Military Married Couples' Reintegration Adult Attachment Experiences:

A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study

Marchell Coleman

Department of Community Care and Counseling, Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

School of Behavioral Sciences

Liberty University

2024

Military Married Couples' Reintegration Adult Attachment Experiences:

A Hermeneutical Phenomenological Study

Marchell Coleman

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

School of Behavioral Sciences

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

2024

Approved by:

Dr. Michael Howard, Ed.D., Committee Chair

Dr. James Kasten, Ed.D., Committee Member

Abstract

The purpose of this research study was to explore and understand how active-duty and veteran long-term military married couples mitigate separation and divorce after multiple post-deployment reintegration periods. This study employed qualitative research design and hermeneutic phenomenology to discover how these couples maintained long-term marriages. The researcher explored these military married couples' internal working models and adult attachment styles. In addition, it explored how these factors shaped their beliefs, responses, and attitudes toward separation and reunion as a married military couple. As a result, the researcher identified strategies and best practices to help military couples successfully mitigate the risk of separation and divorce and build strong, resilient relationships that can withstand the unique challenges of military life. The study also gathered the military married couples' subjective experiences through semi-structured couple interviews, and cognitive representation exercises. The recorded, semi-structured interviews were guided by an interview protocol based on the tenets of attachment theory. These interviews explored the military couples' lived experiences, focusing on how they navigated emotional connections, attachment styles, and patterns of interaction during post-deployment reintegration phases. The study employed a deductive analysis approach by analyzing data collection. This process involved identifying codes within the participants' responses and connecting them with themes derived from attachment theory. This study contributed to adult attachment theory and had practical significance in long-term couple strategies on how military married couples should consider important aspects of their marital relationship and approach post-deployment reintegration that mitigates the likelihood of separation and divorce.

Keywords: Married military couples, attachment theory, attachment styles, post- deployment

Dedication

I dedicate this manuscript to my family, the foundation of everything I have become. I am grateful to my parents, John and Virgie Coleman, Jr., for their love and unwavering support. To my siblings and their spouses, Cassius (Aida) Coleman, Dee (Johnny) Ford, and Michelle (Phillip) Owens, we genuinely form a united and supportive family. Your encouragement and understanding during this journey, marked by both exciting and challenging moments, mean the world to me.

In the loving memory of my brother, Tyrone Coleman, who passed away at the beginning of this journey in 2021, your enduring spirit has been a constant source of inspiration throughout my academic pursuits. Although physically absent, your presence is palpable in every word and thought within these pages. This dedication extends to my nieces and nephew, Greylynne Coleman, Niama Owens, Gabriella Coleman, and Cassius Coleman, Jr. I celebrate your current and academic achievements on your unique paths.

Acknowledgements

I express my heartfelt gratitude to my dissertation chair, Dr. Howard, for his instrumental guidance, expertise, unwavering support, and invaluable mentorship throughout the research process. I am genuinely thankful for the time he consistently scheduled to provide guidance, insight, and encouragement, demonstrating true mentorship. Every email, phone call, and feedback recommendation was deeply appreciated. I extend my sincere thanks to Dr. Kasten, my dissertation reader, for diligently reading my work and offering clarity to the research process, enhancing the quality of this work.

With deep gratitude, I extend my sincere appreciation to the multitude of friends and colleagues who generously offered encouragement, prayers, and unwavering accountability during this transformative journey. Special acknowledgment goes to Dr. Dannette Berksteiner, Dr. La Vera C. Brown, Dr. Kim Dale, Dr. Davette Harvey, Dr. Crystal Gathers, Dr. Gwen Martin, Dr. Teri Hall. These extraordinary women of faith have not only been my friends and mentors but also invaluable companions on this odyssey. I am eternally thankful for their exceptional support and guidance.

A special note of gratitude to my friends and supporters, Kim West, Nicole Kirkland, Lisa Harper, Kena Jacob Mays, Kena Peterson for their unwavering support, prayers, encouragement, and attentive ears. This dissertation stands as a tribute to the indelible mark they have left on my heart and intellect. Their impact is forever in my thoughts, and I am eternally grateful.

Finally, my gratitude extends to the military couples who participated in my study. Without their willingness to share experiences and insights, this research would not have been possible, enriching the depth of my findings.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Abbreviations

Emotional Cycle of Deployment (ECOD)

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Revised Adult Attachment Scale (AAS)

Chapter One: Introduction

Overview

Military deployments can present unique relationship challenges for married couples that threaten the longevity of their relationship. Knobloch et al. (2018) asserted that following extended deployment separations, military married couples are presented with many dilemmas associated with readjusting to living together again. Likewise, Sayers et al. (2018) indicated that married couples may experience difficulties reconnecting and effectively communicating their feelings after a deployment. Consequently, deployments can create mental and emotional stressors, along with barriers to physical and emotional intimacy (Goldsmith & Byers, 2018; Mallonee et al., 2020). During the post-deployment phase, there can be a change in the roles and power dynamics within a married couple's relationship, which may lead to conflicts and/or difficulties while adapting to post-deployment routines. Therefore, post-deployment involves a reintegration adjustment period, which can be stressful for the married couple as each partner adapts to new roles, responsibilities, and expectations (Mallonee et al., 2020). Due to the stress that married couples experience during the post-deployment period, married couples have an increased risk of separation and divorce (Pethrus et al., 2019; Skomorovsky, 2014; Wang et al., 2015). For this reason, Gros et al. (2019) recommended exploring married couples' post-deployment reintegration experiences to gain an in-depth understanding of how married couples overcome separation and divorce risks.

Background

This study background contributed to understanding military married couples' challenges with military deployment cycles. By describing the social context, a further understanding was gained through the setting in which married couples experience the challenges. The theoretical

framework provided the conceptual framework for discussing married couples' adult attachment relationship implications, guiding this study's discovery of how military married couples could mitigate the risks of post-deployment separation and divorce. Adult attachment theory was also utilized to discover how long-term married couples mitigate the risk of separation and divorce after experiencing multiple post-deployment and reintegration phases. The attachment theory concepts assisted the research design and methodology in explaining how long-term married couples mitigate the readjustments during the post-deployment reintegration phase, which can negatively impact their emotional and physical intimacy.

Historical

The impact of the deployment on military service members and their families became evident during the deployments in Afghanistan and Iraq. In 2001, the United States launched Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan following the September 11th attacks (Fulton et al., 2015). Consequently, the September 11th attacks initiated the Global War on Terror (GWOT; Bergmann et al., 2014). The GWOT conflict impacted military service members and their families. Many military families experienced prolonged separations during Afghanistan's deployment for the first time (Agazio et al., 2014).

Carter and Renshaw (2016) identified that the continued deployment missions related to the 2003 Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) left many military spouses uncertain about combat deployments' mental and emotional risks. Hence, the combat deployments of married service members caused relationship strains. In addition, due to the emotional distress related to the continued separation, both spouses were found to have additional mental and emotional risk factors that impacted their relationships (Carter & Renshaw, 2016; Meeks et al., 2016). Though

the primary combat operations ended in Iraq, an insurgency quickly arose and required a continued U.S. military presence.

In 2007, OIF transitioned into Operation New Dawn (OND). The OND mission represented a transition in deployment status for military service members, which meant that a large influx of deployed service members began to return home. Additionally, some military service members and their spouses began to experience post-deployment reunions, which brought relationship adjustments and challenges to the reintegration process. During post-deployment, service members and their families had to readjust to living together, reestablish routines, and adjust to physical or psychological changes (Bullman & Schneiderman, 2021).

In 2011, the United States officially ended its involvement in Iraq and began withdrawing troops (Mallonee et al., 2020). For military families, the transition period following deployment can be challenging (O'Neal et al., 2018). Service members returned with changes to family dynamics, routines, and responsibilities. Besides readjusting to their returning member's presence, families had to rebalance their roles and responsibilities (O'Neal et al., 2018). While the end of U.S. involvement in Iraq brought closure for military families, post-deployment phases still present challenges and require adjustment accordingly.

