military

community develops because the community dynamic is tied directly to the service member's

job and their living situations; because of their unique situations, the community forms. Feelings

of loneliness and isolation were studied with military spouses, and it was found that the more

connected military spouses felt to their community, the higher they reported feelings of well-

being and displayed better coping skills (O'Neal et al., 2020). It was also found that feelings of

loneliness were experienced less in widows of service members when compared to widows of

non-service members (King et al., 2019), suggesting that being part of the military community

and having that experience may promote sustainment of emotional and social well-being that

enables individuals to adapt to stressful situations throughout their lives (King et al., 2019).

Feeling connected to a community, however, proves difficult when individuals are faced with

continuous relocations (Ziff & Garland-Jackson, 2020). Finding and establishing friendships and

supportive networks is something military spouses crave but find difficult because of constant

relocation (Mailey et al., 2018).

As stated, having a sense of community and the college student have been studied

extensively. Tinto (1975) related student attrition to not fully integrating into a college setting,

indicating that not finding and relying on a community for support could lead to dropout.

Gopalan and Brady (2020) found academic persistence and mental health improved when

students felt they belonged at college. With the importance the military spouse places on

establishing friendships and community (Mailey et al., 2018), further research regarding military

spouse students and the potential relationship with their community, either academic or military,

is needed.

Military Subpopulation Challenges

 Lufkin (2017) points out there is a lack of research involving military spouses who are

men. Though they represent only 5% of the military spouse population, their needs are specific

and unique (Lufkin, 2017). Wadsworth and Southwell (2011) found military spouses who were

men reported they felt there was a lack of supportive services provided to them by the military

community. The spouses who were men felt their woman military spouse counterparts were not

welcoming and that integrating into the military community was difficult, which could ultimately

lead to feelings of isolation (Wadsworth & Southwell, 2011). In contrast, Corry et al. (2021)

found men who were military spouses reported less stress due to the military lifestyle than their

woman-spouse counterparts. Research continues to grow with this demographic, and as Lufkin

(2017) suggests, the needs of military spouses who are men require more attention and

understanding to produce military-driven supportive programs to identify and meet their specific

needs.

 Another subpopulation of military spouses includes the dual-military couple who have

their own unique set of challenges and where future research should focus (Huffman et al., 2017;

Woodall et al., 2020). According to the U.S. Department of Defense 2016 Demographics Report,

among the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Forces, over six percent of enlisted and officer

military members are married to another military member, which translates to over 84,000 military members who are also military spouses (U.S. Department of Defense, 2016). In their study, Corry et al. (2021) reported dual-military couples had less stress and perceived more military support than non-dual-military couples. When there were reports of stress, women spouses were impacted more than men, as the perception was that the woman spouse experienced more conflict between career and family (Huffman et al., 2017). Compounding this notion, Woodall et al., 2020, reported women spouses in dual-military couples reported less marital satisfaction than spouses who were men. These findings indicate women spouses in dual-military marriages may require different services and resources than civilian military spouses to alleviate their specific stressors.

Military families with children were also found to have higher perceived stressors than military families without children, even when the service member is home (Corry et al., 2021). Finding adequate childcare, loss of financial stability due to frequent moves, and loss of dual-employment causes stress in military families (Owen & Combs, 2017). Families with special needs children face even more challenges when relocating (Owen & Combs, 2017). Food insecurity among lower-ranking military families was also suggested as a cause of concern and stress for this population (Wax & Stankorb, 2016). Julian et al. (2018) suggest that more services must be tailored to young families with children.

While raising a family, participating in higher education involves many challenges and responsibilities traditional students do not have (Sallee & Cox, 2019). Sallee and Cox (2019) found parents with children had difficulty finding adequate childcare, attended college on child-unfriendly campuses, and reported they were unaware of campus services, which subsequently led to not seeking available help. Raising children in the military presents challenges, and raising

children with a parent attending college adds even more difficulties.

Single parents are another subculture within the military that has challenges separate from other military members. A study conducted with the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) found single parents in the military had more financial and psychological distress and believed they had less control over their situations than other groups (Skomorovsky & Wan, 2019). Negative life satisfaction among CAF members could also be predicted by their perceptions of the difficulties they experienced while balancing work and family responsibilities and the difficulties maintaining parental responsibilities (Skomorovsky et al., 2019). Adding attending college to the mix of being a parent in the military comes with even more challenges.

During deployment, the military spouse is often referred to as a single parent. Although not a military spouse, the single-parent military member has their own unique set of challenges. Earning a college degree as a single parent evokes stress and guilt, among other negative feelings (Lovell & Scott, 2020). Stress from feeling as if all the responsibility of raising a child is solely on their shoulders and striving to maintain perfect grades proves challenging for single-parent college students (Lovell & Scott, 2020). Guilt from not spending more time with their child was also found to be a challenge this demographic faces (Lovell & Scott, 2020). Understanding the needs of the military member who is a single parent, who either wants to go to school or is already enrolled, can help military installations and higher education institutions meet their unique needs.

Stress is not divided equally across military ranks (Corry et al., 2021). Inequitable division of stress may result from education, as officers in the military generally have higher education degrees (Corry et al., 2021). Spouses of higher-ranking service members also reported they received more support and attachment, among other positive reinforcements, from their

community than those of lower-ranking service members (O'Neal et al., 2016). In areas such as

nutrition, well-being, and efficiency, military officers' spouses reported higher levels than those

of lower ranks (Bisht et al., 2020). While military spouses do not hold a rank, the tensions and

unwritten rules between the officer and enlisted spouses can become barriers to supportive and

communal friendships (Mailey et al., 2018).

The Armed Forces comprise the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, Space Force, and

Coast Guard. The Army and Air Force have separate reservist National Guard forces. Military

cultures among these branches differ (Wong & Gerras, 2019). Military culture affects all military

family members, but it also depends on several factors, such as where the family resides and if

they have base access, how they perceive the military lifestyle, and how often their spouse

deploys (Mancini et al., 2020). Different service branches and military cultures may view the

familial role differently, as each service has its separate mission, number of service members,

and recruitment practices (Corry et al., 2021).

Different cultures pose different challenges. In the FINRA Investor Education

Foundation (2012) survey, 41% of respondents claimed to have trouble paying their bills; of

those respondents, Army participants were more than 10% higher than Navy and Air Force.

Sixteen percent of overall survey participants reported they had unpaid medical bills; of those,

Army represented 23% next to the Navy and Air Force at only 8% each. Financial difficulties are

not the only differences between the branches that may be challenging. Armenta et al. (2018)

found service members in the Army and Marine Corps were more prone to persistent PTSD and

perceived social support was a critical component when treating PTSD in this population.

Conversely, Walter et al. (2021) found Army spouses developed new-onset depression more than

spouses within other branches, and spouses married to reservists being the least likely to develop

new-onset depression. These and other challenges affect members of each service differently, which often leads to affecting their spouses. Acknowledging these differences and catering to the needs of the specific service member and their spouse, vice enacting services for all Armed Forces conjunctively, is essential to meet all needs.

Employment Challenges

Loneliness, isolation, and loss of community are not the only issues with frequent relocations. Huffman et al. (2019) found that soldiers reported they felt their family well-being would increase if there were less frequent moves during their military service. They felt their spouse endured the lack of career progression because they had to move often, and changing careers or starting over was detrimental to their spouses' career satisfaction (Huffman et al., 2019). Due to frequent moves and less to deployments, Meadows et al. (2016) found military spouses work less and earn less than their civilian counterparts. Often, career abandonment occurs as the struggle to continuously find a job or start over is more complicated, and instead, spouses turn to events they can control, such as volunteering (Keeling et al., 2020).

Education has also been found to be a factor in employment. Wang and Pullman (2019) found the higher educational level military spouses had, the more the spouse was employed, resulting in higher income levels. This issue has drawn the attention of military institutions, and a recent study reviewed a military initiative aimed at supporting military spouses with employment. In the study, Godier-McBard et al. (2020) found military spouses who felt the military institution valued them were more confident in their ability to secure employment. More research regarding how the military supports the student spouse is justified and needed to further the literature and potentially affect employment and other factors, along with discovering whether this notion helps with academic persistence.

The military spouse faces challenges like no other (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). Prior research has dramatically focused on these challenges to provide meaning to this lifestyle, and often to mitigate and help lessen the burden the challenges present. However, Dorvil (2017) reported stress and military lifestyle demands still precluded many spouses from attaining higher education even when they were eligible for educational benefits, as described later in this chapter.

Coping and Resilience

Managing the challenges that accompany military life can be difficult for military families (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [NASEM], 2019). When families cannot cope with the challenges, well-being and additional challenges can occur (NASEM, 2019). A recent study suggests military spouses lack the skills needed to be resilient and suggests interventions are needed that educate spouses and promote community (Monney, 2019). The study found that the more risk factors present before deployment, such as mental health issues or alcohol misuse, the less likely resilient behaviors may occur (Monney, 2019). Strengthening the case for more interventions, Mailey et al. (2018) point out that military spouses desire a sense of community.

There are risk factors associated with the military community. A recent study, which was a continuation from a previous study involving 1995-1996 Gulf War veterans (Eisen et al., 2005), found there was an increased risk of mental disorders among military spouses of Gulf War veterans who also had a mental disorder (Toomey et al., 2019). In another study, Corry et al. (2019) found military communities had higher smoking and drinking rates when compared to civilian counterparts and lower healthy sleeping rates than the national average. Other risk factors that military families face include violence in the home, child neglect, and the death of a

parent (NASEM, 2019). To mitigate risk factors, the DoD has developed intervention strategies targeting the factors military families face (Pflieger et al., 2020). However, NASEM (2019) points out the DoD is not currently equipped to understand the effectiveness and relevance of the programs it has developed and, thus, cannot improve in areas where needed.

With the challenges and risk factors listed above, and others not identified or heavily researched, it is essential to understand the resilience and coping skills military spouses have shown to possess that increased well-being or satisfaction. The overwhelming challenges include deployments and separations, reintegration experiences, frequent moves, single parenthood, and financial issues. Understanding what promotes resilience or how military spouses cope in certain situations can help identify the social supports they use most frequently and effectively. Everson et al. (2017) suggest military spouses' perception of a specific challenge, and their willingness to face it, determines how well they cope with the situation. When overall satisfaction with military life is rated low among military families; however, it is harder to cope with the demands of military life (Trail et al., 2017).

Several studies have reviewed specific coping skills military spouses and families have used to promote resilience. Giff et al. (2020) found couples who used emotional coping strategies, such as obtaining social support, during a deployment were more satisfied with their relationship following a deployment. O'Neal et al. (2018) found the more frequent communication during a deployment and how a spouse managed the household while the military member was away indicated the reintegration experience the couple would have. Experiencing community connections were also reported as a coping mechanism to deal with the challenges of military life (O'Neal et al., 2020).

Spirituality or religion, as it relates to coping, has also been researched with various

populations. Spirituality is a buffer against PTSD in military veterans and provides more life

purpose for this population (Sharma et al., 2017). In their study with military spouses, Braun-

Lewensohn and Bar (2017) found the spouses of soldiers who identified as religious used more

problem-solving coping strategies than those who did not identify as spiritual or religious.

Identifying these and other coping skills can help military installations focus on what is working

for families and integrate programs that enhance these coping skills.

Educational Opportunities

Kritikos et al. (2020) explored the negative and positive aspects of being a military

spouse and found benefits, such as career and certain educational assistance, were listed as the

top positive aspects of military life. Military leadership and institutions have attempted to

address the challenges military families face by providing benefits to select groups of military

spouses to help in the attainment of educational goals. Available to all branches of the Armed

Forces, the service member's GI Bill can be transferred to family members after certain specifics

have been met. By September 2019, there were 909,320 beneficiaries of the GI Bill (U.S.

Department of Veteran Affairs, 2019). The DoD funds the GI Bill and the My Career

Advancement Account Scholarship Program (MYCAA). The MYCAA program helps military

spouses of active-duty military members fund their education (Military OneSource, 2021). The

MYCAA program is more selective regarding who is eligible for their services than the GI Bill

(Military OneSource, 2021).

As stated, military branches have their own cultures (Wong & Gerras, 2019). Having

different cultures among the branches could lead to varying degrees of supportive services

provided to military families. Military OneSource (2021) points out each branch of the military

approaches supportive services differently by offering different options. Educational services provided to military spouses, according to their service branch, are listed below.

Spouses of Army service members can apply for a scholarship through the Emergency Relief Spouse Education Assistance Program. Scholarships are given based on need, and applicants must be earning an undergraduate degree (Military OneSource, 2021). The Navy and Marine Corps offer an interest-free loan and grant program. Navy and Marine Corps spouses receiving a loan or grant can receive financial assistance up to $3,000 (Military OneSource, 2021). The Air Force Aid Society (2017) also offers Air Force families loans and grant opportunities based on need and merit. Coast Guard service members and their families are offered educational assistance through a grant and loan program. The Coast Guard Mutual Assistance program is a non-profit organization aimed at helping families cover educational fees and supplies but does not include tuition assistance (Coast Guard Mutual Assistance, 2021). Eligible family members can be seeking a college degree or enrolled in a technical program (Military OneSource, 2021). These and other branch-specific educational opportunities are offered to select groups of military spouses, but many educational assistance programs and scholarships are also open to most service branches collectively.

Scholarships such as the Joanne Holbrook Patton Military Scholarship are open to a wide range of military spouse demographics; however, many military spouse scholarships limit eligibility to undergraduate students, such as the ThanksUSA Special Military Spouse Scholarship (Military OneSource, 2021). In addition to financial services, many military bases have educational offices geared toward helping service members with their tuition assistance. Family members are also able to use these services for educational guidance and to help locate resources. Help with finding scholarships, transferring the GI Bill, and choosing a school is

offered to military families and the service member at these offices. Statistics on how many spouses know about and use this service have not been identified.

Post 9/11 GI Bill

In 2008, military families became eligible to use the Post 9/11 GI Bill benefit that had previously only been provided to the military member. This benefit pays for educational expenses, such as tuition and books, while also providing a monthly living allowance (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2013). Although GI Bill usage has increased since 2008 (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2019), until recently, reporting precisely who has used the benefit had not been tracked due to cost and overall difficulties in tracking (Cate et al., 2017). In 2019, however, The Congressional Budget Office (2019) released a report showing 31,300 spouses used the GI Bill in 2016. The GI Bill has strict rules and limitations and can be given by the military member to a dependent, such as a spouse or child. The military member may give their spouse or child a certain number of months from their 36-month benefit. Extending this benefit to military spouses and children can alleviate educational expenses, but without tracking the graduation rates of military spouses, a relationship between GI Bill usage and academic persistence cannot be made.

My Career Advancement Account

The MYCAA program is geared to helping young military spouses obtain careers that can move with them. Frequent relocations are a common stressor the military spouse faces (Owen & Combs, 2017). An eligible military spouse can receive financial assistance of $4,000 to pursue licenses or certifications and up to an associate's degree (Military OneSource, 2021). This program is designed to help military spouses earn an education in a timely manner (Military OneSource, 2021). A report conducted by Miller et al. (2018) found the use of the MYCAA

program and military member continuation were positively correlated, as were spousal

employment and earnings. The report also found 34% of spouses who used the program

graduated, although this number may not be accurate as higher educational reporting may not

continue to report graduation numbers after the program ceases to fund the education (Miller et

al., 2018). Although this program benefits many spouses, it is limited to who can use it. In a

recent study, Ott and Akroyd (2018) found that most military spouses believed they would need

a graduate degree to fulfill their educational goals. The MYCAA program has strict eligibility

guidelines and is not geared toward attaining a bachelor's degree or higher. The program is

offered to spouses whose military member is within certain lower military ranks (Military

OneSource, 2021).