Since 2011, the U.S. military has supported Syria's civil war, supporting different factions. Service members face risks and stressors related to their mission, such as attacks from opposing groups, combat operations, and navigating the environment (U.S. Department of State, n.d.). Karney and Trail (2017) noted that military families considered deployments highly stressful and held the common belief that deployments negatively impacted military marriages, particularly within the last 10 years. One key issue from the increased deployment wass the frequency and duration of extended separation periods between service members and their

families, straining relationships while creating emotional and psychological challenges Karney and Trail (2017).

Social

During the GWOT deployments, the U.S. military advocated that it was critical to understand the impact of social factors to provide context on military married couples' relationships throughout the deployment cycle (Agazio et al., 2014). Therefore, Dursun et al. (2019) proposed that internal and external social factors placed married couples' relationships at risk throughout the deployment cycle. According to Borah and Fina (2017) and Green et al. (2013), internal social factors are situations that certain married military couples may be able to resolve effectively. For example, the internal social factors could be remedied by maintaining close family relationships, staying connected to their faith community, and building social networks within the military community, especially during deployment separations (Borah & Fina, 2017).

Military couples tend to have little influence over external forces brought about by deployment missions, including the length of deployment, deployment location, number of deployments, communication limitations, and intensity of reintegration challenges. Since military couples are not homogenous in their deployment needs and experiences, their readiness levels vary. Some couples can manage the military deployment cycle without difficulty; others require the assistance and support of military support networks, such as marriage counseling services (Bommarito et al., 2017; Cederbaum et al., 2017). For example, Mallonee et al. (2020) found that maintaining a successful marriage can be difficult for married couples because of the social stressors attached to deployment separations. The consequences of negative influences can also cause social problems, such as withdrawing from friends and family during deployment,

chronic mental health issues, and marital infidelity (Pethrus et al., 2019). DeVoe et al. (2019) indicated that married couples could face stigmas and other problems from both civilian and military communities, making it challenging for military spouses to get help or talk about their experiences. Although informal social support may benefit an individual experiencing stress, married couples experiencing reintegration problems may require additional professional support (Borah & Fina, 2017).

Theoretical

John Bowlby (1958) developed attachment theory in the 1950s, emphasizing the critical role of infant-caregiver bonds for development and well-being. Bowlby (1958) proposed that attachment is a fundamental biological need for security and that the quality of the attachment relationship influences emotional and social development. Building upon Bowlby's work, Mary Ainsworth's strange situation expanded the concept of attachment by identifying three types of attachment styles: secure attachment, insecure-avoidant attachment, and insecure-resistant attachment (Ainsworth et al., 1979; Ainsworth & Bell, 1970). Moreover, later advancements in attachment theory extended its application to adulthood. Main et al. (1985) made significant contributions to the marriage counseling field by developing the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI), a research tool that assesses adult attachment patterns and their impact on relationships with others. Hazan and Shaver (1990) further expanded the theory by applying attachment concepts to romantic relationships in adulthood. They proposed that attachment styles established in childhood can shape adult attachment patterns, affecting how individuals form and maintain relationships. Research on adult attachment has provided an increased understanding of how early attachment experiences may influence romantic relationships later in life (Hazan & Shaver, 1990).

Situation to Self

The researcher, Marchell Coleman, was a licensed professional and certified clinical mental health counselor with over 20 years of experience in the mental health field. She had worked extensively in marriage and family counseling and within the military community. Being not married herself, the researcher was interested in developing more knowledge on relationships, marriage, and family dynamics. The primary objective of this researcher was to discover the experiences of married couples as they reintegrate into married life post-deployment. The researcher sought to enhance her professional practice and contribute to the conversation within the marriage counseling field regarding effective strategies that would support military couples in mitigating the risk of separation and divorce. Additionally, this research project shed light on married couples' post-deployment reintegration experiences, which contributed to a broader understanding of social interactions and human behaviors within the adult attachment theory and Emotional Cycle of Deployment (ECOD) context.

Problem Statement

A problem existed regarding an increased risk of separation and divorce among post-deployed reintegrating married couples. Wood et al. (2019) claimed that military deployments may be particularly stressful for married couples. Since 2001, over two million married service members have returned home from military deployments, with approximately 250,000 experiencing three or more deployments (Chandler et al., 2018; Zamir et al., 2020). During deployments, the relationship quality of the married couple can be hindered due to various factors, making post-deployment relationships challenging within the reintegration phase (Chandler et al., 2018), contributing to a higher risk of separation and divorce. Correspondingly, Knobloch-Fedders et al. (2020) and Corry et al. (2021) identified specific reintegration

relationship stressors: (1) lack of communication; (2) reestablishing attachments; (3) renegotiating roles; and (4) lack of physical intimacy.

Furthermore, Gros et al. (2019) indicated that post-deployment separation and divorce were prevalent issues among service members, with a military divorce rate of 3%, and linked to deployment length, communication, and combat-related injuries. However, the authors indicated that there was a gap in the research on effective relationship strategies that could help post-deployed married service members mitigate separation and divorce. For example, one-third of the sample within their study reported separating or divorcing post-deployment. However, their study did not investigate how the couples could have regulated the post-deployment separation and divorce risk factors more effectively. Therefore, it was still not known whether still-married couples that have experienced multiple post-deployment periods have effectively mitigated separation and divorce (Gros et al., 2019; Wen et al., 2020). Wenger et al. (2018) found that 2.77 million military members have served on 5.4 million deployments since 2001, and many soldiers with three or more deployments have continued to serve in the military. Freytes et al. (2017) found that post-deployment reintegration experiences can also remain long after service members leave active duty, which suggested that more empirical studies on the reintegration experiences of veterans and their spouses were needed.

Therefore, assessing these experiences among active-duty military members and veterans was crucial for married couples, due to the disruption they can cause. To address these gaps in the research, this study utilized adult attachment theory from a hermeneutic perspective to guide the exploration of long-term married couples' communication patterns, emotional connections, and relationship satisfaction after experiencing multiple post-deployment reintegration phases. This study contributed to the empirical literature by exploring the lived experiences of long-term

married couples and how they mitigated separation and divorce from an adult attachment perspective.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study was to discover how long-term military married couples, married for 10 or more years, mitigated the risk of separation and divorce after experiencing multiple post-deployment reintegration phases at military installations in Georgia. The theoretical framework that informed this study was adult attachment theory.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this research was that it explored the post-deployment reintegration experiences of long-term married couples while contributing to the conversation within the marriage and family counseling field focused on relationship dynamics. With an emphasis on mitigating the risk of separation and divorce among post-deployed, reintegrating married couples, the research findings made a critical contribution to the reoccurring themes within the marriage and family counseling field, such as communication, conflict resolution, intimacy, emotional connection, roles, and expectations. Although current literature has examined the complex issues that military married couples' encounter, gaps were identified related to the application of adult attachment theory and the ECOD model for married and couples counseling practice (Gros, 2019; Knobloch-Fedders et al., 2020; Long, 2021). Therefore, the research made an empirical and theoretical contribution to the literature in the field and provided a practical understanding of the discipline of marriage and family counseling.

Empirical Significance

The empirical significance of the research was that it addressed a gap in the literature that investigates the post-deployment reintegration experiences of long-term married couples and relationship satisfaction strategies that assist them with mitigating the risk of separation and divorce. Previous research has indicated that the military lifestyle may be particularly stressful for married couples (Wood et al., 2019). Zamir et al. (2020) indicated that the post-deployment reintegration challenges of married couples could illuminate the factors that hinder marital satisfaction and quality. Researching long-term military married couples' post-deployment reintegration experiences contributed to an in-depth understanding of adult attachment theory constructs and their relationship satisfaction strategies (Stahnke, 2023; Weiss & Anzur, 2023). The knowledgeable findings benefited the literature collection that analyzes new data and provided novel insights for marriage and family counseling (Bedair et al., 2020; Riggs et al., 2020; Stahnke, 2023). Research also revealed the underlying factors that cause disagreements between spouses, allowing for preventive and proactive solutions. Therefore, researching military families, deployments, and marriage support services could help shape policy. This research on military couples' unique needs might also assist policymakers in increasing long-term marriages and reducing the likelihood of separation and divorce. The findings of this study have the potential to make significant contributions to developing and improving relationship education and support programs that cater specifically to the unique needs of military couples (Stahnke, 2023; Weiss & Anzur, 2023).

Theoretical Significance

Adult attachment theory contributed to a better understanding of military deployments' influence on married military couples' relationships (Riggs et al., 2020). While adult attachment

theory had been applied to aspects of military couples' relationships in prior research, this study

provided a unique context on how married couples mitigate the risk of divorce during one of the

most stressful aspects of the deployment cycle: post-deployment reintegration (Skomorovsky et

al., 2017). Additionally, it shed light on how military life influences attachment dynamics,

attachment patterns, relationship functioning, and well-being (Knobloch-Fedders et al., 2020).

This knowledge informed the development of interventions, support programs, and policies to

promote healthy attachment, resilience, and marital satisfaction among military couples (Siegel

et al., 2018). Adult attachment theory also benefited from research on military couples during

post-deployment reintegration by providing an understanding of the experiences of military

couples during post-deployment reintegration (Ainsworth et al., 1979; Bowlby, 1977; Wood et

al., 2019).

      According to research, adult attachment types can significantly impact the quality of

marriage relationships (Bedair et al., 2020; Cederbaum et al., 2017; Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

They can also explain some difficulties that military couples report during post-deployment

reintegration. For example, some service members exposed to trauma during deployment may

develop mental or emotional difficulties, making it harder to connect emotionally with their

partners during reintegration (Armey et al., 2022; Bakhurst et al., 2018; Carter & Renshaw,

2016). Additionally, the adult attachment theory can help explain how some couples are more

resilient than others in the face of these obstacles (Wood et al., 2022). The study of military

spouses contributed to the understanding and development of attachment theory by providing a

context for the distinct challenges and experiences of military life due to frequent separations.

Additionally, it shed light on military life's nuanced influences on attachment dynamics,

attachment patterns, relationship functioning, and individual well-being. This knowledge

informed the development of interventions, support programs, and policies to promote healthy

attachment, resilience, and marital satisfaction among military couples (Wood et al., 2019)

.

<div align="center">**Practical Significance**</div>

Renshaw and Campbell (2017) advocated for studies that examined the experiences of

reintegrating married couples. Specifically, the authors recommended future explorations

focusing on the couples' relationship satisfaction. They emphasized the importance of

relationship satisfaction because the relationship's quality can significantly impact the well-being

and adjustment of both partners during the post-deployment reintegration phase (Renshaw &

Campbell, 2017). Sandoz et al. (2015) found that relationship satisfaction is critical in

determining a couple's total well-being, including mental, physical, and emotional health.

Correspondingly, the authors claimed that a couple's well-being equates to happiness (Sandoz et

al., 2015). Similarly, Wen et al. (2020) discovered that higher levels of relationship satisfaction

are associated with a couple's improved ability to adjust during the post-deployment

reintegration phase.

Future adult attachment theory research can assist couples in better understanding one

another and their relationship. This research could assist couples in identifying how their

attachment styles influence their relationship, while also setting the foundation for better

communication patterns to increase their capacity to resolve conflicts more successfully (Carter

& Renshaw, 2016b; Zamir et al., 2020). It could also assist couples in better understanding how

attachment styles impact emotional connection and restoring trust post-deployment (Cafferky &

Shi, 2015; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Wood et al., 2022). Furthermore, the adult attachment theory

could assist military couples and researchers in understanding the complexities of challenges

associated with military deployments, such as trauma, stress, and other factors that impact military couples' post-deployment reintegration relationships (Wood et al., 2019, 2022).

Research Questions

Central Research Question

Stahnke (2023) discovered that considering the narratives and perspectives of long-term married couples may provide a better understanding of how they perceive and make sense of their deep emotional connections and overall contentment within their relationships. Thus, the central research question for this study was: How do long-term married couples describe their internal working models (IWMs) and adult attachment styles, which (1) conceptualize their romantic love and relationship satisfaction lived experiences as well as (2) describe the common meanings and shared practices that assist them with mitigating the risk of separation and divorce?

Sub-Question One

Sub-question one was: How do long-term married couples explain their IWMs and adult attachment styles? This research question shed light on the importance of military married couples' attachment experiences based on IWMs, which are formed early in life and represented in adulthood and serve as mental representations of expectations, perceptions, and behaviors in relationships (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Chui & Leung, 2016; Rosalina et al., 2020).

Sub-Question Two

Sub-question two was: How do long-term married couples conceptualize their romantic love based on their IWMs and adult attachment styles? This question shed light on how long-term married couples conceptualize their romantic love and provided a more in-depth

understanding of the factors contributing to how adult attachment styles influence long-term relationships.

Sub-Question Three

Sub-question three was: How do long-term married couples conceptualize their relationship satisfaction based on their IWM and adult attachment style? This question shed light on how long-term married couples conceptualize their relationship satisfaction based on their adult attachment style, provided an understanding of the psychological processes contributing to satisfaction, and provided an understanding of the impact of early attachment experiences on relationship dynamics, communication patterns, and emotional intimacy.

Sub-Question Four

Sub-question four was: How do long-term married couples describe the post-deployment reintegration practices that assist them with mitigating the risk of separation and divorce? This question helped married couples mitigate the risk of separation and divorce by shedding light on the challenges associated with prolonged deployments that can be stressful for married couples (Bedair et al., 2020; Long, 2021).

Definitions

1. *Adult Attachment Theory* – This psychological framework transformed the concept of infant attachment between caregivers and their children. It explores how adults form relationships and emotional bonds. During early relationships with caregivers, working models are shaped, which influence expectations, beliefs, and behaviors (Bowlby, 1977).

2. *Attachment* – According to Bowlby (1977), attachment is vital to shaping patterns relating to others, forming emotional bonds that begin during infanthood and last throughout life.

3. *Attachment Styles* – Attachment styles may be classified as secure, anxious, or avoidant, affecting an individual's approach to closeness, trust, and emotional support (Ainsworth et al., 1978).

4. *Emotional Connection* – Emotional connection refers to a bond or relationship between two individuals based on their shared emotions, feelings, and understandings of each other's experiences (Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

5. *Emotional Cycle of Deployment (ECOD)* – The ECOD describes the emotions military service members and their spouses experience throughout the five stages of deployment: pre-deployment, deployment, sustainment, redeployment, and post-deployment (Knobloch-Fedders et al., 2020).

6. *Emotional Stressors* – Emotional stressors are triggers or factors that cause psychological or emotional distress. Stressors vary from person to person, as each person has different coping mechanisms and sensitivities (Mallonee et al., 2020).

7. *Hermeneutic Phenomenology* – Hermeneutic phenomenology describes how the study of everyday meaning reveals hidden meanings and structures in people's lives, especially for marginalized groups. In addition to emphasizing context, it acknowledges the subjectivity of human interpretation (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004).

8. *Internal Working Models* – Internal working models (IWMs) are the mental representations that guide how individuals perceive themselves, their partners, and relationships in general based on childhood/caregiver experiences (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Bretherton, 1999).

9. *Mental Stressors* – Mental stressors are factors or circumstances that contribute to mental or psychological distress (Knobloch et al., 2018).

10. *Post-Deployment Reintegration Phase* – This phase in the deployment cycle describes the process of military service members and their spouses transitioning back from a deployment mission. Returning home and reintegrating into families, communities, and daily life involves adjusting to changes in routines, roles, and relationships (Knobloch et al., 2021).

11. *Reintegration Stressors* – The mental or emotional challenges that military members or their spouses may encounter during the post-deployment reintegration phase (Pflieger et al., 2018; Wood et al., 2019).

12. *Relationship Satisfaction* – A couple's level of mutual satisfaction and fulfillment in their relationship (Carter et al., 2020).