Although the programs described have benefited the military spouse student, their

numbers do not reflect accurate military spouse graduation rates. Although usage of the benefits

without graduation promotes skill attainment (Miller et al., 2018.), accurate reporting of

graduation numbers could indicate who attrits at what time during their educational journey.

More research is needed to understand military spouse student persistence and graduation rates.

Educational benefits alone may not be the reason for persistence, and although more research is

needed to understand the relationship between the two, literature has been conducted relating

academic persistence with various factors, as indicated in the following section.

Persistence and Support Factors

Tinto's (2006) theory regarding student retention placed responsibility on the higher

educational institution and student involvement, but Bean and Metzner (1985) believed

environmental factors were the catalyst to the non-traditional student's persistence in higher

education. Recent literature supports both of these claims, as the programs and resources higher

education institutions develop and enact, and the student engagement in those supports, have

been positively correlated with persistence (Cotton et al., 2017; Hatch & Garcia, 2017). Graham

et al. (2013) also reported several strategies that could help students persist in STEM degrees,

such as advocating for educational resources, faculty training and involvement, and

implementing student learning communities. These factors represent different social supports

House (1981) identified and helped shape the framework of this study. The four social support

dimensions House (1981) describes are listed below, along with the research and literature that

supports them.

Emotional Support and Academic Persistence

Retaining students is challenging (Hall et al., 2021) and has implications for all parties

involved (Bernardo et al., 2016), and because of this, many studies have been conducted trying

to understand the relationship between different types of support and various school populations.

Emotional support involves providing care, love, and empathy (House, 1981). A person can

receive emotional support from a friend, colleague, family member, stranger, or educator, among

many others. It was found that educators who show positive emotional support, such as

displaying sincerity, responding to student cues, and holding eye contact, have been found to

positively affect student outcomes (O'Hare et al., 2020). In a study with African American

students, Brooks (2015) found that family support influenced and positively correlated with

student persistence, both as positive and distracting factors. Skahill (2002) studied commuter

students in relation to those who lived on campus. Findings from the study revealed commuter

students were less likely to persist, which could result from not seeing family as often and not

having a social support network they interacted with daily, like others who may live on campus

did (Skahill, 2002). In their study, Ma et al. (2020) found student nurses who were men

perceived a lack of emotional support from counselors. Ma et al. (2020) suggested incorporating more mentors who are men into the program to help alleviate this perception. More training with faculty, however, may be needed to show precisely what emotional support entails.

Community and academic persistence have also been studied at great length, but the findings are varied. While students reported they felt new social media tools, such as Adobe Connect and EZ texting, helped them feel as if they were more connected to their peers and school, the tools did not significantly promote academic persistence (Armstrong et al., 2018). However, Johnson et al. (2020) studied the effects of a college place-based community program and found STEM students who participated in the program had higher academic persistence rates than those who did not participate. The students who participated felt more connected to their colleagues and felt they belonged (Johnson et al., 2020). Given the strong sense of community military spouses desire (Mailey et al., 2018) and the positive well-being associated with the military spouse who has a sense of community (Wang et al., 2015), it is essential future research with the military spouse student, and their sense of community at their school, occurs.

In contrast to the positive correlations above, Estrada et al. (2019) found that psychosocial or emotional support was not a significant predictor of college persistence with historically underrepresented biomedical students in their one-year longitudinal study. However, identifying as a science student was positively correlated with persistence in this population (Estrada et al., 2019). The study suggests identity within a community may predict persistence with this population more than emotional support. In another study, Romano et al. (2020) examined the relationship between school burnout, anxiety, and the perceived emotional support students receive from faculty. They found that students with high anxiety perceived receiving less emotional support from faculty (Romano et al., 2020). The different findings regarding

persistence between these populations suggest research with military spouse students specifically is needed to determine if perceived family or emotional support is a predictor of academic persistence.

Instrumental Support and Academic Persistence

As House (1981) described, instrumental support includes physical or tangible objects, such as giving or receiving money, childcare, or a ride to school. Higher education is not free in the United States, and according to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2020), the cost of attending a non-profit four-year university as a full-time student is nearly $14,000 a year. The price rises to over $27,000 at private schools (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2020). Student loans, grants, and scholarships help students pay for their education. Herzog (2018) found students who met the financial eligibility requirements for federal Pell grants and who received instrumental support in the form of subsidized loans, and especially those who took the max amount of loans offered, were at a greater risk of not academically persisting than students who did not take loans. It was shown that the military spouse has several opportunities to receive instrumental financial support in the way of military-specific scholarships and programs, yet a 2019 survey found military spouses listed the cost of attaining an education as the number one reason for not attending higher education (DoD, 2020). Furthermore, many military spouses may be eligible for receiving Pell-grant funding, and based on Herzog's (2018) findings, this could put them at greater risk of not academically persisting if they took student loans to finance their education.

As stated earlier, 31,500 spouses were beneficiaries of the Post 9/11 GI Bill in 2016 (The Congressional Budget Office, 2019). Unfortunately, graduation rates for military spouses who used the Post 9/11 GI Bill to finance their education are not readily available. Further research

with this population is needed to determine if transferring the Post 9/11 GI Bill to the military spouse student aids academic persistence.

The expense of childcare and the challenge of finding appropriate care were listed among the top five reasons military spouses could not enroll in higher education (DoD, 2020). A recent study explored the persistence rates of community college students who used school services, such as transportation, food banks, and childcare, with those who did not (Troester-Trate, 2020). The persistence rates between these two groups were similar, indicating if services are available and students in need use them, academic persistence may be stabilized (Troester-Trate, 2020). However, Salle and Cox (2019) found that student parents often did not use the services provided by the school because they were unaware of the support that was offered to them. Knowing what the school offers regarding instrumental support appeared to be the catalyst to obtaining help and persisting.

In contrast to the studies above, research conducted with biomedical students found that instrumental support, defined as providing educational material, such as books, or other tangible resources, was not a significant indicator of students' persistence in the program (Estrada et al., 2019). Like emotional support and persistence, identifying whether instrumental, tangible support with the military spouse student helps them persist is needed, and precisely, what types of instrumental support with this population is most effective.

Informational Support and Academic Persistence

House (1981) defines informational support as giving individual advice or guidance. Motivating and encouraging another individual would also fall under House's definition of informational support. Students who utilized academic advisors were more persistent than those who did not use this service (Tippetts et al., 2020). Ceglie and Settlage (2016) found persistence

in STEM degrees was correlated with women who had received support, guidance, and motivation from faculty members. The women reported having at least one teacher offer guidance and support motivated them to continue in the STEM field. In another study, Hatch and Garcia (2017) found that tutoring and advising may perpetuate persistence; however, it depends on the timing and type of assistance offered. They recommend faculty be observant of student goals and help accordingly. Cotton et al. (2017) argued higher education institutions that provided tutoring, study support, and transition assistance to their students could increase their persistence rates with the non-traditional student population. However, Southwell et al. (2018) researched student service members and veterans enrolled in college and found they visited academic officers and faculty less than their civilian peers, which could be attributed to a variety of factors. However, without the support and guidance that has been shown to increase academic persistence (Ceglie & Settlage, 2016), student service members and veterans are missing out on another supportive measure that could help them achieve their educational goals. Research regarding military spouse students and how receiving informational support regarding persistence is lacking. Future studies that include informational support could advance the literature and potentially help military spouses persist in achieving their educational goals.

Appraisal Support and Academic Persistence

House's (1981) definition of appraisal support is described as providing feedback or the evaluation of an individual's performance, for example. It could also include self-appraising behaviors. In a study with college distance education students, Brubacher and Silinda (2019) found intrinsic motivation, rather than self-assessed competency levels, predicted students' persistence in school. In contrast, Fong et al. (2017) found self-perceptions positively correlated with academic success and persistence. In addition, You (2018) also found that Korean college

students who displayed high self-efficacy displayed higher learning persistence levels. More research with different populations and regarding appraisal support is needed. The military spouse has often been described as having values that contribute to resiliency (Eubanks, 2013; Erbes et al., 2019); however, whether this is internalized and used as motivation to persist in higher education or whether self-perceptions promote persistence has not been researched. Future studies that focus on appraisal support and the possible relationship to military spouse student persistence can advance the literature.

Summary

The military spouse student is underrepresented in literature. While there are extensive studies conducted with the active-duty military member, the unique and challenging experiences military spouses are exposed to have limited research. Past research has focused on the military spouse as a supporting participant to the active-duty or veteran military member and not on their sole specific needs. The challenges this population is continuously faced with are varied and unique. Although studies have been conducted attempting to identify and fulfill the needs of the military community (Friedman et al., 2015), very few have been conducted involving military spouse students specifically.

Dorvil (2017) found military spouses eagerly want to participate in and attain education, yet report they are unable to because of the challenges the military lifestyle bestows on them. Challenges such as childcare and finances have been reported as the barrier to higher education for this group (Dorvil, 2017), even when they are eligible for educational benefits that have been enacted specifically for them. In addition, the military spouse population is diverse and has subpopulations within that present their own set of challenges separate from other military spouses. Military spouses who are men have different issues from dual-military couples, for

example. To understand the military spouse student, a look at all of the subpopulations is needed, as well as their resilience and coping patterns, in an attempt to understand and promote healthy behaviors that lead to academic persistence. The challenges identified create unique needs that have attempted to be identified in recent literature, yet studies fail to determine how to meet all their needs effectively.

The theoretical framework of this study is based on Bean and Metzner's (1985) non-traditional undergraduate student attrition model with a specific focus on the environmental supportive factors that are defined by House (1981). The types of support include emotional, informational, instrumental, and appraisal components. This study focuses on the emotional and instrumental support military spouses indicate they need or have received that enabled them to academically persist. Each component provides different supportive aspects and can meet various needs that account for the variance among student persistence factors. Social support has been studied with various higher education populations, but the military spouse student does not have significant research in this area.

Bean and Metzner's (1985) model guided the development of this study's research questions. Recent literature has not provided an understanding of what support military spouse students claim effectively assists them in their academic persistence to graduation. The military spouse student population is an area the field has not explored; however, this study can help close the gap literature has overlooked by providing an understanding of the supportive experiences of military spouses who academically persist to graduation.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenology was to understand the supportive experiences that influenced the academic persistence to graduation of military spouse students. This chapter begins with a thorough description of this study's research design, followed by a restatement of the research questions. Next, this study's setting and participants are described. A section regarding researcher positionality is then provided and offers a description of my interpretive framework explaining the lens through which this study was conducted. Within the researcher positionality section, my philosophical assumptions, to include my ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions, are explained and followed by a description of my role as the human instrument in this study. Next, the permissions and recruitment plan are described in the procedures section. The data collection plan section then provides detailed descriptions of the three types of collection methods this study used and the data analysis plan for each method, followed by a description of how the data was synthesized. The last section in this chapter involves trustworthiness, where credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and ethical considerations are explained. The chapter concludes with a summary.

Research Design

The problem this study addressed is that more than 85% of military spouse survey respondents indicated they only had some college while 34% of the respondents stated they had a college degree (U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, 2017). These figures can indicate that specific military challenges limit degree attainment. Studies have found that military spouses want an education but are unable to achieve their education goals due to military lifestyle constraints (Dorvil, 2017; Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). Research has shown higher education

institutions are interested in retaining as many students as possible to enhance current institution success and to elevate future revenue through students and alumni (Haverila et al., 2020). Research has also shown attending higher education has been linked to lower poverty rates (Keller, 2021), higher salaries (Chen, 2017; Heller, 2011; Torpey, 2018), and feelings of community (Johnson et al., 2020). This study intended to understand the experiences of the military spouse student in an attempt to identify the type of support military and higher education institutions could provide that enables academic persistence to graduation. A qualitative design was chosen because it explores a problem to understand a phenomenon (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019) and uses narrative stories to describe participants' experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This type of design allowed the participants to share their reflective thoughts and gave voice to their experiences. Through interviews, focus groups, and personal written letters, narrative stories emerged that helped understand how social support influences academic persistence to graduation for military spouse students.

This study used a hermeneutic phenomenological design. Phenomenological studies describe the experiences of a group of individuals who have a shared commonality that produces an overarching phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A phenomenological approach was best suited for this study as military spouse students already have shared commonalities; however, the type of support or reasons for persisting based on their social support may differ. Moustakas (1994) describes transcendental phenomenological studies as a research design using a system that limits or eliminates researcher judgment to describe a phenomenon in its purest form, as explained from the participant's experiences. Although Creswell and Poth (2018) and Moustakas (1994) explain the phenomenological design from an approach that includes the acknowledgment of researcher bias, this study used a hermeneutic phenomenological design to

describe the phenomenon as it appeared while also interpreting it to form a more profound understanding (van Manen, 1997). A hermeneutic design was chosen for this study because hermeneutic research acknowledges the researcher's experiences as part of the process (Bynum & Varpio, 2018). In contrast, transcendental research designs focus solely on describing the experience and ask the researcher to leave their experiences out of the data collection and analysis process (Moustakas, 1994).

Hermeneutic phenomenology explores the meaning of a phenomenon by looking at what shaped it (Bynum & Varpio, 2018). The fundamental principles of hermeneutic design focus on the participant's experience, acknowledging the researcher's experience as part of the data collection and analysis process, and the importance of reflection and writing during analysis (Bynum & Varpio, 2018; van Manen, 1997). Using this approach, studying experiences involves interpreting the "texts" of a participant's life to understand their experiences (van Manen, 1997). Using Husserl's phenomenological beliefs as a starting point, Heidegger (1962) developed a hermeneutic design that differed from Husserl's beliefs (Laverty, 2003). Instead of bracketing the researcher's biases and experiences during the data collection and analysis process, Heidegger (1962) believed one could not separate the world in which they live as our past is what inherently guides us. Incorporating researcher interpretation into the process creates a deeper understanding of the meaning of the phenomenon (Laverty, 2003).

The hermeneutic design worked well for this study as I am a military spouse who persisted through an undergraduate program. Recognizing the high level of familiarity and lifestyle between the participants and me, I could not separate myself from those experiences. As Heidegger (1962) suggested, I used my experiences to help me interpret participant data and enhance the process leading to understanding the phenomenon.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to understand the supportive experiences of military spouse students who academically persist to graduation. Bean and Metzner's (1985) non-traditional undergraduate student attrition model was used to frame the study and help develop the research questions. This study aimed to understand how social support, specifically emotional and instrumental supportive factors, could aid future military spouse students in their academic persistence to graduation. This information will help higher education institutions implement programs designed to meet the needs of the military spouse student. The central question aimed to guide data collection while the sub-questions supported the discovery process. The central question and sub-questions are listed below.

Central Research Question

What role does support play in the academic persistence of undergraduate military spouses?

Sub-Question One

How does emotional support affect academic persistence?

Sub-Question Two

How does instrumental support affect academic persistence?

Sub-Question Three

How does emotional and instrumental support influence military spouse students in their academic persistence during times of active-duty separations?

Setting and Participants

A study's setting is chosen to obtain information that answers the research questions (Spickard, 2017). This study's setting involved using social media to access students who

attended or graduated from various colleges across the United States. The participants chosen for this study had experienced the phenomenon of enrolling and attending a higher education institution while married to their active-duty spouse. This study's setting and participants are explained in greater detail below.

Setting

This study's setting involved several different higher educational institutions in the United States. Chosen participants attended public or private colleges where bachelor's degrees were offered. Various demographics, such as school enrollment numbers and student gender ratios, were not relevant to the study. Any universities identified were given pseudonyms. This setting was chosen because of the researcher's familiarity with the higher education system and the ability to reach various military spouse students attending higher educational institutions throughout the United States and who belonged to different military branches. Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest obtaining multiple perspectives is essential to obtaining credible findings. This type of setting was chosen to attain multiple perspectives from students who have experienced the same phenomenon.

Participants

Polkinghorne (2005) suggests using a small number of participants to understand a phenomenon from varied perspectives. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) explain that researchers should obtain data to the point of saturation, which occurs when behaviors and phrases become redundant. In line with Polkinghorne's (2005) suggestion of 10-15 participants, and to achieve saturation, 11 participants were chosen to be included in this study. Participants were recruited from military affiliated Facebook groups and from other military affiliated individuals. The participants chosen for this study were military spouse students who were within two years of

graduating with a bachelor's degree and were currently attending a four-year institution or had received a bachelor's degree within the last five years. All participants were over the age of 18 and married to an active-duty military member. All participants experienced a deployment or separation of three months or more during their educational journey. According to van Manen (2014), participants in a phenomenological study have a shared experience in common, and as researchers, we borrow these experiences to learn and educate ourselves. In this study, the shared experience military spouses had was that they were students who enrolled in and attended higher education courses while married to their active-duty spouses. The phenomenon of persisting in their educational journey was shared among the military spouse students, although their personal experiences as to what role and type of social support enabled or hindered them from doing so differed.

Researcher Positionality

According to Blakeslee and Fleischer (2019), the position a researcher takes when writing and designing a study affects all major aspects of the study. Research is a personal endeavor. A researcher's biases and beliefs play a role in how a study is designed and how the research questions are posed, and because of this, every researcher must be aware of their positionality (Blakeslee & Fleischer, 2019). The following paragraphs explain my positionality in conducting this study and the philosophical assumptions that guided the research.

Interpretive Framework

A social constructivist worldview framed this study. I was motivated to understand the world in which military spouse students live, which, according to Creswell and Poth (2018), describes the social constructivist researcher's goal. This paradigm recognizes that an individual's background forms how they interpret the world and interacting with others is how meaning and

understanding are achieved (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My beliefs agreed with the social

constructivist view. My study was designed to interact with military spouse students through

interviews that elicited descriptive data comprised from open-ended questions that ultimately

supported the research questions guiding this study.

Philosophical Assumptions

Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest a researcher's beliefs guide their research. This study

used a hermeneutical research design that inserted the researcher into the design process, and my

assumptions were identified. According to van Manen (1997), the problem with

phenomenological research is that researchers already know too much about the topic and bring

their own experiences to the study that predisposes all interpretations. Researchers cannot

separate themselves from these assumptions (van Manen, 1997).

Ontological Assumption

Ontological assumptions involve what a researcher believes is the nature of reality

(Creswell & Poth, 2018). When reflecting on my ontological assumptions, a constructivist

viewpoint emerged. I believed differing realities can exist, and individuals construct their reality

through their experiences. Through the lived experiences of several participants, I found diverse

perspectives regarding individual realities that together led to a descriptive whole. These

different perspectives were needed to ensure a well-rounded and thorough understanding of how

a phenomenon occurs. This study captured the different perspectives of the military spouse

student participants and their portrayal of their reality regarding their experiences.

Epistemological Assumption

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), an epistemological assumption involves

knowledge, what makes it knowledge, and the relationship between the study's subject matter

and the researcher. Direct observation and immersion into the participant's life can produce meaningful context for the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this study, direct observation or immersion was neither practical nor realistic to understand the experiences of military spouse students. I could not immerse myself thoroughly enough in the participant's world to gain the best clarification of knowledge. Instead, for this study, knowledge was gained through my interpretation of what the participants communicated to me. Participants' quotes, statements, and body language become knowledge through my interpretations. My experiences as a military spouse molded my interpretations.

Axiological Assumption

A researcher's past is what guides interpretation (Heidegger, 1962). In this study, data was collected and interpreted while understanding that participants had unique realities. As a researcher, understanding my values and sharing them while collecting and analyzing data was the epitome of qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). During this study, I was a military spouse student who began an educational journey after marrying an active-duty military member. Through various moves throughout the United States and Japan, I persisted academically and graduated with a bachelor's degree. I understood and appreciated the unique challenges the military lifestyle imposes, and as a military spouse who sought to achieve a personal educational goal, I also wanted to help others achieve their education goals. This study employed the axiological assumption that my biases were real and they were acknowledged through my journal writing and throughout the data analysis process. Member checks were completed to ensure I captured the true essence of the participant's reality.

Researcher's Role

Peredaryenko and Krauss (2013) suggest the point of qualitative research is to derive meaning and understand a phenomenon strictly from participant perspectives; however, a researcher brings their own beliefs and biases that may agree or disagree with participants involved in the study. Like Heidegger (1962), Laverty (2003) suggests humans have a pre-understanding of what it means to be of the world. Unlike the bracketing approach that seeks to set aside researcher bias and experience in an attempt to focus solely on participant experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018), the hermeneutic researcher acknowledges they have experiences that add to the interpretive process (Bynum & Varpio, 2018). As the human instrument in this study, not only was I aware of this notion, but I also acknowledged that my previous experiences as a military spouse student could influence and add to the data obtained. My experiences that enriched the data are described below.

During this study, I was a spouse of an active-duty Marine Corps Officer who had served for 33 years. We have been married for 27 years. We raised three children together and have experienced countless deployments up to six months in duration and one wartime deployment that lasted longer than seven months. We also experienced countless smaller separations lasting from two days to several weeks. These shorter trips were numerous and disrupted consistency in our home. During all of these times, I had to rely on social supports, specifically emotional and instrumental supports, that enabled me to persist academically.

Education had always been a part of our lives. My spouse and I entered the marriage with neither having more education than a high school diploma. I began my educational journey when our children were between one and seven years old. While obtaining my degree, we moved three times, one being overseas. It took me six years to obtain my bachelor's degree in psychology,

double the time it took my spouse, whose sole military job was to earn the degree. Unlike many of my fellow military spouses, I did not work during this time and focused strictly on my schoolwork while raising our children. Reflecting on the social support I received during different periods of my educational journey helped me understand the vital role support plays in maintaining persistence. As van Manen (1997) suggests, researchers must find a subject they are interested in and one from where they can draw experience. The military lifestyle has provided me with countless experiences to reflect on while simultaneously interpreting participants' experiences.

Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest reflexivity is "positioning" oneself as a writer through self-awareness and suggest researchers should write about their thoughts while conducting the study. To ensure I practiced reflexivity, I maintained a personal journal to record thoughts and experiences to maintain awareness. Once the data was collected, I analyzed and reflected on participant themes that emerged, including my experiences in the process. These steps were conducted to further the research regarding military spouse students, a population in which I was invested.

Procedures

This section explained this study's permissions and recruitment plan in detail. In research proposals, procedures should be as detailed as possible to show potential participant risks, according to Creswell and Guetterman (2019). This study's various permissions, sample pool, sample size, and type of sample were identified and explained below.

Permissions

Prior to data collection, Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) 's approval to conduct the study was granted (See Appendix A). The social media site Facebook was used to

gain access to private groups housed within the site. The groups I asked to participate in this study were all affiliated with the military and permission to post was requested from the group administrators as required. Groups were chosen based on their inclusivity to gender, their locations, military branch affiliation, military member rank, and participant numbers.

Recruitment Plan

Creswell and Poth (2018) state that a purposeful sampling method works best when all participants within a study experience a collective phenomenon. Purposeful, convenience, and snowball sampling was used in this study to identify military spouse students who academically persisted. Members from Facebook groups and suggested participants from military affiliated individuals formed the participant pool. This study included a sample size of 11 military spouse participants that met the criteria listed previously in this chapter. All participants in this study were chosen because they have experienced the phenomenon of attending academic courses in higher education while married to an active-duty military member.

Krysik and Finn (2018) suggest convenience sampling strategy saves time by using readily available participants. Convenience sampling saved time and broadened the group's diversity to incorporate different perspectives. The snowball sampling technique obtained data from participants who were suggested by others and who met the criteria. Snowball sampling is used when a researcher may need help identifying suitable participants and reaches out and asks current participants for recommendations (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Once participants were identified, informed consent was obtained (See Appendix D). The first 11 respondents that met all criteria and returned signed consent forms were selected.

Data Collection Plan

Once informed consent forms and demographic information were received, data collection began. A triangulation approach was used, as this involves obtaining data using different methods to create credible and reliable themes that emerge from all data collectively (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Triangulation involves understanding the big picture by synthesizing several single accounts (Polkinghorne, 2005), using several data collection methods, and then comparing the data across all methods (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This study used interviews, focus groups, and a letter participants will write to their younger selves to obtain participant data.

Data collection occurred over approximately 11 weeks. Data collection began with a virtual interview with each participant. The interviews ranged in time between thirty minutes to one hour. In qualitative research, the purpose of an interview is to describe a phenomenon's meaning using a small number of participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The central and sub-research questions guided the development of the interview questions. Participants were asked to provide answers that described their experiences with social support and how it influenced their academic persistence. A semi-structured interview procedure was used, as the questions were developed before the interview and asked in an order that reflected the natural flow of the interview, flexibility was built in for deviations relevant to the study (Bhattacharya, 2017). To understand a participant's reality through any type of data collection, they must be made to feel comfortable. Through interviews, I established trust and helped the participant feel comfortable sharing their experiences. After the initial interview, the participant was asked to attend and share their thoughts with others in a focus group (See Appendix E). The questions posed in the focus groups identified participants' views regarding the support that helps military spouse

students academically persist during deployments. Finally, participants were asked to write a letter to themselves. This last data collection method allowed participants time to reflect on their educational journeys and uncover areas where support was needed. Participants had two weeks to reflect on what advice they would give to their former selves as they began their educational journey.

The data collection sequence was chosen to initially build rapport with the participant during the interview, hoping that the participant would feel more comfortable sharing their experiences later when they participated in a focus group. The particular sequence was also chosen to use the data obtained in the interview to ask more direct or clarifying questions in the focus groups. The personal advice letter was chosen as the last data collection method because after participating in an interview and focus group, the participant's recollections of their experiences were fresh in their mind. The experiences the participants discussed in their interview and with others in a focus group potentially provided more personal and helpful advice when writing the letter to their former selves.

Although this study used a hermeneutic phenomenology design to understand the phenomenon's essence, to analyze data, Moustakas' (1994) modified van Kaam method was the specific design chosen as it identified steps taken during the analysis process that led to interpreting the essence. Moustakas (1994) suggests seven steps are needed to analyze a participant transcript. He begins with step one that involves listing and grouping the material, or horizontalization, as Moustakas (1994) defines it. During the horizontalization process, the researcher is looking for meaningful material and will group similar phrases (Moustakas, 1994). In step two, Moustakas suggests researchers should reduce and eliminate vague phrases that are unnecessary and do not contribute to understanding the phenomenon. In step three, core themes

are developed through a clustering technique. Step four involves validating the themes to ensure the developed themes capture what the participant's transcripts indicate or express. In step five, verbatim examples are used to encapsulate each participant's textual descriptions, and these descriptions are used to develop each participant's structural description in step six. Finally, in step seven, the essence of combined participant experiences is formed through a combined textural-structural description (Moustakas, 1994).

Individual Interviews

The first data collection method described involves participant interviews. The questions posed to the participants were approved by my Chair and reviewed by my committee. After approval, the first interview conducted served as the pilot interview. The questions posed in an interview reflect the study's research questions and are the guiding focus of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A semi-structured interview was given with each participant via Zoom. All initial interviews were recorded audibly and visually. Interview questions elicited participant vulnerability as they recalled the social support they received over the years. The interview questions are listed below.

Individual Interview Questions

1. Please tell me about you and your family. CRQ

2. What were your experiences with the military or military culture before meeting your spouse? CRQ

3. What are some advantages or positive experiences you have had that can be contributed to the military or military lifestyle? CRQ

4. What are some disadvantages or challenging experiences you have had that can be attributed to the military or military lifestyle? CRQ

5. Describe a supportive experience that influenced you to enroll in higher education. CRQ

6. Describe an experience, after you enrolled, where your spouse or family supported you in your educational journey. SQ1

7. Describe an experience when the military community, to include other military spouses, supported you in your academic journey. SQ2

8. Please explain how professors or instructors support you in your academic journey. SQ2

9. Please explain how spirituality impacts your academic persistence. SQ2

10. Please describe an incident when you felt supported financially by the military as a military spouse student. SQ2

11. Please describe a time when you felt the military aided in your persistence. SQ2

12. Please describe a time when you felt your school aided in your persistence. SQ2

13. Please describe a time when you felt the military caused barriers to your persistence. SQ2

14. Please describe a time when you felt your school caused barriers to your persistence. SQ2

15. Please describe your experiences, positive or negative, as a student during a deployment. SQ3

16. Reflecting on your experiences with academic persistence throughout your journey, what supportive area could have helped you more? CRQ

17. Thank you for your time and assistance with this study. What are your final thoughts regarding social support and persistence with the military spouse student population? CRQ

Building rapport is a vital part of the interview process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I built rapport and trust by asking questions about the participant, their family, and the military while also relating to their experiences. After rapport was built, I began asking questions about when the participant decided to start their educational journey, and the supportive experiences they had that enabled them to enroll. I asked about emotional and instrumental support, as defined by House (1981), and captured any supportive or non-supportive academic experiences the participant shared. Sub-question three of this study inquired about support received during deployments. There was only one question about deployments in the initial interview. Deployment questions were answered in the focus groups and questions were based on the data attained from question 19. The final interview questions provided an opportunity for participants to reflect on their entire educational journey and the supportive experiences they believe would have helped them persist, in addition to the already identified support.

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

Using Moustakas' (1994) modified van Kaam analysis design to understand the essence of the problem, a sentence-by-sentence approach of each participant's texts was conducted. Moustakas describes horizontalization as repetitively reading each participant's transcript sentence-by-sentence and grouping keywords and phrases together that represent similar thoughts. This coding technique led to organizing and analyzing the data. Next, Moustakas (1994) suggests eliminating any words or phrases that do not add value to understanding the phenomenon's essence and identifying the invariable constituents or meaning units. Phrases that repeated themselves or were vague throughout each participant's transcript were eliminated, and the remaining words and phrases were formed into clusters that produced four emergent themes

that incorporated all participant's transcripts together. A lean coding system was be used to make sense of the texts within the transcripts (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Moustakas (1994) argues that it is vital to address bracketing during the analysis process and ensure the themes that emerge represent the participant's experiences. While Moustakas' (1994) is grounded in transcendental phenomenology, this study was hermeneutic in design. While I agreed with Moustakas regarding his belief that participants' experiences are what is to be explored and discovered, I was unable to completely bracket my personal experiences from interpretation, as they were my experiences and interpretations alone and cannot be removed from my thoughts entirely.

Once themes emerge from the clusters, Moustakas (1994) suggests they should be validated. To do this, repetitive reading of each participant's transcript occurred to ensure the overall themes identified captured what the participants experienced across all transcripts. Individual textual descriptions for each participant then occurred. Creswell and Poth (2018) point out that textual descriptions are formed when a researcher uncovers what a participant experienced instead of how they experienced it. I ensured themes captured where what the participants experienced and not how they experienced them. Verbatim examples were used to elaborate on participants' experiences.