13. *Romantic Love* – The emotional connection that transcends friendship. Relationships with romantic partners can be viewed as an extension of the attachment process, where individuals' early attachment relationships with caregivers shape their attachment styles as adults (Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

Summary

There was a problem with post-deployed married couples experiencing an increased risk of mental and emotional stressors. According to Corry et al. (2021), there are specific challenges for reestablishing emotional connection in the relationship for married couples during the first 3–6 months of the post-deployment reintegration phase. Additionally, there is an issue with the lack of literature on the reintegration of experiences in married couples (Corry et al., 2021; Mallonee et al., 2020). As a result, the purpose of this qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study was to learn about the experiences of post-deployed married couples in the reintegration phase through the lens of adult attachment theory (Ainsworth et al., 1979; Bowlby, 1958, 1977). A review of the literature provided an in-depth discussion of the theoretical background; related

literature focusing on married couples, the ECOD, the married military couple's reintegration phase, mental and emotional marital stressors, separation, and divorce factors, as well as marital quality and satisfaction key concepts, are provided in Chapter Two.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Overview

Married couples have become vulnerable to an increased risk of separation and divorce due to military deployments (Skomorovsky et al., 2017). The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative study was to discover how military married couples can mitigate the risk of separation and divorce during the reintegration phase. Exploring the post-deployment reintegration experiences of married couples provided a substantial understanding of their challenges. Military couples have been experiencing post-deployment reintegration for centuries; the nature of the military mission and present military changes in culture frequently characterize their experiences. This literature review focused on the literature relevant to the lived experiences of married couples with post-deployment reintegration.

Bowlby's (1969) seminal research on attachment theory was later expanded to include attachment styles by Ainsworth et al. (1978) and Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991). In addition, Main et al. (1985), as well as Hazan and Shaver (1987), expanded the theory to include a focus on adult attachment in romantic relationships. This research was guided by the evolved version of adult attachment theory, which served as the framework for this study. The literature review discusses the adult attachment theory's theoretical assumptions, relating them to the stressors and barriers that may impact the quality of married couples' post-deployment relationships. After discussing the theoretical framework, the literature review examines the history of military marriages and deployments, the Emotional Cycle of Deployment (ECOD), the reintegration relationship stressors, and the barriers that military married couples encounter that impact their successful transition to mitigating separation and divorce.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that guided this dissertation research was adult attachment theory. The adult attachment theory constructs aligned with the research inquiry of how long-term married couples mitigate the risk of separation and divorce after multiple deployment reintegration phases. Therefore, the attachment theory constructs were utilized within the qualitative research design and methods to provide a framework for the data collection instrument and analysis application regarding the married couples' strategies that assisted them in mitigating separation and divorce. Following is a discussion regarding the empirical research and subsequent evolution of adult attachment theory, along with the constructs that guided this research.

Adult Attachment Theory: Historical Overview

Adult attachment theory, initially developed by Bowlby in the 1950s, proposed that individuals develop specific attachment bonds based on their early experiences (Bowlby, 1958; 1969; 1973; 1977). Bowlby (1969) suggested that early experiences of attachment between infants and their caregivers lay the foundation for their emotional and social development throughout life. He extensively discussed the concept of internal working models (IWMs), which he explained as the cognitive and affective representations that individuals develop based on their early experiences with caregivers. Bowlby (1969) further argued that IWMs influence an individual's sense of self, their expectations of others, and their overall capacity for forming and maintaining relationships throughout life. Moreover, Bowlby (1977) indicated that attachment theory explains how individuals form *affectionate bonds* in relationships. It identifies the emotional connection and disconnection that can emerge through feelings of separation and loss (Bowlby, 1977).

Additionally, Ainsworth et al. (1978) further advanced attachment theory through their strange situation experimental research. The findings of the strange situation experiment became a foundational approach for one of the most widely used and recognized methods for studying attachment styles. The experiment involved children and their caregivers being placed in a room with toys and objects. The experiment involved eight scenarios designed to activate the child's attachment system and observe their behavior in response to the caregiver's presence, absence, and return (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970). As a result, Ainsworth et al. (1979) further developed the concept of attachment bond by identifying three main attachment styles: (1) secure attachment, (2) anxious-ambivalent attachment, and (3) avoidant attachment. These different attachment styles assist with the ability to understand how people relate to one another. In Ainsworth's (1978) research on attachment theory, secure attachment is described as a child's ability to use their caregiver as a secure base from which they can explore their environment, while likewise seeking proximity and comfort in times of distress or uncertainty. Following Bowlby and Ainsworth's seminal works, subsequent researchers, such as Hazan and Shaver (1987), examined the application of attachment theory to romantic relationships in adults. In Hazan and Shaver's (1990) influential attachment theory study, the researchers discovered relationship parallels between infant/caregiver attachments and adult romantic attachments.

Like Ainsworth's (1978) attachment style outcome from observing infant/caregiver relationships, Hazan and Shaver (1987) conducted a study about adult romantic relationships, which indicated that attachment styles could be categorized based on similar criteria to Ainsworth's (1978): (1) secure attachment, (2) anxious-preoccupied attachment, and (3) avoidant attachment. Participants in their study who aligned with having a secure attachment style indicated that they experienced comfort with intimacy and independence, communicated

effectively, and possessed positive self-perceptions and perceptions of their spouses. In contrast, participants with an anxious-preoccupied attachment style often encountered feelings of insecurity, anxiety, and a fear of rejection or abandonment within their romantic relationships. These individuals often exhibited clingy tendencies, possessiveness, or an ongoing need for reassurance from their spouses. Alternatively, those with an avoidant attachment style were found to exhibit emotional distance and struggle with intimacy and trust. These participants prioritized independence and self-reliance, encountered challenges expressing emotions, and often harbored concerns about feeling overwhelmed or controlled within relationships (Ainsworth, 1978). Hazan and Shaver's (1987) research shed light on the association between early attachment experiences and subsequent adult romantic attachment patterns.

During a follow-up study, Hazan and Shaver (1990) discovered that individuals with a secure attachment style were more likely to experience a fulfilling and trusting romantic relationship. The study's findings confirmed their previous research findings that attachment styles develop in infancy and influence people's expectations, beliefs, and behaviors within romantic relationships later in life. Bartholomew and Shaver (1998) indicated that the Hazan and Shaver (1987) study was designed to measure loneliness and insecure attachment patterns. Their study focused on the participants' perceptions of romantic relationships as associated with the pervasive loneliness of their current existence. Furthermore, they utilized a self-report questionnaire designed for adult attachment patterns. In subsequent studies regarding romantic relationships and attachment styles, their method became a popular tool for exploring adult attachment patterns.

Such ongoing research has contributed valuable insights into the role of attachment in adult romantic relationships. The research aims of understanding adult attachments within the

seminal context of Bowlby's (1969, 1973) attachment theory and IWMs, along with Ainsworth

and Bell's (1970) attachment styles, contributed to an in-depth understanding of adult

relationship dynamics, satisfaction, and stability in adulthood. Accordingly, the adult attachment

IWMs and adult attachment styles were the theoretical constructs that were the primary drivers

within the current research study.

Adult Attachment IWMs

As Bowlby (1973) explained, IWMs are based on a person's experiences, memories, and

beliefs based on early attachment with caregivers. Their IWMs will continue evolving as

individuals encounter new experiences or develop new relationships outside the family (Bowlby,

1973; Collins, 2003). Collins (2003) asserted that IWMs develop from experiences with

attachment figures and revolve around regulating and fulfilling attachment needs, such as

proximity to a nurturing caregiver, and can be adjusted over time if the quality of caregiving

patterns changes.

An IWM is significant in supporting individuals to regulate their emotions and cope with

adversity (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Bowlby, 1969). Bowlby (1969) identified two forms

of IWMs: (1) the perception of an individual's relationship with attachment figures, including the

level of trust or security within the relationship, and (2) the individual's self-perception regarding

whether the attachment figures will demonstrate the types of actions that validate their

perceptions of trust and security or those areas that require support when needed (Bartholomew

& Horowitz; Bowlby, 1973; Chui & Leung, 2016; Thompson et al., 2022). Hazan and Shaver's

(1990) research focused on attachment related to romantic love and adult experiences based on

IWMs. Bartholomew and Horowitz indicated that researchers began to explore IWMs, which

represent the connection between relationships formed during childhood and the ability to adjust

socially and emotionally as adults. The more consistent the caregiving patterns, the more IWMs can become solidified through repeated experiences and become increasingly generalized over time (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991).

Bowlby further stated that IWMs combined with adult attachment styles clarify how adults' relationships with their primary attachment figure influence their current relationship approach. Main et al. (1985) extended Bowlby's work by establishing a connection between adult attachment and IWM through the development of the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) protocol, which considers the impact of childhood attachment on adult relationships. While Main's (1985) semi-structured AAI supported efforts to connect IWMs to adult relationships, Hazan and Shaver (1987) took it a step further to develop a self-report questionnaire, the Attachment Three-Category (ATC), to bring more understanding to how IWMs connect adults to romantic love and attachment. The ATC questionnaire identified three groups that coincide with attachment styles developed in childhood (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). The combination of the semi-structured interview and self-report questionnaire can provide a comprehensive understanding of the attachment style of married couples (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Brandão et al., 2020; Bretherton, 1999; Shaver et al., 2000), further confirming that Bowlby's IWMs provided an integrative mental construction of a person's inner perception of themselves, their attachment figures, and their interpersonal relationships. Ponti and Tani (2019) suggested that IWMs also influence social relationships beyond the family. For example, avoidant and anxious attachment styles may present significant challenges due to the repetition of learned behavior patterns from early attachment experiences within romantic relationships (Ponti & Tani, 2019).

Adult Attachment Styles

Bowlby's (1969) proposal of a secure emotional bond between a child and their primary caregiver contributed to the foundational premise for attachment styles. As aforementioned, Ainsworth et al.'s (1979), strange situation experimental procedures identified three primary attachment styles: (1) secure, (2) anxious-preoccupied/ambivalent, and (3) avoidant. Main et al. (1987) identified a third insecure attachment style, disorganized behavior patterns, based on their observation of the strange situation's infants exhibiting inconsistent behaviors around their caregivers, distinct from anxious and avoidant attachment patterns. Hesse and Main (2000) proposed that infants who may be identified with disorganized patterns may be more vulnerable to experiencing unresolved traumatic experiences or attachment conflicts. This attachment style may have additional clinical considerations due to the trauma. These four attachment styles provide a broader understanding of how individuals form and maintain relationships.

Secure Adult Attachment Style

Married couples with a secure attachment style often have a positive self-perception and a belief in the long-term stability of their relationship. Bowlby (1977) emphasized the significance of attachment behavior in defining adult attachment styles, building upon his research on the secure base established in childhood and carried throughout life. Ainsworth et al. (1978) identified secure attachment as the presence of comfort and security displayed by infants in the presence of their caregiving attachment figures. Similarly, Hazan and Shaver (1987) found that adults with secure attachment styles exhibit an appropriate level of security, hold realistic expectations for their relationships, and possess a healthy understanding of intimacy and interdependence. Furthermore, Bartholomew and Shaver (1998) noted that individuals with a secure attachment style tend to have a positive sense of self-worth, which supports their capacity

to develop intimacy in close relationships. Pietromonaco and Collins (2017) advocated that secure attachment is characterized by people skills. According to Hasim et al. (2018), individuals with a secure attachment style in a secure marriage can demonstrate vulnerability, engage in open self-disclosure, and effectively manage negative emotions without fear of rejection from their spouses. Yip et al. (2018) suggested that the secure adult attachment style can predict a couple's inner resources and self-sufficiency. Additionally, Bergeron et al. (2019) found that individuals with a secure adult attachment exhibit stronger resilience, commitment, and positive engagement in their relationships, and Zagefka et al. (2021) discovered that life satisfaction was associated with attachment to a romantic partner. Konrath et al. (2014) found that individuals with secure attachment styles tend to demonstrate balance in their relationships, have a decrease in negative thinking about romantic relationships, low levels of loneliness and may experience greater relationship satisfaction in general. Thus, secure attachment is important for overall relational health.

The secure attachment style has also been explored within the context of military families. Wood et al. (2019) associated secure attachment styles with the ability of military couples to respond from a secure base during post-deployment and reintegration. They discovered that couples with a secure base demonstrate emotional availability during critical relationship transitions, leading to increased flexibility and strength in their relationship (Wood et al., 2019). In a study conducted by Bedair et al. (2020) involving 180 married military couples stationed in Qatar, participants completed self-report questionnaires measuring attachment style, marital satisfaction, and mutual support. The study aligned with previous research by Yip et al. (2018) and Bergeron et al. (2019) and revealed that many participants identified with a secure adult attachment style and displayed low levels of anxiety and avoidance. These adults may have

experienced consistently available and responsive caregivers during childhood, resulting in positive self-perception and perceptions of others. These secure adult attachment-style relationships flourished due to the establishment of trust, dependability, effective communication, critical thinking skills, and the ability to manage emotions effectively based on their childhood experiences with primary attachment figures. Importantly, Bedair et al. (2020) found that participants with secure adult attachment styles reported higher marital satisfaction and enjoyed healthier relationships. A secure attachment style provides a foundation of trust and satisfaction in married couples relationships.

Insecure Attachment Styles

Attachment styles characterized by insecurity can challenge establishing and maintaining a secure, trusting relationship with others. Molero et al. (2016) noted that people with insecure attachments, including anxious, avoidant, and disorganized attachment styles, often struggle with how they are perceived in relationships and feel apprehensive about intimacy and abandonment. In addition, insecure attachment can hinder adult relationships, making it more difficult to form healthy emotional bonds because of fears of sharing their emotions with their romantic partners and a greater tendency to suppress them (Brandão et al., 2020; Konrath et al., 2014) Muetzelfeld et al., 2020). Accordingly, the discussion explores three categories of insecure attachment: anxious-preoccupied, dismissive-avoidant, and disorganized-fearful.

Anxious-Preoccupied Adult Attachment Style. The anxious-preoccupied adult attachment style is characterized by anxiety and emotional turmoil. Previous research has highlighted the impact of the anxious-preoccupied attachment style on relationship dynamics, indicating several factors that can influence individuals with this attachment style (Hazan & Shaver, 1987, 2017). For instance, those with an anxious-preoccupied attachment style may

introduce challenges to their relationships through emotional disconnection, communication difficulties, and an ongoing need for validation and reassurance from their partners (Hasim et al., 2018). According to Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991), individuals with preoccupied attachment styles often display ambivalence, a negative self-concept, and a positive view of others. Additionally, Bartholomew and Shaver (1998) noted that preoccupied individuals anxiously seek acceptance and assurance from others, believing that safety and security can be achieved if they receive the desired responses. In contrast, Hasim et al. (2018) found that individuals with an anxious-preoccupied attachment style can suddenly feel rejected by their partners. They may exhibit demanding, clingy, and overly dependent behaviors in emotionally connected relationships (Hasim et al., 2018).

Wood et al. (2019) discovered that individuals with anxiety attachment often harbor a fear of abandonment and frequently ruminate on thoughts of rejection from their partners. Bergeron et al. (2019) observed that individuals with anxious attachment tend to display higher levels of over-commitment, indicating an excessive investment in the relationship. Muetzelfeld et al. (2020) indicated that an individual's attachment style is often not recognized at a conscious level. Therefore, individuals may not be aware that their need for reassurance and excessive rumination are characteristic of relationship dynamics or a specific attachment style.

Dismissive-Avoidant Adult Attachment Style. Another insecurely attached style is the dismissive-avoidant attachment style, which can also have a negative impact on relationship dynamics, emotional connections, and overall relationship satisfaction (Muetzelfeld et al., 2020). Individuals with dismissive-avoidant attachment styles tend to have an overly optimistic view of their independence and self-sufficiency, downplaying the importance of others and avoiding intimacy (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Gleeson et al., 2021). Bartholomew and Shaver

(1998) characterized dismissive attachment as having a positive self-model and a negative model of others. They have negative expectations, avoid closeness, and maintain their self-worth by denying the significance and value of close relationships. With such a perspective, dismissive-avoidant individuals struggle to develop and maintain close relationships (Bartholomew & Shaver, 1998).