Next, a structural description of how each participant experienced the phenomenon was uncovered. Creswell and Poth (2018) state that structural descriptions explain the context of the experience or the participant's condition during the experience. Moustakas (1994) calls this the imaginative variant and is valuable to the analysis process as the researcher must interpret the experiences using different perspectives to adequately describe how the participants experienced

the phenomenon. In this study, I used imagination variation to look at what each participant's experiences were and how, or in what context, they experienced it.

Finally, Moustakas (1994) suggests that to identify the phenomenon's essence, a final synthesis of the textural and structural descriptions should occur. I reviewed the individual textual and structural descriptions to create a collective interpretation of the essence of the phenomenon. The essence of this study was to understand the supportive experiences of military spouse students who academically persist to graduation.

In addition, I took notes during the interview to capture unspoken narratives, such as participant nonverbal language. I also participated in memoing throughout the data collection and analysis process by taking notes that outlined my thought processes of what the data indicated and where I believed it was heading. Memoing, according to Creswell and Poth (2018), helps the researcher develop their theory. Memoing kept my thoughts in a linear pattern that led to understanding the essence of the phenomenon.

Interviewing participants was one step in the data collection and analysis process of this study. To achieve triangulation, I synthesized data collected from interviews, focus groups, and letters participants wrote to themselves. I used a lean coding system to describe, classify, and interpret the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Focus Groups

After their interview, participants were asked to join and share their experiences in an online focus group. This study included two focus groups and one individual interview that asked the same questions as the focus group. Claire was unable to meet at the designated focus group times and expressed that she still wanted to participate in answering the deployment and separation questions. She had recently begun a military separation and her answers provided

insight into the support she was currently receiving. Designating times for the focus group was difficult as participants lived in three times zones throughout the United States. The first focus group had three participants. The second group had five participants. As the facilitator of the semi-structured focus groups, the questions I posed supported data triangulation amongst all three collection methods. The data attained from the one individual interview question on deployment drove the order of the focus group questions. Research sub-question three supports the primary topic of the focus groups, which focused on the supportive experiences associated with deployments or separations that helped or hindered participants from persisting academically. Deployments often produce different and more stressful situations for military families (Ormeno et al. 2020) than during times of non-deployment. Discussing the topic of deployments in a group setting possibly helped participants recall and clarify their own experiences while relating to the experiences of others. Differentiating between the needs of the military student during deployment and their needs during non-deployment produced data that identified differences between the two time periods.

Creswell and Guetterman (2019) state that participants in a focus group who share similarities is optimal and that data collected from focus groups can produce a shared understanding. Smaller focus groups are best when sensitive topics are explored or when participants are highly involved with the focus group topic (Morgan & Hoffman, 2018). The experiences this study's participants share in a focus group was sensitive, and all participants experienced a deployment or separation during their educational journey. Participants were divided into two groups and were asked to attend an online semi-structured focus group at the time that was most convenient for them. The focus groups occurred online via Zoom and was audio and visually recorded. The individual interview with Claire was only audibly recorded.

Focus Group Questions

1. Please introduce yourselves and tell the group a little about your military affiliation and educational background. CRQ

2. What challenges did you experience as a student during a deployment? SQ3

3. What are some types of support you experienced as a student during a deployment? SQ3

4. What are your experiences with family support during a deployment as a student? SQ3

5. How could your family support you more during a deployment as a student? SQ3

6. What are your experiences regarding military community support during a deployment as a student? SQ3

7. How can the military community support you more during a deployment as a student? SQ3

8. How can professors or instructors support you during a deployment as a student? SQ3

9. If you utilized any military resources during a deployment, please describe how they helped you persist. SQ3

10. If you utilized any of your school resources, please describe how they helped you persist. SQ3

11. What is the most important type of support or resource you believe you needed or received during a deployment as a student? SQ3

According to Morgan and Hoffman (2018), the first question should set the tone and help the participants feel more relaxed and willing to share their experiences with strangers. The first question in each focus group asked participants to tell a little about themselves, such as previous duty stations, how long they had been involved in the military lifestyle, and their higher

education background, such as when they graduated or their focus of study. Using a semi-structured facilitation approach allowed me to direct the questions based on the data attained from the individual interviews and ultimately navigate the group's conversation flow. The remaining questions explored experiences regarding the challenges they had faced, the types of support they had received, and the resources they had used or needed during a deployment that helped them academically persist to graduation. The data attained from the focus groups, the individual interviews, and the third data collection method of letter writing was triangulated and used to understand the supportive experiences of military spouse students who academically persist to graduation.

Focus Groups Data Analysis Plan

As with data analysis of interview data, the same process was used to identify themes from focus group recordings. Moustakas' (1994) modified van Kaam data analysis method was used where a sentence-by-sentence approach to the text was reviewed to develop and interpret themes. Similar to the data analysis procedure used with the interviews, I used individual textual and structural descriptions to understand the *what* of the experience, which led to identifying the essence of the phenomenon. During the collection and analysis process, I continued to write in my journal to reflect on my own experiences.

Personal Letter Written to Self

The third data collection method this study will used a written letter the participant will write to their former self (Appendix G). To ensure the participant captures the experience the study is trying to understand, the researcher must provide clear instructions, according to van Manen (1997). Participants were asked to write a letter to their previous beginning student self. They were asked to focus on the advice they would give to themselves as they embarked on their

educational journey and what may make future situations easier regarding academic persistence. Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest documents, such as letters, are generally used in addition to interviews and other data collection methods to supplement and enhance the overall collection and provide a triangulation effect. The letters participants wrote described difficult situations they faced and their perceptions regarding what would have helped them overcome those challenges. As suggested by Hayman et al. (2012), participants will be provided clear instructions and information and be given two weeks to write their letters. Ten participants wrote personal letters giving their formal beginning student self valuable advice. Many participants exclaimed they enjoyed the experience.

Personal Letter Written to Self Data Analysis Plan

In conjunction with prior data analysis procedures used during the interview and journal data analysis processes, the data received from participant written letters also used the sentence-by-sentence approach and a lean coding system to achieve thematic accuracy. After themes were identified, individual textual and structural descriptions describing the experience in terms of what and how were uncovered. I memoed throughout the data collection and analysis process. Using Moustakas' (1994) modified van Kaam analysis method led to identifying the essence of the phenomenon.

Data Synthesis

This study used Moustakas' (1994) modified van Kaam approach to synthesize the themes from each data collection method. Memoing occurred throughout the data collection and analysis portion of the study. Using a lean coding system, as defined by Creswell and Poth (2018), the themes from each method, and any relevant notes I made throughout the process, were used to identify initial codes. These codes were then expanded to review and group and

were reduced, once again, to include categories that lead to one theme (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The goal is to have five to six themes to write the narrative (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study

had four distinct themes that identified areas where support occurred in the military spouse

student's lives.

Trustworthiness

Shenton (2004) argues trustworthiness in qualitative research has been criticized for its

inability to demonstrate the validity and reliability that naturalistic research can demonstrate.

Various concepts and terms have been identified to address these concerns and seek to show

validity and reliability in qualitative research. Concepts such as transferability, credibility,

dependability, and confirmability, as developed by Guba and Lincoln (1982), can help determine

whether a qualitative study is trustworthy, thereby valid and reliable.

Credibility

Merriam and Tisdell (2015) suggest qualitative research is never absolute in capturing the

entire truth or reality of a study; however, qualitative researchers can conduct steps that improve

the credibility of the study's findings. Creswell and Poth (2018) point out clarifying researcher

bias and collaborating with participants can establish credibility. I identified any researcher bias

by writing in my journal throughout the data collection and analysis process to clarify and

acknowledge my past experiences and beliefs and their connection to this study.

This study also used triangulation to ensure credibility. Triangulation involves reviewing

the data collected from the different collection methods to ensure the developed themes are

represented within each method (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). This study used three methods

to obtain participant data; interviews, focus groups, and written letters participants wrote to

themselves.

Member checking was also used to enhance credibility. Member checking is described as an accountability measure that ensures the study's findings are accurate (Creswell & Poth, 2018). After initial interviews and focus groups were conducted and the letters collected, the results were transcribed by hand and through a transcription application, and shared with participants to ensure their words were transcribed correctly and their meaning was given the correct context they intended. Participants were given two weeks to review and provide feedback.

Transferability

Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest extensive descriptions must occur between researcher and research subjects to ensure accurate transferability. Incorporating a rich, detailed, and thick description allows readers the opportunity to transfer findings to different groups based on shared characteristics (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study was generalized to all military spouse students based on the chosen sampling method, data collection, and analysis methods used. Throughout the study, transferability was achieved by extensively describing participants by using their answers to questions, their experiences, and their stories regarding the role social support played in their persistence in higher education. Connecting the data and themes and using action words to describe helps ensure transferability occurs, according to Creswell and Poth (2018), and is what this study used.

Dependability

Shenton (2004) suggests a study's processes can be repeated accurately only when they are explained in detail. My dissertation committee and the Qualitative Research Director at Liberty University conducted a thorough review of this study's findings and the processes involved in collecting and analyzing the findings. To aid in this external audit, I created an audit

trail that explained how findings were generated using the procedures listed in this study (Appendix E).

Confirmability

Merriam and Tisdell (2015) explain the concept of confirmability in qualitative research as not necessarily representing whether the findings from a particular study could be found again in other studies; rather, whether the findings are indicative of the data obtained. DePoy and Gitlin (2016) suggest using an audit trail that leaves a traceable path to the researcher's thoughts and actions throughout the analytic process. I used an audit trail incorporating my reflective journal, notes, Microsoft Excel spreadsheets, member checks, and written findings to maintain confirmability. Audit trails are used to understand the researcher's process and procedures that lead to the study's findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Ethical Considerations

Moustakas (1994) suggests individuals who conduct research with human participants should be guided by ethical principles that outline the practice. Ethical principles include maintaining standards regarding agreements and disclosures with participants, ensuring confidentiality, and receiving participants' informed consent (Moustakas, 1994). Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest ethics should be considered before conducting the study, at the beginning of the study, while collecting, analyzing, and reporting data, and throughout the publishing process.

Before data collection, Liberty University's Institutional Review Board's approval was granted. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), approval must occur before data collection begins. Once IRB approval was gained, data collection commenced. Participants were made aware of the purpose of the study in the recruitment announcement (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To build trust and show respect (Creswell & Poth, 2018), when setting up interviews, I was sensitive

to the unique needs of the military spouse student population and scheduled meetings at times that were conducive to their schedules. Informed consent was be obtained from all participants; they were not coerced to participate and were informed their participation was voluntary, which Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest is a necessary ethical consideration. Participants were made aware they can stop participating at any time during the study, and should that occur, any previous data collected would be removed and disposed of using a paper shredder.

It was disclosed that all research collected via paper will be locked in a file cabinet when not in use. Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest using appropriate security measures throughout the data collection and analysis process. I collected data electronically and stored it on an encrypted flash drive and stored the flash drive in a locked filing cabinet. It was disclosed that once the study is published, all paper documents will be destroyed via shredder and disposed of accordingly.

Privacy is a critical ethical component (Creswell & Poth, 2018), and this study's participant's privacy was maintained at all times and costs. Confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms. All identifying names on paper documents was changed to reflect their pseudonym, except the informed consent document.

Summary

This chapter described the hermeneutic phenomenological design and why it was chosen for this study. This type of design allows the researcher to be part of the data collection and analysis process. As a military spouse student, I identified with this population, and my reflective experiences enhanced the data and provided a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of persisting to graduation in higher education.

Chapter Three also explained how the participants were identified, their specific demographics, and processes regarding data collection. This chapter explained that Facebook and snowball sampling was used to attain a participant pool and interviews and focus groups were conducted, and participants were given explicit instructions on how to complete their personal written letters. The data collection methods were discussed, and a detailed analysis plan was described, followed by explaining how trustworthiness, credibility, dependability, and transferability would be assured. Finally, ethical considerations were addressed.

Military spouse students are a unique population who face unique challenges at different times (Trautmann et al., 2018). The research questions guiding this study aimed to understand the experiences of military spouse students who academically persist to graduation. Using Bean and Metzner's (1985) non-traditional undergraduate student attrition model to frame the study, a look at different types of support and how they influenced academic persistence with this population was the goal of this study and guided the choice of research design, data collection, and data analysis processes.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of undergraduate military spouse students who academically persist to graduation. Prior research (Dorvil, 2017; U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, 2017) indicates that military spouses may incur challenging events that can inhibit them from achieving a bachelor's degree, even though they desire to attain one. These challenges differ from other types of non-traditional students (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). Stress from deployments (Padden et al., 2011), feeling isolated (Wadsworth & Southwell, 2011), trying to raise a family in an unconventional environment (Sallee & Cox, 2019), and having to continuously make new friends because of multiple relocations (Mailey et al., 2018) can be situations non-traditional students may experience in single occurrences. The military spouse often experiences several of the forementioned situations at the same time. This chapter explains the findings that resulted from the data obtained from participants. Sections in this chapter include participant descriptions, narrative themes, followed by subthemes, outlier data, and answers to this study's research questions. A summary concludes this chapter.

Participants

Purposeful, convenience, and snowball sampling were used to obtain 11 participants through several online military-affiliated Facebook groups once I secured IRB approval. Obtaining interested participants for this study was difficult and as a result, the original participant recruitment efforts were broadened to include recruitment from additional military-affiliated Facebook groups. Participant requirements were also broadened to include participants who started school before marriage and to permit participants who obtained their degree within the last five years to participate. My original goal of obtaining non-persisting participants was

unsuccessful; still, the participants of this study shared diverse and meaningful experiences that contributed significantly to answering the study's research questions. Four military branches were represented among the participants. As shown in Table 1, participants were asked about graduation status and whether there were children in the home while attending higher education. Table 1 also shows the method of participation in which the participant shared their experiences. The one anomaly regarding the method used was with Claire, who could not participate in either of the focus groups, but wanted to share her deployment experiences. A separate interview was conducted with Claire where she was asked the same questions regarding deployments as the focus groups. Pseudonyms represent the participants to protect identity and confidentiality. Member-checks occurred once all forms of data collection were transcribed.

Table 1

Participants

Name	Military Branch Affiliation	Children at Home	Graduated	Method of Participation
Amanda	Navy	Yes	Yes	Interview/Focus Group/Letter
Becky	Air Force	Yes	No	Interview/Focus Group/Letter
Claire	Navy	No	Yes	Interview/Deployment Interview/Letter
Dana	Marine Corps	No	No	Interview/Letter
Emily	Navy	Yes	Yes	Interview/Focus Group/Letter
Faith	Marine Corps	Yes	No	Interview/Focus Group/Letter
Gina	Marine Corps	Yes	No	Interview/Focus Group/Letter
Hope	Marine Corps	No	No	Interview/Focus Group/Letter
Iris	Army	Yes	No	Interview/Focus Group/Letter
Julia	Navy	Yes	Yes	Interview/Letter
Kris	Marine Corps	Yes	Yes	Interview

Results

Using Moustakas' (1994) modified van Kaam design to guide this study's data analysis, a sentence-by-sentence review of each participant's text led to grouping keywords that ultimately formed clusters. The clusters led to the identification of four primary themes: military factors, school factors, personal factors, and deployment and separation factors, as shown visually in

Figure 1. Each theme identified areas where support was received and where support was lacking with academic persistence.

Figure 1

Themes and Subthemes
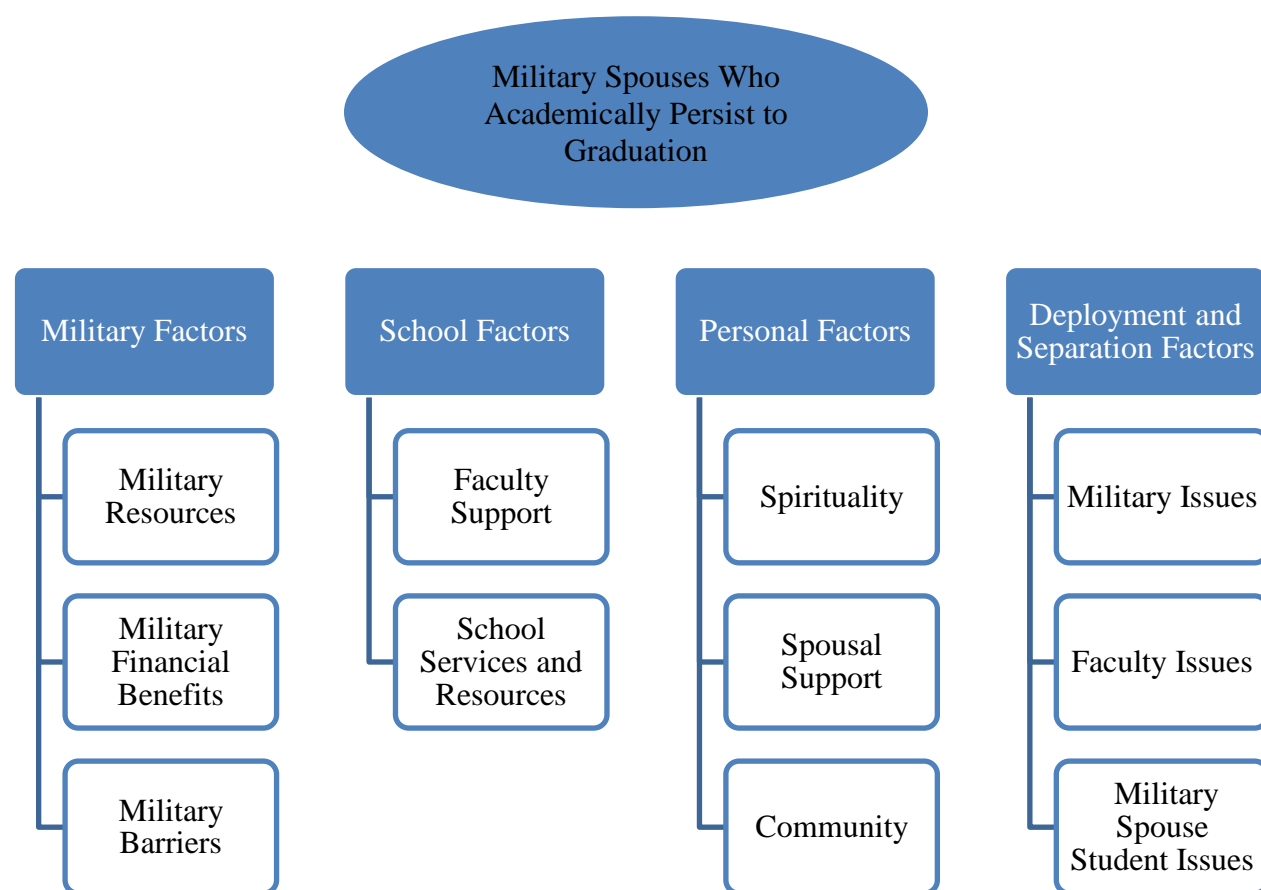
Military Factors

This theme included the various types of military support and barriers participants identified that enabled or inhibited their academic persistence. As shown in Figure 1, the subthemes within this theme included military resources, military financial benefits, and military barriers. Sources of support included having financial stability and taking advantage of various services or resources provided to military spouses. Moving-related stressors, such as the inability

to plan or have control over where to relocate, or having to make difficult family decisions to accomplish educational goals, as well as childcare and financial pressures, were shown to cause hardships and identified where additional support was needed.

Military Resources

This subtheme developed as participants described how the various military-affiliated services or resources affected their academic persistence positively or negatively. Each military branch has dedicated resources that support military families regarding different topics, such as financial help, educational guidance, and new family support groups. While Dana, Julia, and Iris knew about and used some of the resources military branches provide for spouses, the remaining eight participants either did not know about or did not utilize any of these services outside of childcare. Dana and Iris were the only two participants who knew about and used the education center on military bases.

Unawareness of services and resources was mentioned by ten of the participants as being a catalyst to not receiving military provided support. Amanda suggested that without knowing about the resources, support received from the military is extremely limited. Amanda further commented that many resources available are only provided to a select group of spouses; the MYCAA, for example. Julia, who did know about and used military resources, stated, "there's a lot of support for military spouses and I know it's kind of hard, it can be hard to find if you don't know where to look." Sharing Julia's views, Claire exclaimed:

> I feel like a lot of spouses that I know, aren't aware of all the resources available. And it's really hard to find out unless you find like a seasoned spouse that knows all these things, which can be hard to find, right?

Military Financial Benefits

While several participants indicated more military financial support or military services was needed, most participants indicated that the military benefited them financially in some large or small way. Financial security can reduce some stressors. Gina explained that not worrying about job security and having a steady paycheck enabled her to persist in her education. She stated:

> …you know the military is not like a civilian job, you never will skip a paycheck, it's not like, you know, that money always comes in.

Echoing Gina's declaration that the military brings financial security, Claire expressed that the military paycheck, although small, enabled her to remain in school and complete her internship:

> …the BAH allowance and those kinds of things, like, helped my husband and I get through so that we could afford just, you know, the basics like food and rent and things like that, so that I could do my, get my, you know, my degree so we could eventually make more money anyway.

Participants mentioned other benefits the military provided that aided in their academic persistence, and when analyzed, were discovered to be financial in nature. Hope stated that military health benefits provided her support while she was in school, while both Faith and Kris acknowledged that having the title of military spouse allowed them to incur lower tuition rates at their respective schools. Kris said, "I got cheaper in-state tuition, even though I wasn't a resident of the state because he was active and I was his spouse." Lower taxes, more financial aid, and other discounts were also cited as valuable benefits of being a military spouse student. As Julia pointed out, "…there's tons of trainings that are free for spouses, there's tons of trainings that are

discounted, there's tons of programs that will help pay for licenses, like, there is a lot of stuff out there." Interestingly, only one participant stated they used their spouse's GI Bill to pay for their education.

Military Barriers

Constant moving between duty stations was a standard answer to the interview question about military hardships. Ten participants mentioned moving and relocating as being the cause of stress and feeling overwhelmed. In addition to moving, Faith exclaimed that not having control over the choice of where they lived or where they moved caused unnecessary feelings of distress:

> And I feel like it's just unfair sometimes the choices, ya know, how they give you the top three choices of where you would like to go, and I feel like that always gets pushed out of the way and they give you the worst spot. And I feel like it's inconsiderate sometimes because they don't, they don't look at the position you're in…we can't control it, but, it's rough, it's rough. And packing and unpacking and going through all of that, is so stressful.

Mirroring Faith's statements regarding the lack of control and inability to plan effectively, Emily explained that moving cross country contributed to her having to take a break from school, "I did take a break a year and a half ago, due to many factors. But one of them being we knew we were going to be moving back across the country. We just didn't know when." Emily and other participants were also at the mercy of the military when it came to planning and executing their moves, which left inconsistent time to devote to schoolwork. According to Emily, "…it takes like a week to, you know, to get across [the country], driving the entire time. It's not like you can stop and study." Like Emily, Hope also took a break from school when the military forced her to move.

Another factor associated with military moves involved deciding between being separated from your spouse or staying behind and remaining in school, as some school majors and programs are not easily transferrable or must be taken in-person rather than online. Julia and Kris were forced to make such a decision and voluntarily separated from their spouse to remain in their degree field and academically persist to graduation. Julia explained her situation, "…we were separated for like 5 months, I think, because I wanted to finish my degree, so I was like, I'm not moving…I couch surfed for about 5 months." Echoing Julia's decision, Kris shared:

> So, when I was doing my bachelor's, we actually had to separate, not like separate separate, but we did live separately for two years, because I had two years left of my degree and they sent him off to Japan and there was only like a few online schools and none of them had my degree so I stayed to finish school.

The career field and schedule of the military member was cited as another barrier to academic persistence by many of the participants. Having erratic schedules with frequent, and often unexpected, military demands caused several participants stress and made attending school and taking exams difficult. Having been in the military herself, Julia understood the erratic schedule military members can sometimes endure. She stated, "My husband gets up at one o'clock in the morning one week, and he goes to work at four and gets home at two the next week, like, it's not normal, it's not nine to five." Talking about the career path her spouse was in, Amanda stated, "…his schedule, it fluctuates so much. One week he's working, like, 12-hour shifts, I'm here by myself trying to, to do everything, school, work, take care of my mom, take care of kids, like…sometimes it becomes overwhelming…."

Kris suggested that the military be more flexible, when possible, to accommodate her education. According to many of the participants, childcare services on military bases are

extremely limited, and having your non-deployed spouse help even minimally by being able to watch children during unusual circumstances, such as having to take an exam, should not be out-of-the question. Kris felt the military does not support spouses who work or go to school outside of the home, "…like at some points it feels like most spouses just have to stay home because the military isn't lenient like letting husbands take the kids to daycare, pick them up for school, or stuff like that."

When asked what support could have helped with academic persistence, participants were divided between more financial support and better access to childcare. Julia believed the cost of childcare, relocating, and paying for books caused her financial hardships, and more support in these areas would help with academic persistence. Amanda, Emily, and Claire also agreed that more financial support would help with academic persistence. Iris stated that childcare was the greatest difficulty she faced and because her school was online, she did not have access to childcare facilities offered at her school. Echoing Iris' difficulties with childcare, Becky described how having even minimal childcare opportunities helped her as a military spouse student, "So, having a gym that has childcare, even for an hour, and you don't even have to work out, you could go work, you could go work on your schoolwork, or whatever you wanted to do, was huge."

School Factors

This section explains how faculty support, school services, and resources affected participants' stress levels and feelings of being supported. Having a military background and being a responsive and attentive faculty member contributed positively to the participant's feelings of being understood and supported. School financial support helped several participants reduce stress when it came to paying for their tuition, while other participants acknowledged that

their school guidance counselors and advisors directly and positively impacted their educational journey.

Faculty Support

Faculty who had some affiliation or knowledge with the military were shown to be more empathetic and understanding of what military spouse students may face, and because of this, may afford more leniency to military spouse students regarding specific deadlines or assignments. According to Iris, Faith, Kris, and Claire, faculty with military knowledge increased the chances of developing supportive relationships with military spouse students. Understanding and empathetic instructors who knew the hurdles military spouse students faced were often more lenient with assignment deadlines. Communicating with the professor about their situation was a defining factor in receiving support. Iris explained her professors and the communication she would have with them:

> I have had very understanding professors and instructors. As soon as I had like, a family emergency come up, or if my husband was in the field, they're really understanding as long as I let them know, 'Hey, I'm on solo parent this week. I might be late. My husband's gone. We don't do daycare.' So, it's like they let you do, they let you submit stuff late, if you need it….

Echoing Iris' comments, Faith stated that communication with a professor who had a military background and understood the hardships she was facing resulted in her feeling supported and less stressed about assignment deadlines. She exclaimed, "You know, I wasn't getting favoritism, but they knew the situations. So I was, I was very lucky."

Several participants also reported responsive and available faculty as being supportive and helpful. Gina explained that her time to work on schoolwork is limited and based on her

spouse's military schedule. She stated, "…if I send an email on Thursday for something that's due on Sunday, I really need that professor to respond because my husband's at work all day Saturday. He's gone Sunday. Friday's my day…." Time is valuable to all students, but for the military spouse student, working around a spouse's unpredictable schedule can interfere and severely limit the time that was previously dedicated to schoolwork.

Being a responsive and active participant in their students' educational journeys made some participants feel their professors cared about their student's successes. After receiving educational advice from a particular professor, Faith explained, "I couldn't thank her [the professor] enough because it was, it was nice to know that you know, the professor wasn't a robot." Claire reported she felt that her professor was personally invested in her educational success when she helped her with a challenging educational decision, "…she helped, [and] like, really make me feel more confident in that decision."

School Services and Resources

Reducing or eliminating educational debt was a goal for all participants. Unlike the unawareness of services and resources the military provided to military spouse students, most participants were aware of the financial support their school offered, even if they did not apply or use the resources. Emily reported that her school regularly will "…send out different organizations that offer scholarships." Claire was also aware of her school's financial assistance and knew where to look on her school's website to find this information. Faith and Hope happily reported that their school offered discounted tuition to military spouses. Hope remarked, "And they even extend military discount to spouses! So, they give the same discount [they give] active-duty to [the] spouse. I know, [it] blew my mind. I love them!" Claire explained that her school issued small grants to students during the COVID-19 pandemic to help with expenses, "I

got multiple grants and scholarships through them. I mean, financially, like they made it [academically persisting] very doable."

Several participants commented that their school provided supportive services other than financial support. Claire, Becky, Iris, and Hope explained that career and educational guidance provided by their respective school counselors and advisors enabled their academic persistence. Hope stated that attending a military-friendly school with dedicated military guidance and financial advisors was exceptionally helpful. In times of need, whether it was a power outage or an issue with a professor, Hope stated she would contact her advisor for support instead of contacting her instructors, "…I would just reach out to my, like my advisor, through my cell phone and she would then reach out to my professors. So, I never really talked to the professors one-on-one about any issues I might be having…." When asked about this uncommon practice, Hope replied she would contact her advisor first, "…because I just don't know how they [her professors] are going to have a conversation with me. And I don't want the back and forth. So I look for support with my advisor." In contrast to the experiences Claire, Becky, Iris, and Hope had, Amanda stated that she does not feel that her school is supporting the military spouse student enough. She indicated that her school had military financial advisors, services, and resources dedicated to helping veterans or active-duty service members but stated, "there's nothing for spouses."

Personal Factors

This section explored how personal factors may influence academic persistence. The theme evolved when the data emerged from clusters regarding spirituality, spousal support, and community support. Of the three subthemes, spousal support was the participants' most widely discussed and prominent source of support.

Spirituality

When asked if spirituality helped their academic persistence, most participants stated it was not a factor. Only four of the eleven participants expressed that some form of spirituality aided their persistence. Becky and Gina attended Christian schools, and both stated they were surprised by how that affected them. For example, Becky stated that attending a Christian school was "…surprisingly encouraging for me. And it's something that I didn't know I needed in an academic setting." Echoing Becky's views, Gina stated, "There's not an assignment that goes by that's not biblical, so, it really just grounds you in that and, um, I think just brings a lot of inner peace, and you know, just keeps you moving because of that." Claire and Hope also believed spirituality helped them persist, albeit differently from Becky and Gina. Claire turned to prayer and believed this helped her get through difficult times in her education. Hope relied on manifestation to achieve her educational goals, "I'm all about like, just, I feel like we can't control much in the world, so why not have, like, energy use and thought processes and, like, be focused on certain things to get to the goals you want."

Spousal Support

When participants discussed spousal support, all but one individual indicated that their spouse was supportive while they attended school. Most participants admired their spouses for the unwavering support and encouragement they provided. Participants' spouses encouraged them to enroll in higher education and maintained that type of support throughout their educational journeys in various ways. For example, Amanda pointed out that when she expressed interest in going to school, her spouse was very encouraging and "…he's always been quite supportive and he wants me to be happy with what I do, career wise." Amanda also made it a point to share that her spouse is, "…very supportive in that regard of making sure that I'm happy

and achieving my goals. He doesn't want it to be all about him, which sometimes can happen, you know, military-wise."