Bergeron et al. (2019) and Hasim et al. (2018) described the dismissive attachment style as independent, with a tendency to avoid committed relationships and limited vulnerability to maintain autonomy and control over their life direction. They discovered that individuals with avoidant attachment displayed higher levels of under-commitment, indicating a lack of engagement and emotional withdrawal in relationships. Individuals with an avoidant-dismissive attachment style often had caregivers who consistently failed to respond, rejected, or dismissed their needs, consistent with Ainsworth's (1978) research experiment, strange situation (Bergeron et al., 2019; Hasim et al., 2018).

Adults identified with avoidant-dismissive attachment styles may demonstrate limited expressions of distress when they experience separation from their spouse and may prefer independence over dependence in their relationship (Muetzelfeld et al., 2020; Wood et al., 2019). Additionally, Brandão et al. (2020) found that when individuals with this attachment style are in relationships, they tend to be emotionally independent, value independence, and may find emotional intimacy challenging. Likewise, Wood et al. (2019) found that attachment avoidance among military spouses reflects discomfort with emotional closeness. These individuals value independence, avoid intimacy, and may struggle with emotional closeness and commitment (Wood et al., 2019).

Disorganized-Fearful Adult Attachment Style.

Main and Solomon (1986) proposed that disorganized-fearful attachment can be characterized by a lack of a consistent or coherent approach to seeking comfort and support from caregivers. In adults with disorganized-fearful attachments, emotions may conflict, and regulating themselves can be challenging. A critical feature of this attachment style is the simultaneous desire for closeness with others and the fear of rejection. Accordingly, people with a disorganized-fearful attachment style may have experienced trauma early in life, resulting in adult feelings of insecurity and emotional instability. Accordingly, individuals with disorganized-fearful attachments may find it challenging to establish trusting relationships with partners, hindering the formation of healthy, emotionally connected bonds. They further indicated that disorganized-fearful attachment behaviors could impact romantic relationships and incorporate various aspects, such as emotional intimacy, communication patterns, and relationship satisfaction (Main & Solomon, 1986).

Bartholomew and Shaver (1998) noted that individuals with a disorganized-fearful attachment style rely on the acceptance and approval of others, often avoiding intimacy as a protective shield from pain and rejection. Hasim et al. (2018) found that individuals with disorganized-fearful attachment styles consistently fear rejection and tend to limit their interpersonal interactions. Similarly, dismissive attachment types may avoid intimacy, although for varied reasons. Hence, attachment orientation plays a crucial role in determining the quality of relationships, communication during conflicts, relationship satisfaction, and the overall stability of marriages (Hasim et al., 2018). As a result, early identified attachment styles persist over time, influencing couples as they enter their romantic relationships (Bartholomew & Shaver, 1998; Hasim et al., 2018; Main & Solomon, 1986).

Related Literature

This section presents related existing literature on military married couples and their experience with post-deployment reintegration.

Military Marriages and Deployment Since WWII

To provide context, a historical overview regarding the evolution of military married couples' unique vulnerabilities to separation and divorce begins with the World War II (WWII) era. As a result, Hill's (1949) study was more influential during WWII to understand how deployments affected military marriages and families throughout a global conflict that lasted between 1939–1945. Hill's study enrolled 82,000 Iowa male military members who experienced the Pearl Harbor attack and investigated how deployment impacted their marriages and families. The study identified several barriers that may have prevented male service members from successfully rejoining their spouses and families after deployment, which included inadequate financial circumstances, relocation challenges, and communication challenges (Hill). In addition to Hill's (1949) study, Boulding (1950) conducted a follow-up study that reemphasized the importance of the Iowa study and the importance of military family connections during WWII.

The purpose of Hill's (1949) study was to identify the level of separation crisis after the deployment reunion of the male service members with their families. His research provided a better understanding of military couples' attachment experiences during deployment, separation, and reunion, highlighting the emotional and mental barriers military couples experienced during deployments and the essential nature of attachment relationships in helping them cope during these crises. A review of the results revealed that many of the deployment effects observed during WWII remained relevant in the post-WWII era, specifically during modern Vietnam deployments (Hill, 1949).

Military deployments continue to have an impact on military couples, just as they did during World War II and Vietnam. The war in Iraq and Afghanistan, which lasted 2 decades, had a profound historical impact on society, especially on military married couples (Armey et al., 2022). Between September 2001–2018, 2.6 million active duty, national guard, and reserve military members served in support of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, according to the U.S. Department of Defense (Borah & Fina, 2017). According to Renshaw and Campbell (2017), there have been previous studies that examined the effect of war-related deployments on military service members associated with missions in Iraq and Afghanistan. According to the authors, most of the studies focused on service members' post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), yet there was a limited focus on exploring the disruptive impact of the disorder on spousal and family relationships (Renshaw & Campbell, 2017).

Similarly, Richardson et al. (2020) found that the impact of deployment risks could be explained by considering prior deployments, combat-related exposure, deployment injuries, and the types of support available during the deployment cycle to avoid post-deployment consequences. Due to the historical nature of the ongoing deployment rate of active-duty, National Guard, and reservist members, the emphasis on the need for continued research on the impact of deployment on married couples' experiences around post-deployment and reintegration can have far-reaching implications (Balderrama-Durbin et al., 2017).

As a result of the negative impacts of deployments on relationships, the government has expressed an increasing interest in assisting post-deployed married couples in lowering reintegration relationship stressors, which can increase service member retention rates (Pflieger et al., 2018). Similarly, Street et al. (2022) proposed that the high demands of military life may have a negative impact on married service members' retention after deployment. The military

relies on service members to be ready to deploy at any given moment. As a result, an established and supportive home environment can improve military members' readiness and retention (Borah & Fina, 2017; Mallonee et al., 2020; Renshaw & Campbell, 2017). According to Giff et al. (2020), coping methods for military couples related to relationship satisfaction emphasize the relevance of adaptive coping techniques, such as seeking social support and problem-solving, in fostering better relationship satisfaction. Following the historical context of military marriages, researchers must understand the unique challenges and dynamics that unfold in military marriages during deployments before they can discuss the deployment cycle.

Military Emotional Cycle of Deployment

The Emotional Cycle of Deployment (ECOD) model, initially developed by Kathleen Vestal Logan in 1987, sought to identify the behavioral and emotional changes experienced by Navy spouses during deployments lasting 3 months or longer. While initially focused on wives, the ECOD model's applicability expanded to include husbands and children (Logan, 1987). Although the adult attachment theory context focuses on how individuals form and experience emotional bonds in adult romantic relationships, the ECOD model aligns with the adult attachment theory with its focus on the emotional bonds between family members during each stage of the deployment process. Within the ECOD model, the various stages of deployment can have implications for the attachment dynamics within a married couple's relationship based on their attachment styles.

Logan (1987) indicated that the ECOD model consisted of seven stages of deployment that integrated specific emotional responses within each phase. Logan's first ECOD stage, anticipation of loss, addressed the psychological impacts of separation on couples as they prepared for departure and completed pre-deployment activities. The second stage included the

emotional responses of detachment and withdrawal, where emotional and physical distance between military spouses increased before deployment departure. Emotional disorganization characterized the third stage, as spouses often experience surprises and disruptions to established routines. The fourth stage was associated with recovery and stabilization of emotional responses. During this phase, spouses experienced relief and confidence as they adapted to increased independence and new family patterns without the service member. The anticipation of homecoming defined the fifth stage, with a mix of spousal excitement and anxiety. The sixth stage involved spouses renegotiating the marital contract, as couples physically reunited but often remained emotionally detached. Stage seven described the reintegration and stabilization phase, where the military couples focused on reestablishing routines, as well as intimacy, based on an increased sense of togetherness (Logan, 1987).

In 2001, Pincus et al. further developed Logan's (1987) original ECOD model by categorizing the various emotional responses and challenges into specific phases within the deployment cycle. The researchers' purpose was to understand the impact of multiple deployment missions on the stress experienced by married couples. Pincus and his colleagues conducted research with an estimated 4,600 participants who were members of the Texas National Guard. The researchers observed National Guard members who were activated for deployment for their seventh mission, which lasted up to 8 months for each deployment. More than two-thirds of the service members were married. During the span of the research, there were various military missions, including the Gulf War, Bosnia, and humanitarian deployments. The authors categorized the ECOD model into five stages of the deployment cycle and grouped the emotional responses experienced by U.S. Army and National Guard family members during each stage of deployment. The five deployment stages were identified as: pre-deployment,

deployment, sustainment, redeployment, and post-deployment. This emotion focused ECOD version provided valuable insights into the sequential emotional challenges military families may encounter during the deployment phases (Pincus et al., 2001).

Pincus et al.'s (2001) research findings, still being replicated today, further explained the levels of distress that couples go through. Pincus et al. (2001) suggested that the pre-deployment stage can extend from weeks to months before deployment, leaving married couples uncertain about their relationship (Long, 2021). Wood et al. (2019) linked the pre-deployment phase with signs consistent with an anxious attachment style, where a spouse may display excessive worry about being separated and worry about their spouse's safety. Furthermore, the at-home spouse may seek reassurance and comfort while preparing for departure (Long, 2021; O'Neal & Lavner, 2022; Pincus et al., 2001). About a month after the pre-deployment phase, the deployment phase begins, when the service member is considered on the mission. This stage can evoke mixed emotions in married couples, such as anxiety and a feeling of being overwhelmed for the non-deployed spouse (Long, 2021; Wood et al., 2019).

According to Wood et al. (2019), individuals with avoidant attachment patterns may exercise their independence more and suppress their emotions to cope with separation more efficiently while underestimating the emotional consequences. After the deployment phase, the sustainment phase follows. It may include lifestyle adjustments for each spouse, such as establishing new routines, leading to a sense of control over the changes they recently experienced (Pincus et al., 2001). For example, during this transition period, individuals with anxious attachment patterns may go from anxious to relieved. They may attempt to maintain contact and connection with their spouse through regular communication and a caring demeanor. In contrast, those who prioritize independence over dependence may continue their routines and

find comfort in them (Sandberg et al., 2017; Wood et al., 2019). The redeployment phase focuses on the service member's preparation for returning to their duty station, and the post-deployment phase marks the service member's reintegration into the family unit (Long, 2021; Pincus et al., 2001). Pincus and colleagues' research laid the foundation for understanding couples' challenges due to the intricacy of deployment missions (Balderrama-Durbin et al., 2015; Knobloch-Fedders et al., 2020). The redeployment and post-deployment stages can evoke strong reactions in anxious and avoidant attachment types. Those with anxious attachment patterns may require close physical presence and comforting connections to others for emotional support. In contrast, avoidant attachment types may find the sudden increase in intimacy unsettling; they may need time to recover their sense of security before feeling ready to commit again fully (Wood et al., 2019).

Knobloch-Fedders et al. (2020) supported Pincus' (2001) research findings while expanding the ECOD model by including timing factors related to military couples' deployment cycle experiences and relationship experiences. They sought to enhance the model by including additional concepts and conducted a longitudinal study using data collected between 2018–2019 from a sample of 555 couples. This study focused on the post-deployment phase of the ECOD and explored positive and negative relationship experiences, communication, personality changes, and other factors that impact couples' lives after deployment (Knobloch-Fedders et al., 2020). Researchers focused on questions related to changes in relationships, couples' evaluation of experiences, the impact of post-deployment conflict management strategies, and level of commitment (Balderrama-Durbin et al., 2015; Knobloch-Fedders et al., 2020). The ECOD framework, when viewed through the lens of adult attachment theory, provided insights into the emotional experiences, behaviors, and needs of military couples during various stages of

deployment, considering how attachment styles influenced their responses to separation and reintegration (Konrath et al., 2014; Meadows et al., 2017).

ECOD Post-Deployment Reintegration Phase

O'Neal et al. (2018) emphasized the critical role of the post-deployment reintegration phase in the deployment cycle for military married couples. They emphasized the need to focus on this phase to gain a more in-depth understanding of the heightened vulnerability that can be experienced by military married couples, which can impact their ability to reconnect, readjust, and build resilience following a prolonged separation (O'Neal et al., 2018). Supporting this perspective, O'Neal and Lavner (2022) reinforced the notion that the post-deployment reintegration phase can significantly influence military couples' emotional connection and relationship dynamics. Therefore, the expansion of Knobloch-Fedders et al.'s (2020) work helped to better understand the couple's perceptions of their experience during the post-deployment reintegration transition, the last stage in the deployment cycle. This post-deployment phase was significant because it signified the homecoming and reunion after the service member had been away from their home installation for 3–6 months (Knobloch et al., 2021). The authors indicated that as part of their post-deployment reintegration, married service members typically transitioned back into their pre-deployment routine, which included transitioning back into the family unit where the non-military spouse may have to develop more independence, often involving the family unit, including spouses and children (Knobloch et al., 2021).

Knobloch et al. (2018) indicated the importance of emphasizing that during the earlier deployment phase, the family at home may have experienced internal and external changes, including how the home was managed, parenting responsibilities, financial responsibilities, and the personal qualities of the at-home spouse. Moreover, this critical stage of the deployment

cycle's reintegration phase can cause challenges in the married couple's relationship and may take time and patience to reestablish and restructure for successful reintegration (Knobloch et al., 2021). How attachment styles interact with post-deployment challenges can influence the couple's ability to navigate the transition successfully and may impact the risk of divorce or separation.

Reintegration Phase Relationship Stressors

The ECOD model provides an understanding of the deployment cycle's distinct deployment phases. Within the model, the post-deployment reintegration phase stressors have specific implications for married couples. The model emphasizes the emotional experiences that can contribute to marital stress during the post-deployment reintegration phase (Knobloch et al., 2021). Wood et al. (2022) described the post-deployment reintegration phase as the most stressful for married couples and associated with certain challenges. O'Neal and Lavner (2022) argued that, in general, military life can increase stress levels for married couples. This military-related stress often makes it difficult for military spouses to meet each other's emotional needs. Combining military life stress with reintegration-related stressors can exacerbate already strained relationships. Furthermore, they found that when a couple perceives a threat, change, or challenge in their relationship, there is an associated increase in stress, which can impact their physical, mental, and/or emotional interactions with each other (O'Neal & Lavner, 2022). Cafferky et al. (2022) and Cheney (2017) identified a relationship between how military spouses deal with their emotions while the service member spouse is deployed and the strength of their emotional connection during the post-deployment reintegration phase.

Richardson et al. (2020) aligned with Mallonee et al. (2020) in that post-deployment stressors increased based on risk factors associated with the service members' deployment, such

as multiple deployments, combat missions, and the risk of physical injury. Per Solomon et al. (2016), military couples who are married may experience various mental health difficulties, including anxiety, sadness, and PTSD, in the first 6 months following reintegration. Additionally, other studies have found that relationship uncertainty can be a cognitive construct that triggers reactions during transition periods (Weiss & Anzur, 2023). These findings indicated that the shift can be a challenging phase for military couples, and they may require support and assistance during this period. Correspondingly, the shift from active deployment to post-deployment reintegration can be mentally challenging for returning military service members and their at-home spouses (Clark et al., 2018; Knobloch et al., 2020).

Mental Stressors

Meadows et al. (2017) suggested that unresolved mental health problems may cause higher divorce rates following overseas deployment. Research conducted to date has demonstrated that service members often face challenges managing mental health conditions that could pose difficulties to themselves and their partners, worsen over time, and have lasting repercussions (Knobloch et al., 2018; Meadows et al., 2017). Mallonee et al. (2020) found that post-deployment stressors can increase based on how military spouses perceive the mental health outcomes of returning service members. Clark et al. (2018) indicated that mental health stressor perceptions are important to the overall reintegration experience due to the empirical evidence regarding secondary trauma experiences that can often co-occur within the family unit with the service member's spouse and children. For example, Knobloch et al. (2018) discovered that some military service members can experience a variety of mental health symptoms, such as anxiety, depression, and PTSD, that can increase the stressors during the post-deployment reintegration phase. Furthermore, some studies have found that non-deployed spouses' reports of mental

health symptoms have increased (Mallonee et al., 2020). For married couples, the reintegration process can be more difficult if the mental health symptoms are brought on by the deployment separation, during the post-deployment period, or were already present (Mallonee et al., 2020). During the reintegration period, couples must readjust, which can make simple issues appear more complicated (Messecar, 2017).