Similarly, Hope stated her husband encouraged her to enroll in school by saying things such as, "…come on, when are you going to start, when are you going to start? Come on, like, you know, you'll love it, you know you'll love it…." Dana shared that her spouse was also encouraging when she was considering starting higher education. Dana stated, "Well, my husband, first of all, he's like, super big on education. He loves to learn. He publishes things for fun, right? He reads for fun…so he was really encouraging since I didn't know what I wanted to do."

Faith and Becky expressed how they viewed their spouses as role models when enrolling and enrolling in education. Talking about when her spouse was pursuing his bachelor's degree, Faith stated, "I definitely saw how he copes and saw he was able to stay motivated in a way that, you know, he was able to actually achieve it and do it and I was so proud of him…." Becky had a similar experience to Faith's when witnessing her spouse prioritize education. Becky shared that her spouse is "…very much encouraging of, he's always eager to learn, he's always reading." Witnessing their spouses grow, cope, and continue to learn through education motivated these two participants to persist academically.

Participants who had children acknowledged that the most important type of support they received from their spouse was when their spouse would watch the children so the participant could focus on schoolwork. Iris pointed out her spouse, "…definitely stepped it up in the evenings when I really needed to study after you know, fussy baby all day." Becky had a similar experience and stated,

Okay, like maybe sometimes on the weekend, well even now, my husband will, you know, kind of make sure he's like, 'Are you good with school?' and, or 'Do you need my help this weekend?' and even if he, you know, watches the kids for a couple hours on a Sunday, which isn't an ideal day to get work done, but he's gonna take them and do something so that I can stay ahead of my schoolwork.

Several participants also pointed out how their spouses supported them financially as they attended higher education. Claire shared that her spouse helped her complete her degree by supporting her while she was unable to work due to student teaching requirements:

I had to do my student teaching, and so I wasn't able to work or make any money. And so with the little bit that the military does give us to live on, he, you know, supported me financially in that sense, like, so I could, could, you know, continue and finish my degree…otherwise, I don't know what I would have done.

In a comparable situation, Julia shared how her husband's financial support helped her academically persist, "Um, I mean, my husband is very supportive. I didn't have to work, he paid for everything. He paid all the bills, if I needed money for school, he was always supportive, he paid for daycare…." Gina's spouse also supported her financially when he reenlisted so she could stay home with their child and attend school, "so my husband…really wasn't expecting to extend his career in the military up until that point, and he extended for me and my son and, you know, for me to finish, so that was a really big supportive…moment…." When her spouse reenlisted, it gave Gina the financial security and support to persist academically.

Community

The last subtheme in this category that evolved from the data was military community support. This subtheme was placed under the personal factors category because the participants

shared vastly different personal experiences regarding how their military community supported their academic persistence. Julia, Dana, and Hope had the most positive experience with military community support, and Julia described how another military spouse supported her education:

> She's been a good support, like both emotionally and like with work like having a colleague and like talking through the move, she's moving, I'm moving, she's transferring her license, she's like, 'Hey, I found out about this program. I got this thing through a reimbursement,' or, and 'Hey, ya know, at this board,' or "Just look at this,' or, so we just kind of send each other back and forth, so, she's been a big support, as well.

Hope shared that another military spouse also helped her feel supported and grounded. Explaining that their personalities were complete opposites, Hope provided an example of how they viewed things differently and how the differing perspectives helped her. When telling her friend about a grade she received, Hope stated, "So if I got like a 93, I was like, 'Oh, my God,' and then I would tell [her] about it, and she'd be like…'It's a 93, like, hop off yourself!'" The type of relationship they had, and the different personalities, helped Hope keep things in perspective when it came to school.

Several other participants held different views regarding obtaining support from the military community. Having both positive and negative experiences with the military community, Amanda shared her story and stated the military community is good, "…because you don't really feel like you're alone. There is always other people who are in your exact same shoes, who have been there, done that, and can help you along the way." Later, however, Amanda explained that there were several times at different duty stations where she did not have military community support because a military base was not close to where she lived. Echoing Amanda's experience regarding a lack of military community support, Faith and Claire both

desired to be a part of the military community but did not live on base and stated it was difficult to meet other spouses. Faith, along with Julia and Amanda, expressed interest in developing or attending a support group where military spouses experiencing similar life struggles, such as school or work, can connect. The different experiences the participants had with their community were also discussed regarding deployments and separations, which is elaborated in greater detail in the next section.

Deployments and Separations

In this section, the subthemes developed as participants discussed their experiences with various types of support during deployments and separations. The clusters that formed from the data represented military factors, school factors, and personal factors. This section reflects participants' experiences that occurred during deployments or separations, as well as participants' suggestions regarding where additional support is needed during deployments and separations.

Military Issues

Military Command. This factor was placed under the subtheme of military issues because when asked about military community involvement during deployments or separations, many participants discussed the lack of support they received from their spouse's military unit or command. For example, Hope stated, "…. I feel like there's not a lot of support, while husbands are away, particularly, like, from the military directly, you know, like, especially unit support. I think they just kind of are like, 'Okay, bye.'" Comparatively, Amanda and Becky also felt isolated from the military community when they endured separations from their spouses. Becky shared her deployment experience:

During the remote assignment, I was so fortunate to have our family support. But aside

from that, I didn't feel any sense of support from the military. And you know, it's all

people run, so it's people that would need to be reaching out. There was a base close by

us, but since we weren't assigned to that base, there was no support from them even

medically, so it was kind of a big learning process for, for all of us to realize that. You

don't always have the military support, unfortunately.

Compared to Hope, Amanda, and Becky's experiences, Iris had positive experiences with

her spouse's command unit during a military separation. She explained:

So, I'm not sure about the Marines, but with the Army, we have the Soldier Family

Readiness groups. So that is a huge way for you to network within your company level

and get to know your husband's co-workers on the military side as well. And then also,

we have the Army Community Services Center, which holds a lot of coffee socials, every

other month, plus if you're EFMP. They also do that once a month as well.

Although her personal experience with the military community support was positive, she did

acknowledge and state that most military community support was "…geared towards people who

live on base, so a lot of the spouses off base often get forgotten…." Amanda had varying

experiences regarding military community support, and although she felt isolated while separated

from her spouse, as previously mentioned, she acknowledged that the military base they were

currently attached to did offer community support. She shared, "we do have spouses groups, they

reach out, they check on, they make sure you're okay…They still, there's support there that you

can actually feel, and it doesn't just feel like you're isolated and by yourself."

Amanda also pointed out that there often is no support for all military services when you are at a service-specific base. For example, she was at an Army base, but they did little to cater to the other service's needs. She suggested:

> So, I think it would be great if they actually had support for the other branches…If you're going to do, I guess what you would say, like, a joint base, make sure you have the support there for the other branches that are there. Because it's very, very limited. It's like an afterthought of like, oh crap, yeah, we've got Navy here.

Higher Education Issues

Military Familiarity. Similar to experiences when their spouse was not deployed, several participants stated they experienced more support from faculty during a separation when the professor or instructor knew about military hardships. Kris explained, "…one of my teachers, gave me, when I was pregnant and my husband left, he gave me extensions the entire year, or well, semester." She stated her professor gave her the extensions because "…he [professor] had been deployed when his wife was pregnant…." Comparatively, Amanda suggested that faculty sometimes do not understand military hardships. She stated:

> So maybe they could be a little bit more understanding? Because sometimes they're just kinda like, 'Oh, well, they're deployed. How does that affect you with finishing your schoolwork?' Well, I miss my spouse, I could be depressed, so I could be anything, you know, you don't know what I'm feeling, emotionally. I don't think they really take that into account. You know, I could be taking care of multiple kids by myself, where I had my partner [previously at home], so I don't think professors really consider that it's just, I don't, they treat you the same, which in some regards, you are, but at the same time, you're not.

Military Spouse Student Issues

Added Responsibilities. All participants acknowledged they had additional or different responsibilities when separated from their spouse for significant lengths of time. Often, these extra duties led to stress and feeling overwhelmed for many participants. Claire described her experience with additional responsibilities:

> Yeah. I mean, yeah, like, like having my partner gone for you know, what was it, like eight or nine months? Like it was really flippin hard. Because not only did I have to, you know, manage the household, I had to manage, you know, our finances over here. And then I was also packed, planning a move, because they decided to move us, and so well, and going to school finishing my degree so and working well, you know, doing my internship, which was, and on top of that, schoolwork after when I got home. So there was a lot and it was very stressful. And the military definitely packed on some of that stress, because they, you know, they can decide to move you at, you know, at a snap.

> Like Claire's experience, Emily shared, "You know, holding down the fort with the, you know, my job, both kids, you know, new house, wintertime, you know, all the things and then schoolwork on top of it. Just, it's a lot." Echoing Claire and Emily, Hope shared, "So I just think that you're left to do it all. And it's quite hard to do it all. You know, to just like keep everything running at home, to do your job, to do school work…" Adding responsibilities to an already stressful workload led some participants to take a break from school during a deployment or lengthy separation.

Education Break. Becky and Gina took a break from their education while their spouse was deployed. Gina, who was also pregnant at the time, explained her situation, "So that was definitely a challenge to be by myself and to have to continue trekking through school, but you

know, it ended up being, being fine, but still a hardship." In a letter to her beginning student self, Becky pleaded with her former self to stay in school and not take a break. Looking back, she realized she likely could have managed her schoolwork, even though it would have been challenging.

Childcare. An overwhelming response to hardships during separations regarded the lack of childcare available to help military spouse students. Iris explained that when her spouse was stationed in a different country, "…I was doing full time student, plus, I had just moved to his follow on, and so, I had nobody. I didn't know anybody when I first got there, and child care is always backed up on base…." The base childcare situation was mentioned by other participants, as well. Julia commented that signing her daughter up for childcare at the new duty station is the first thing she does when faced with a move, and while she believes the base childcare center had recently updated its policies when she and her daughter arrived at their current location, they "…had to wait a really long time for childcare…I did not have it for a while. I was lucky my internship was really flexible…." Iris believed that if the military revised their childcare policies, they would help more military spouse students. She explained, "So childcare is really just so difficult to find. And I think that's such a big area that could be a help to people, especially who are in school trying to get an education."

Extended Family. All but two participants shared that they relied on extended family members while separated from their spouses. Many moved home during a deployment to receive support. Gina explained she moved home for several reasons:

I was actually with my parents for the majority of the time that my husband was deployed…So even though in the absence of my husband being gone, I still had that support to help, you know, cooking meals and all of this extra stuff that just helps you as

a student because you're just so busy, that it's just you know, one less thing that you've got to deal with.

Some participants already had a parent living with them in the home, or the parent would visit during a separation and offer support. Other participants who did not live with a parent or go home during a separation still relied on their parents or other extended family members for emotional support during stressful separations. During a particularly stressful separation at the beginning of COVID-19, Hope shared that she would call her mother "…and lay in bed and cry, it was just, it was really hard, not knowing anything, and not being able to know what he was doing, where he was, how everything was going…."

Outlier Data and Findings

Military spouses often share similar experiences while married to their active-duty spouses, but their perceptions regarding those experiences can differ significantly. The military spouse students who participated in this study were in different stages of their marriages and revealed different levels of knowledge regarding military life. As a result of the varying perceptions, stages, and levels, outlier data was found.

Self-Motivation

An unexpected finding that did not align with specific research questions was that more than half of the participants believed their self-motivation and determination got them through difficult times throughout their education instead of emotional or instrumental support. This type of support aligns with House's (1981) definition of informational support. Faith stated she would "always just tell myself to keep going," and wrote in a letter to her former beginning student self, "It's your ship, you're the captain." Kris stated she was motivated because she had wanted to be in her profession for so long that she had no choice but to finish her education. Becky also

believed her intrinsic motivation was a factor that helped her reenroll back in school after a year-long break.

Perspective

How participants coped during a deployment or separation was determined by their perspective regarding the separation from their spouse. Four participants spoke about how separations or the military lifestyle either did not bother them, how it caused them to realize how independent they were, or how they understood it was time they could devote to their education. Dana, for example, understood that developing a community with other spouses and friends helped her, and she recognized that making friends was easy. Faith recognized that she had become more independent because of the military lifestyle, while Gina used the separation to give more attention to achieving her educational goals. Gina stated, "…to have your own thing that you are working towards, regardless of where your spouse is or what they're doing…it's difficult being away from your spouse, but it's filling the time and made me proud of something I did…." Julia offered a slightly different viewpoint that summed up the way she views the military lifestyle and what ultimately helped her cope:

> I think the more indoctrinated you are and the more accepting of the military culture the better it can be because if you can accept it, and just accept it as normal, instead of just trying to make it fit into something else, or like normal husbands do this, well, you're not a normal husband. You don't have a nine to five.

Research Question Responses

Central Research Question

This study's findings included four prominent themes: military factors, school factors, personal factors, and deployment and separation factors. The role support played in academic

persistence depended on the barriers the military lifestyle imposed. Support was reported as helpful and positive when the participant had financial support, spousal support, and faculty familiar with the military lifestyle. Support inhibited academic persistence the greatest when participants lacked resources, such as childcare, and when they were separated from their spouse for long periods; as Becky pointed out, "…we endured a year-long family separation and I decided to take a break from school because our kids were very little at that time…."

Sub-Question One

How does emotional support affect academic persistence? Emotional support plays a critical role with military spouse students who academically persist to graduation. Emotional support was heavily relied upon by all participants in some way. Participants received emotional support from family, friends, and faculty that positively affected their academic persistence. Hope stated that her spouse encouraged her to begin her education, while Amanda recognized that her spouse supported her emotionally by being open to flexibility in their living situation so she could attend the school she desired. Dana's husband wanted to see her achieve her goals, and she described his emotional support as, "…my husband is like, I'm downplaying this so much, but he, like, he honestly is, like, the most supportive partner anybody could have….my number one fan, like, he just wants to see me succeed."

According to Kris, faculty who know what the military lifestyle encompasses can provide more emotional support. Kris stated she received assignment extensions while pregnant and separated from her spouse due to military events. Similarly, Faith was thankful that one of her professors understood the stressors the military lifestyle could cause. Faith described how the professor's military knowledge established a commonality and mutual trust between them when she was allowed to turn an assignment in late, "You know, I wasn't getting favoritism, but they

knew the situation." Faculty who do not understand the additional responsibilities that occur when an active-duty spouse is deployed can trigger a military spouse student to drop a class or not academically persist. Iris explained how showing empathy could make military spouse students feel supported emotionally, "if my husband was in the field, they're [faculty] really understanding as long as I let them know, 'Hey, I'm on solo parent this week. I might be late. My husband's gone. We don't do daycare.'"

Sub-Question Two

How does instrumental support affect academic persistence? Instrumental support affects academic persistence in both positive and negative ways. Instrumental support by way of financial security reduced stress among participants. Financial security "is a wonderful thing," according to Becky, and it enabled her to remain in school. Claire explained that not having to worry about rent because they had her spouse's salary and BAH reduced stress and enabled her to persist, as she knew they would eventually make more money once she earned her academic degree.

Many participants agreed that instrumental support negatively impacted their lives when it came to financing their higher education. Claire, who relied on student loans to help pay for her education, searched for military-affiliated grants and scholarships but explained she "wasn't able to find anything that would benefit." All participants identified that financial assistance for military spouse students was needed, and without more opportunities for monetary assistance, academic persistence for the military spouse student population could be inhibited.

Finding childcare was also an instrumental type of support that participants identified as an inhibiter to academic persistence. Julia explained the first thing she does when faced with a military move is call the new duty station's child care facility and put her daughter on the

waitlist. Iris expressed that military spouses cannot always attend brick-and-mortar schools without the risk of losing college credits because they continuously have to relocate to new duty stations. Iris stated, "So just being able to have the support to even get our kid into childcare would be amazing. Because everywhere is full. I'm at a huge base right now and there is waitlist on top of waitlist…"

Sub-Question Three

How does emotional and instrumental support influence military spouse students in their academic persistence during times of active-duty separations? Emotional support was identified as a significant reason for most participants' ability to persist academically to graduation. Most participants relied on their extended family during deployments or separations to provide emotional support. Gina described how staying with her parents motivated her to accomplish her goals while her spouse was deployed. Gina stated, "You have companionship, you have someone to talk to at the end of the day, all of that really does help to keep you grounded, focused, motivated, all of that kind of stuff."

All participants who had children emphatically stated that childcare was the tangible, instrumental type of support needed most while they were separated from their spouse and the type of support that was severely lacking on base. Iris pointed out that even though she currently lives on a large military base, "…there is waitlist on top of waitlist…" for childcare services at base facilities. Gina pointed out that while childcare is hard to get for many individuals, prioritizing childcare at military facilities, "...would be a big help for people who are in school and really need that assistance." Not having this type of instrumental support could lead to drop-out or stop-out of higher education for the military spouse student who is experiencing a deployment or separation.

Summary

In this chapter, military spouse students who persisted academically shared their experiences regarding the types of support that either enabled them to persist academically or types of support that were lacking and, thus, created challenges to their degree attainment. Three themes centered around the difficulties the military lifestyle imposed on military spouse students were identified from participant data. Several military, school, and personal factors provided support both while the active-duty spouse was home and while the active-duty spouse was deployed or separated from the military spouse student. Financial stability, spousal support, and faculty with military lifestyle knowledge provided the most significant types of emotional and instrumental support and were factors in helping participants academically persist to graduation. This study also found that financial assistance and childcare were areas where participants felt more support was needed to help military spouse students persist academically.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenology was to understand the supportive experiences of military spouse students who academically persist to graduation. This chapter begins with a discussion regarding the central findings. The subsections that follow include a summary of the thematic findings, followed by implications for policy and practice, theoretical and empirical implications, the limitations and delimitations of this study, and my recommendations for future research. A conclusion will complete this chapter by providing a succinct summary of the entire study.

Discussion

This study's central research question asked, "What role does support play in the academic persistence of military spouse students who persist to graduation." Participants provided data that, once analyzed, identified areas where support occurred or was lacking. Four main themes categorized the factors that provided or restricted support: military factors, schools factors, personal factors, and factors within a deployment or separation.

Military factors included subthemes discussing participants' supportive experiences regarding military resources, military financial benefits, and military barriers. Awareness of services was an issue for several participants and kept them from receiving military assistance in some cases. Only two of the participants utilized the education centers on military bases. Padden et al. (2011) found that familiarity with the military lifestyle was a predictor of well-being for military spouses. Interestingly, three participants stated they knew a good amount of information about the military and the lifestyle prior to meeting their spouse, and of these three, two were aware of military services and used them while married to their active-duty spouse. While

utilizing services does not indicate levels of well-being, it may indicate that prior military

knowledge can be linked with awareness and comfortability of using military-provided

resources, which could lead to higher levels of well-being and less stress.

Owen and Combs (2017) point out that younger military families often face financial

difficulties, especially when forced to relocate frequently. Several participants in this study

acknowledged that they experienced financial stress related to paying for school, but most

participants expressed gratitude and were thankful for the steady income the military provided.

Constant relocation was a hardship expressed by several participants, including some of the

financial aspects associated with relocating, but the steady paycheck appeared to be the catalyst

for experiencing less stress for most participants.

O'Hare et al. (2020) linked emotionally supportive behaviors such as displaying sincerity

with positive student outcomes. Gibbs et al. (2019) advised faculty to develop a trusting

relationship with veteran students by communicating and understanding the military lifestyle to

heighten student success. This study corroborates recent research (Gibbs et al., 2019; O'Hare et

al., 2020) that suggests student-faculty relationships and interactions affect student success.

Participants in this study acknowledged that positive experiences with faculty who understood

the military lifestyle and provided reasonable accommodations helped increase academic success

and persistence.

This study validated recent research that suggested military spouses want to feel

connected to other military spouses (Mailey et al., 2018). Some participants in this study wanted

to be part of a military community but did not know how to find opportunities to develop

connections with other military spouses. Another missed connection identified in this study

occurred with the military unit or command. Participants shared that they felt separated from the

military community because they did not live on base and felt significantly isolated during deployments or when separated from their active-duty spouses for extended periods. Some participants felt the military did not do enough to support the military spouse during deployments and separations. A recent study (Corry et al., 2021) found that Army military spouses reported less perceived military support than spouses from other military branches; this contrasted with the findings from this study. This study's lone Army military spouse shared helpful and supportive experiences that the Army provided during deployments and separations. Unable to rely on significant support from the military, most participants turned toward extended family for emotional and instrumental assistance.

Corroborating a recent survey that identified childcare issues as a primary reason military spouses could not attain an education (Dorvil, 2017), this study also found childcare issues to be a significant cause of participant stress and where more support was needed. While separated from their spouse due to military commitments, participants had to rely on extended family members and military-provided childcare options. One participant sent her child to stay with extended family during a difficult military relocation so the participant could remain in school and finish her degree. Several more participants had negative experiences with childcare options on military bases and were often unable to use the childcare service because of their low student priority status on the waitlist. Childcare issues remain a source of stress for military spouse students, and finding more ways to support this demographic should be a high priority for military leadership.

Lastly, a significant finding of this study validates previous research that positively correlated family support and academic persistence (Jimenez et al., 2022). Most participants received support from their spouses through encouragement, childcare, and financial assistance.

Some participants viewed their spouses as academic role models and wanted to persist in attaining an education to honor the support they received from their spouses. Having spousal support throughout participants' academic journeys was essential to academic persistence for most participants.

Interpretation of Findings

Participants in this study shared supportive experiences that varied greatly, at times, from one another. Collectively, though, themes and sub-themes emerged as participants explained their experiences with support while they were military spouse students. Listening to and analyzing participants' experiences ultimately led to identifying four key themes and several sub-themes. Military, school, personal, and deployment or separation factors were identified as the overarching themes where support was provided, inhibited, or lacking. The themes and sub-themes also validated empirical and theoretical literature that was discussed in Chapter Two and is discussed in further detail later in this chapter.

Summary of Thematic Findings

This study aimed to understand the supportive experiences of military spouse students who academically persist to graduation. The central research question that guided this study was: "What role does support play in the academic persistence of military spouse students?" The question was developed to understand participants' experiences and give meaning to the essence of the phenomenon of academically persisting to graduation. Eleven participants participated in interviews, focus groups, and a letter-writing activity. All participants shared candid experiences. The data from participants' unique experiences were analyzed into overarching themes that produced several subthemes, all in an effort to understand the role support plays in academic persistence with military spouse students. All participants shared experiences of emotional and

instrumental types of support. It was found that when their spouse was deployed, participants' challenges were amplified, and there was a greater need for support from military, school, and personal entities; this validates prior research that found military spouses' needs can be different during times of separations and deployments (Trautmann et al., 2018). The following interpretations result from data analysis and this study's findings.

Awareness. The themes throughout the study indicated that awareness was essential to receiving support. Interestingly, most participants knew about the services their school provided, even though participants primarily attended online courses. Four of the eleven participants reported receiving career and educational guidance directly from their school. In contrast, it was found that the majority of military spouse students in this study were unaware of the services provided to them by the military. Only two participants actively used the education center on their military base. Julia, who actively knew about and utilized military-provided services, such as military-sponsored licensing programs, acknowledged that "…it can be hard to find [services] if you don't know where to look." A recent research report found that Army spouses often only heard about military services from other Army spouses (Trail et al., 2021).

A common theme regarding awareness was also found when military spouse students experienced a deployment or separation. Often, they felt as if the military forgot about them because they did not live on base. Iris, who did not feel abandoned during a deployment or separation, still acknowledged that command or unit support is "…geared towards people who live on base…."

In my interpretation, I found that the responsibility to be aware and provide awareness includes everyone involved. A few participants were aware and took advantage of the military resources and services. It is the individual's responsibility to seek what services and programs

can help and initiate the support. In their personal advice letters, several participants acknowledged that being a military spouse student was not easy, and as Julia stated in her letter, "Ask for help if you need it."

Many participants reported that they were aware of their school's services and help but knew little about the many services provided by the military. The military service branch, military command or unit, and the school are partially responsible for ensuring spouses and students know about the services and programs provided; otherwise, the services may go unused. The military command or unit must ensure all spouses, no matter where they live, are aware of the services provided to them during a deployment or separation. Higher education institutions appear to perform better in awareness than the military. Although several participants acknowledged that their school was successful in providing information and help, it was abundantly clear that faculty who are aware of and can identify with or empathize with their students can ensure a more meaningful learning experience occurs.

Community. Research has shown a connection between having a sense of community and academic persistence (Johnson et al., 2020; Tinto, 1975). Military spouses desire to connect with other military spouses experiencing similar challenges (Mailey et al., 2018). O'Neal et al. (2020) pointed out how having a sense of community can help individuals cope. Interestingly, most participants in this study did not seek support from other military spouses. Only three participants stated that their support from another military spouse helped them academically persist. However, four participants acknowledged they desired to be part of a military community. I interpret this as participants understanding the support they could be receiving and providing to other military spouses but either do not know about existing support groups or do not know how to start a support network of military spouses. Incorporating a military spouse

support group outside of immediate or extended family could create positive emotional and instrumental supportive opportunities.

      Extended Family. Several participants acknowledged their responsibilities increased during a deployment or separation because their active-duty spouse was not home. Many participants stated they lacked childcare options or could not receive the daily emotional support and encouragement they needed, or as Ormeno et al. (2020) suggested, they had to make important family decisions alone while experiencing a military separation. Due to the added responsibilities and reduced support, many participants reached out to extended family members while separated from their spouses to alleviate some of these additional challenges and stressors. Research has shown that emotional support received from family is positively correlated to a student's academic persistence (Brooks, 2015; Roksa & Kinsley, 2019) and well-being (Skomorovsky, 2017). My interpretation is that understanding they would need help during this stressful time, many participants relied on their extended family to provide emotional, and sometimes instrumental, support instead of turning to fellow military spouses.

Implications for Policy or Practice

      Implications for policy with higher education institutions and military bases and commands were found. Implications for practices were also found for higher education institutions, military bases and commands, and military spouse students. Policies that require faculty training and command contact throughout deployments and separations could emotionally support military spouse students. The military spouse student must be aware of the programs available and participate in them to receive support, but military bases can also provide more awareness of their programs to better reach all military families, even if the family does not live on the military base. The military command can ensure awareness of programs by

continuous contact with the military spouse student throughout a deployment or separation. Finally, higher education institutions can provide services that directly support military spouse students throughout the military spouse's educational journey to increase academic persistence.

Implications for Policy

The findings from this study indicated there were two implications for policy; one educational and one military. Participants shared that they felt more connected to their professors when the professor had some experience or prior knowledge regarding the military lifestyle. Understanding the hardships military families often face enabled faculty to empathize with the military spouse student. For example, Iris and Faith communicated with their professors, who understood military hardships, and both students ultimately received leniency with education deadlines when they needed it most. It would be advantageous for higher education institutions to create policy that requires all faculty receive training regarding the hardships and barriers the military lifestyle presents to military spouse students. By default, this may also help the active-duty military student.

Several participants felt disconnected from the military during a deployment or separation. These feelings may be because the participant moved home to stay with extended family members to receive help with children or, as Gina expressed, "…you know, it was just nice to not be by myself." Creating better policies that ensure all military families are contacted throughout a deployment or separation can make military spouse students feel like they are part of a community, cared for, informed, and supported.

Implications for Practice

The findings in this study indicate that there are four implications for practice. Two implications involve awareness. In part, the military spouse student's responsibility is to

understand what services and support are provided to them. The military spouse student is also responsible for actively participating in services or reaching out for support, either with their school or military affiliates. Various programs and services are provided to the military spouse, and understanding where to turn for this information is essential. Military spouse students can contact their spouse's command or base services to learn about support programs. They can also get information regarding resources from other military spouses. Military OneSource is an excellent place to receive information regarding, military moves, family, non-medical counseling, education and employment, benefit information, and where you can reach help when experiencing a crisis. Many military bases have websites that are particular to that base.

It is also the military's responsibility to ensure the services they provide reach their intended target. Most of this study's participants stated they were unaware of the military's supportive services. Possible solutions could entail more advertising at places military spouses frequent, such as the base commissary or childcare facility. Not all military spouses live on military bases, however. Further outreach efforts should be enacted to ensure all spouses, regardless of their living situation, are extended an opportunity to participate and receive the support provided to others who may live closer.

Many military spouse students rely on their extended family for support, especially during deployments and separations. However, not all military spouse students have extended family members that can offer support during this time. Designated military support groups are a way for military spouses to develop a community, learn about services, and find support in an area they need most, such as being a military spouse student.

Lastly, an implication for educational practice is offering long-term, dedicated educational counselors to military spouse students. Research has shown that military spouse

students have different stressors from non-traditional students (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). Four of the eleven participants acknowledged the educational and career services provided by their school directly impacted their academic persistence. Hope, in particular, passionately expressed how her dedicated educational counselor supported her throughout her educational journey. Programs that ensure military spouse students have a specific educational advocate for them at all times can aid in academic persistence.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

The findings from this study validated Bean and Metzner's (1985) theory regarding environmental factors significantly contributing to non-traditional students' academic persistence. The participants in this study acknowledged that several environmental factors contributed to their academic persistence. Financial security and support, lack of military spouse community, spousal support, deployments and separations, and lack of childcare options all contributed to the academic persistence in participants' lives. Some factors supported this positively, while others caused participants to take educational breaks, which lengthened their time in school. The positive support the participant received throughout their education enabled them to remain or return to school and academically persist.

The findings from this study also confirm previous research findings regarding military spouses, non-traditional students, and social support in several ways. For example, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) found that people who perceive they have social support during critical times can adapt better than those who do not perceive social support when they need it most. Almost all of the participants in this study relied on extended family members while separated from their spouses. The participants primarily relied on their parents for emotional support, but instrumental support, in the way of childcare, was also provided. In their study, Trautmann et al. (2017) found

some military spouses preferred being in close physical proximity to extended family members during separations from their military members as the military spouse felt the family helped them through the separation. Relying on extended family members indicates that military spouse students who perceive they can turn to others during critical times, such as a deployment or lengthy separation, will adapt and be able to cope better than military spouse students who do not have that same level of perception regarding social support in their lives. Roksa and Kinsley (2019) found family support was positively correlated with academic persistence and further supports the claim that the perception of social support from family members can help military spouse students cope and academically persist.

Bean and Metzner (1985) believed informal peer and faculty socialization was not a substantial reason non-traditional students academically persisted. In contrast to Bean and Metzner (1985), several participants in this study acknowledged that their informal communication with their faculty was instrumental in helping them stay in school while they were separated from their spouses. Due to the additional responsibilities they experienced while enduring a military separation, participants felt more connected to and supported by faculty who understood their challenges and faculty who allowed accommodations when needed. Reaching out and developing an informal relationship was essential to ensure faculty understood their situation. Most participants attended online courses, and developing a relationship was essential to making a connection; as Becky explains, "…sometimes I do feel I'll reach out to them via email and, you know, try to get that relationship a little bit established because so much of it is a little bit cold." This study found speaking informally with faculty about their life situation helped participants feel supported when they needed it most.

Limitations and Delimitations

This study had limitations that were uncontrollable. The military spouse population is primarily women, and I understood that finding participants who were men and met the academic requirements would be challenging. To strengthen the possibility of attracting male military spouse students, I targeted Facebook spouse groups open to both male and female military spouses. I also tried the snowball method and asked several participants to forward the recruitment letter to anyone, man or woman, that met the study's requirements.

I limited recruitment to Facebook groups and snowball sampling. Finding ten qualified military spouse students proved difficult, and once a participant was identified, I began the interview process. After 11 participants were identified and individually interviewed, I began the focus group scheduling. After initially agreeing to a focus group date and time, one participant did not respond to emails when her scheduled focus group date had to be changed. I continued sending emails asking if she could attend a new focus group time, but she never responded. I also sent her member checks and did not get a response. I am unsure why she quit participating, besides being a busy mother in school.

My choice to include military spouse students who attended or were attending a four-year college throughout the United States offered a better chance of obtaining diverse participants from various military service branches. This delimitation provided a rich participant pool that shared different perspectives and experiences. Having the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force represented from the perspective of the military spouse student provided different insights into how the various military branches support military families.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study sought to understand how environmental factors, such as emotional and instrumental support, affected academic persistence with military spouse students. House (1981) defined social support using four categories, emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal. Earlier in this chapter, I interpreted awareness of resources as being a catalyst for receiving support for this study's participants. According to House's (1981) definition of informational support, guidance, motivation, and encouragement are given to an individual. Many participants connected with faculty and advisors who motivated and encouraged them to stay in school. Julia, who had no intention of higher education after receiving a bachelor's degree, explained that one of her professors encouraged and motivated her to continue her studies and complete a master's degree. Informational support and how it affects academic persistence is a study worthy of more focus.

House (1981) used feedback, evaluation, and self-appraisal to define appraisal support. One surprising finding this study uncovered was how participants relied on their self-motivation factors to stay in school. When asked questions about what type of support helped them academically persist, more than half of the respondents believed their intrinsic motivation was a factor. As defined by House (1981), studies involving appraisal could lead to understanding how believing in oneself plays a role in persisting to graduation. Several other demographic factors could explain how support plays a role in the academic persistence of military spouse students. The military member's rank, how long they have been in the military, and how old the military spouse is could factor into understanding the needs of the military spouse student.

Conclusion

The experiences of 11 military spouse students who persisted to graduation were examined in this study. Through interviews, focus groups, and personal letters, participants provided data that, once analyzed, produced four main themes and several sub-themes. Three areas identified where support is needed most for the military spouse student: awareness, community, and extended family. There are implications for policy and practice that can enhance these areas and either continue to provide support or ensure the identified areas are met with more supportive experiences.

The key takeaways from the results of this study involve awareness. Support from programs and resources can only be provided if the military spouse student knows the support exists. Many of this study's participants were unaware of the resources and programs offered to them that could have supported them during stressful times, such as deployments or separations. It is, in part, the responsibility of the military spouse student to be aware of the programs and services provided to them by the military and their higher education institutions. It is in the military's and higher education institution's best interests to provide services for the military spouse student, enabling academic persistence. Once supportive services, such as support groups, command outreach, faculty training, and dedicated academic or guidance counselors are provided, the military and higher education institution's responsibilities are to ensure the military spouse student knows the resources are available and how to access them.

This study intended to understand the supportive experiences of military spouse students who academically persist to graduation. Data was collected and analyzed through participants' shared experiences. This study's research questions were answered, and viable suggestions for

policy and practice were given to provide as much support as possible to ensure the success of

the military spouse student.

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Appendix A

IRB Approval

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

March 2, 2022

Lasette Doherty
David Vacchi

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY21-22-581 A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ON MILITARY SPOUSES WHO ACADEMICALLY PERSIST TO GRADUATION

Dear Lasette Doherty, David Vacchi,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(ii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording).
Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation.

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,
G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

Appendix B

Consent Letter

Consent

Title of the Project: A Phenomenological Study on Military Spouses Who Academically Persist
Principal Investigator: Lasette Doherty, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University, School of Education

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must meet the following criteria:

1. Must be 18 years of age or older.
2. Must be married to an active-duty military member.
3. You must have been married to your active-duty spouse while you attended a college or university for at least one college semester/quarter.
4. Your active-duty spouse must have remained on active-duty while you were in college for at least one college semester/quarter.
5. You must have experienced a spousal deployment/separation of three months or more (consecutive or non-consecutive) while enrolled in a U.S. university or college.
6. You must have enrolled in college with the intent of earning a bachelor's degree within a five-year period.
7. Must fall into one of the two categories below:

Category 1. You are in your fourth or final year of college and will attain a bachelor's degree from a U.S., 4-year university or college within the next 2 years, or you have graduated with a bachelor's degree from a U.S., 4-year university or college within the last 5 years.

Category 2. You began your college education at a U.S. university or college but had to stop, postpone, or drop out while trying to earn a bachelor's degree at a U.S. university or college, and you stopped, postponed, or dropped out before the last year of earning a bachelor's degree from a U.S. university or college.

Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to understand the role support plays in the persistence of military spouse students. This study hopes to gain important knowledge regarding how military and higher education institutions can support military spouses in attaining their academic goals.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:
1. Meet with the researcher for an interview that will last approximately thirty minutes to one hour. This interview will be conducted using the virtual media you prefer (e.g., Zoom, Skype, Microsoft Teams, etc.). The interview will be audio- and video-recorded and notes will be taken throughout.

2. Participate in a virtual focus group. You will be asked to join only ONE of two virtual focus groups with 3-7 other participants. You will be broken into groups of those who persisted to graduation and those who stopped or postponed your degree attainment. In either group, you will be asked a set of questions that asks about your experiences with support and persisting to graduation OR support and stopping or postponing your education. These focus groups will be audio- and video-recorded and notes will be taken throughout.

3. Participate in writing a letter to your former beginning student self. In 500 to 1000 words, you will be asked to write a letter to yourself as if you were just beginning your educational journey. The letter will focus on the advice you would give yourself as you embark on your educational journey and what could potentially make future situations easier regarding academic persistence. You will be asked to email the letter to the researcher. You will have two weeks to complete the letter.

4. Participate in a data review exercise that will ensure the researcher captures accurate meanings as described from your experiences. The data review exercise will take approximately 15 minutes to complete.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include the potential development and delivery of supportive services tailored to support military spouse students in achieving their academic goals.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Interviews will be conducted virtually and where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Electronic data will be stored in an online password-protected file or on a password-protected website, and paper data will be stored in a locked desk drawer. Data may be used in future presentations. Only the researcher will have access to password-protected and locked data.
- Interviews and focus groups will be audio- and video-recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-protected website. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Lasette Doherty. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ or ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. David Vacchi, at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio- and video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____
Printed Subject Name

_____
Signature & Date

Appendix C

Facebook and Email Recruitment Letter

ATTENTION MILITARY SPOUSES: I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree at Liberty University. The purpose of my research is to understand how military spouse students who graduate with a bachelor's degree experience support. It is my intent to use the information received from the study to inform higher education institutions and military leaders where support for military spouse students is needed most.

To be included in the study, all participants must be 18 years of age or older and currently married to an active-duty military member. All participants must have been married to their active-duty spouse while they attended a college or university for at least one college semester/quarter. All participant's active-duty spouses must have remained on active-duty status while the participant attended a college or university for at least one college semester/quarter. As a participant, you must have experienced a spousal deployment/separation of three months or more (consecutive or nonconsecutive) while enrolled in a U.S. university or college. You must have enrolled in college with the intent of earning a bachelor's degree within a five-year period. In addition to the requirements above, there are two types of participants this study is requesting. Participants must fall into one of the two categories below:

Category 1: The first category requires that a participant is either in their fourth or final year of college and will attain a bachelor's degree from a U.S., 4-year university or college within the next two years, or they have graduated with a bachelor's degree from a U.S., 4-year university or college within the last five years.

Category 2: The second category requires that participants began their college education at a U.S. university or college but had to stop, postpone, or drop out while trying to earn a bachelor's degree at a U.S. university or college and that you stopped, postponed, or dropped out of college before the last year of earning a bachelor's degree from a U.S. university or college.

Participants will be asked to participate in one virtual individual interview, a virtual focus group, a personal letter-writing activity, and will be asked to electronically review data that describes their experiences with support. The interview, focus group, and letter activity will take approximately 30 minutes to one hour each to complete. The data check, to ensure what I capture is accurate, will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. If you would like to participate and meet the study criteria, please click https://www.questionpro.com/t/AVCz3Zrl7b. If chosen to participate, a consent document will be emailed to you at least one week prior to your interview. It will need to be signed and returned via email prior to or at the time of the interview.

Thank you,

Lasette Doherty
Doctoral Candidate

Appendix D

Individual Participant Interview Questions

Semi-Structured, Open-Ended Questions

1. Please tell me about you and your family.

2. What were your experiences with the military or military culture before meeting your spouse?

3. What are some advantages or positive experiences you have had that can be contributed to the military or military lifestyle?

4. What are some disadvantages or challenging experiences you have had that can be attributed to the military or military lifestyle?

5. Describe a supportive experience that influenced you to enroll in higher education.

6. Describe an experience, after you enrolled, where your spouse or family supported you in your educational journey.

7. Describe an experience when the military community, to include other military spouses, supported you in your academic journey.

8. Please explain how professors or instructors support you in your academic journey.

9. Please explain how spirituality impacts your academic persistence.

10. Please describe an incident when you felt supported financially by the military as a military spouse student.

11. Please describe a time when you felt the military aided in your persistence.

12. Please describe a time when you felt your school aided in your persistence.

13. Please describe a time when you felt the military caused barriers to your persistence.

14. Please describe a time when you felt your school caused barriers to your persistence.

15. Please describe your experiences, positive or negative, as a student during a deployment.

16. Reflecting on your experiences with academic persistence throughout your journey, what supportive area could have helped you more?

17. Thank you for your time and assistance with this study. What are your final thoughts regarding social support and persistence with the military spouse student population?

Appendix E

Focus Group Questions

Semi-structured, Focus Groups Questions

1. Please introduce yourselves and tell the group a little about your military affiliation and educational background.

2. What challenges did you experience as a student during a deployment?

3. What are some types of support you experienced as a student during a deployment?

4. What are your experiences with family support during a deployment as a student?

5. How could your family support you more during a deployment as a student?

6. What are your experiences regarding military community support during a deployment as a student?

7. How can the military community support you more during a deployment as a student?

8. How can professors or instructors support you during a deployment as a student?

9. If you utilized any military resources during a deployment, please describe how they helped you persist.

10. If you utilized any of your school resources, please describe how they helped you persist.

11. What is the most important type of support or resource you believe you needed or received during a deployment as a student?

Appendix F

Letter Writing Activity Instructions

In 500-1000-words, write a letter to yourself as if you were just beginning your educational

journey. Please focus on the advice you would give to yourself as you embark on your

educational journey and what could potentially make future situations easier regarding academic

persistence.

Appendix G

Memos

March 29, 2022. During the interview with Amanda:

It was good to hear she had her mother living with her to help with her daughter. It was surprising and refreshing to hear she was pursuing an advanced degree in the medical field as a military spouse. It is often difficult to complete a degree with all the clinical requirements without switching schools or making hard decisions about not to move, or when to move.

April 8, 2022. During the deployment interview with Claire:

I am happy she was able to reschedule and wanted to participate. She's experiencing a deployment right now, so her feelings are very accurate, current, and insightful. During her interview, Claire mentioned that more financial assistance for military spouses was needed. I had asked her if she used her spouse's GI Bill to help pay for school. She stated she did not because her husband was planning on using it when he left the military. I asked if he was using tuition assistance currently or if he had used it. I was a little surprised when she replied that neither she nor her husband did not know much about it. I explained how tuition assistance works for the military member. I think this is another area where awareness of services is important. When service people receive briefs about education, it is usually with a number of other briefs telling them about the services and resources offered at military bases. While this gets the word out to some, there may be additional ways to help others use the services the military provides at times when they are ready to use it. Claire's spouse may not be able to take college classes currently, or may not want to, but if he did not know that tuition assistance was offered or that it was an easy process, they may have missed out on an opportunity for him to start his education and save

all or part of his GI Bill for Claire, future children, or himself to help pay for additional schooling. It may have been a missed opportunity.

March 31, 2022. After the interview with Becky:

It was a very informative interview with Becky. I was particularly interested in her experiences with receiving the phone calls from her school. She viewed them as helpful and that they made her feel cared for by her university. That was a new way of looking at the phone calls for me. Becky had a great outlook on the calls and I appreciated the different perspective.

Another area that I found interesting was when we discussed her using her spouse's GI Bill. She had mentioned that he worked really hard for that and for him to give it to her to use for her education was something very special and meaningful. She did not take the gift of the GI Bill lightly and is what motivated her, in part, to stay in school.

April 5, 2022: After the interview with Dana:

What a great interview! It was great to get a perspective of a military spouse who does not have children yet, although she is currently pregnant with her first. I wish I would have put more emphasis on going to school when there were children in the home. I was happy to hear she used so many resources the military and the school offers. It was particularly good to hear about the interaction with her neighbors. She did not live on a base, but her community was tight knit and she could depend on them. It was good to see the perspective from a younger military spouse who had never experienced a close military family neighborhood before.

April 22, 2022. During the interview with Julia:

I had not thought about having to make such difficult decisions between moving with your spouse or choosing to stay to finish your education. What a difficult decision that had to be, let alone all the planning with her daughter.

April 22, 2022. After the interview with Hope:

It was a good reminder that even though military members may not be deployed in war zones, there are plenty of times, as military spouses, we fear for their safety, even if it is a "normal" part of the job.

I like how she rebuked the cliched claim of "you knew what you were getting into when you married a military member." She said she did not know it would be like this. How could she?

April 29, 2022. During focus group 1:

It was interesting to see how quickly childcare came up and how it was such an issue with the group members. Iris made a great point about having childcare options at some higher education institutions, but because she goes to school online, she doesn't get that benefit.

May 3, 2022. During focus group 2:

A couple of the group members discussed military community and the lack of support provided when they were separated from their spouse. During a lengthy deployment, if the group member did not stay on base, or around a military base, they did not receive support. Some of the participants went home to their parents during a long separation from their spouse. I hadn't thought about the support given from military communities or military commands during that time. Great points!

Appendix H

Audit Trail

IRB approval	IRB approval was obtained.
Participant Selection	Purposeful, convenience, and snowball sampling. QuestionPro.com was used for the participant survey questions. IRB approved consent forms were obtained from every participant.
Data Collection	Personal interviews, focus groups, letter writing activity completed by participants. Data was audio and visually recorded using Zoom. Data was transcribed using Otter.ai.
Storage	Participant consent forms and participant data was stored on an encrypted flash drive. The flash drive was stored in a locked filing cabinet. All paper data was stored in a locked file cabinet. Memoing journal was kept in a locked file cabinet.
Coding	Coding was completed manually using a sentence-by-sentence approach. Excel organized the coded data.
Trustworthiness	Memoing, triangulation of data, and dissertation committee member-checking produced trustworthiness.