Emotional Stressors

Military spouses can experience individual and couple-related emotional difficulties during reintegration. Some couples report feeling distant and detached from their spouses; these experiences may trigger intense emotional responses (Bakhurst et al., 2018; Clark et al., 2018). While one partner may feel their spouse's perceptions are mismatched and one-sided, they may be unaware of the severity of their relationship situation (Cafferky et al., 2022). Other concerns that develop during reintegration are unfulfilled needs, emotional instability, and reestablishing connection (Wolf et al., 2017). Wood et al. (2022) discovered three emotionally stressful issues that impacted the couple's relationship satisfaction: reestablishing intimacy, grieving the loss of freedom achieved while the deployed spouse was away, and adjusting to new routines. If a married couple cannot manage these reintegration stressors, they may be prevented from completing the transition and create long-term relationship barriers (Knobloch-Fedders et al., 2020).

Married Couples Deployment and Relationship Barriers

Military married couples may encounter relationship barriers in their relationship during the post-deployment reintegration phase. After a review of the literature, there were certain barriers that were identified as being more common than others. The most common types of barriers are categorized by deployment and relationship considerations in a discussion of the

several types of deployment and relationship barriers that reintegrating married couples may experience that could impact their level of relationship satisfaction.

Deployment Barriers

The post-deployment reintegration phase of the ECOD is a critical stage for married couples. The ECOD reintegration phase process has a unique set of mental and emotional stressors that, when combined with the following deployment barriers, can increase the risk of separation and divorce among married couples. The types of married couples' post-deployment reintegration barriers that were most common in the literature that will discussed in this section were pre-deployment planning and preparation, length of deployment, multiple deployments, combat deployment, and PTSD.

Pre-Deployment Planning and Preparation. Pethrus et al. (2019) found that pre-deployment mental health can be important when determining a married couple's risk of separation and divorce. Pincus et al. (2001) advocated that the pre-deployment stage could last from 3 days to several months, spanning from receiving deployment notification orders until service members' post-deployment. Cafferky et al. (2022) emphasized that a military spouse's deployment preparedness was crucial to the couple's emotional connection and marriage quality. The authors claimed that spouses actively participating in pre-deployment planning were less emotionally detached than those who were emotionally distant and suppressed or avoided pre-deployment discussions. Notably, spouses who actively prepared for deployment reported increased relationship satisfaction, emotional connection, and mutual understanding (Cafferky et al., 2022). Pethrus et al. (2019) suggested that future research investigate the risk associated with an increased divorce rate among deployed military veterans by collecting data on married military couples' relationship quality pre-deployment.

While each deployment phase represents different emotional challenges for family members, there is no specific expectation regarding the emotions experienced before embarking on each new stage. This particularly applies to the pre-deployment phase (Cafferky et al., 2022; Pincus et al., 2001). Russotti et al. (2015) suggested that, in general, service members' ability to manage their emotions during the pre-deployment and reunification periods prevents problems in their relationships with their families or other people. Previous research has found that many spouses have experienced increased difficulties during pre-deployment as they prepared for the upcoming separations (Meadows et al., 2017). Pre-deployment preparation can help couples succeed in the post-deployment reintegration transition. In contrast, if the couples were experiencing a challenging relationship prior to the service member spouse being deployed, Mallonee et al. (2020) found that the couples who failed to pre-plan for reintegration during pre-deployment may have an increased risk of picking up where they left off within their relationship. Lack of pre-deployment preparation for the reintegration phase can become a relationship barrier for service members and their families because it can leave them unprepared for the challenges of post-deployment life (Collins et al., 2017; Richardson et al., 2020).

Therefore, pre-deployment reintegration preparation is critical for mitigating post-deployment marital and family challenges (Collins et al., 2017; Mallonee et al., 2020). Pre-deployment reintegration preparation may consist of education on the possible impacts of deployment, methods of communication for staying connected while the service member is deployed, and information regarding the support systems for military families during each stage of the deployment process (Collins et al., 2017; Dursun et al., 2019).

Length of Deployment. The length of deployment has been associated with 3% of the total divorce rate among service members who were previously deployed (Gros et al., 2019). The

length of deployment can be a significant stressor for military members and their families during the post-deployment period (Wood et al., 2019). Long deployments can be incredibly stressful, which can lead to feelings of isolation and difficulty readjusting to daily life for military couples (Wilson et al., 2018). Military couples may face various pressures during long deployments, including communication difficulties, loneliness, and anxiety about the future of their relationship (Carter & Renshaw, 2016). Additionally, Beasley (2019) indicated that lengthy deployments could have a cumulative effect on military couples and have been linked to higher rates of PTSD, other mental health disorders, and relationship challenges. The author found that after lengthy deployments, many military couples' relationships were characterized by increased conflict and decreased closeness (Beasley, 2019).

  Multiple Deployments. Karney and Trail (2017) emphasized the need for additional research on the link between multiple deployments and relationship satisfaction. Wenger et al. (2018) found that married couples experience relationship challenges. These researchers, likewise, identified the critical areas that are impacted by married couples experiencing multiple deployments, such as the career of the non-military spouse and the financial status of the couple, as well as the overall physical and emotional well-being of each spouse. O'Neal and Lavner (2022) found an association between multiple deployments and a service member's rank and length of service. Their study showed that senior-ranking members and those with extended military service typically experience more deployments. This can increase the level of stress experienced during each subsequent reintegration. In collaboration, Gros et al. (2019) claimed that multiple deployments might cause relationship dysfunction and marital distress, adversely impacting the long-term satisfaction of reintegrating married couples. Moreover, service members pursuing long-term military careers may experience multiple deployments during their

service. Karney and Trail (2017) indicated that consideration of relationship distress and dysfunction could be associated with multiple deployments, which can be an emotionally exhausting separation and divorce risk factor for married couples.

Combat Deployments and PTSD. Considerable research has been conducted on the impact of combat deployments on military couples. However, a significant obstacle to relationship satisfaction arises during the reintegration process as married couples adjust to the aftermath of combat deployment. Deployments involving combat or high levels of danger can lead to significant stress and trauma for service members as they strive to reintegrate with their spouses after deployment (Armey et al., 2022).

Previous studies have demonstrated that negative combat deployment experiences affect service members' ability to readjust when they reunite with their spouses (Griffith, 2019). According to Skomorovsky et al. (2017) and Currier et al. (2019), spouses have reported that caring for a service member with combat-related mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical conditions increases conflict during the reintegration phase, thereby increasing the risk of separation and divorce for military couples. Factors contributing to related risks during combat-related reintegration include unresolved PTSD, mental health challenges, and other psychological difficulties (Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy, 2021).

For example, Gros et al. (2019) found that three out of every four marriages among Vietnam veterans ended in divorce within 6 months of post-deployment. Since PTSD is a common diagnosis among combat service members, there are relationship implications associated with relationship satisfaction, which may increase the risk of separation and divorce

among married couples. The relationship implications can be described as relationship barriers that include mental and emotional stressors (Gros et al., 2019).

Relationship Barriers

As previously discussed, the ECOD post-deployment reintegration phase and deployment barriers have separation and divorce implications for married couples. The combination of mental and emotional stressors, along with distinct types of deployment characteristics, can likewise be associated with various relationship barriers that are common within the post-deployment reintegration phase. Additionally, the mental and emotional stressors, along with the deployment and relationship barriers, can impact the married couple's attachment styles, making it difficult to experience a successful post-deployment reintegration phase. The types of relationship barriers that married couples may experience during the post-deployment reintegration phase are communication breakdown, financial stressors, and alcohol and substance abuse, which have separation and divorce implications.

Communication Breakdown. Military couples' well-being and adjustment during the post-deployment reintegration phase can be affected by their level and type of communication. Balderrama-Durbin et al. (2017) asserted that limited communication between the spouses during post-deployment was associated with a lack of physical intimacy and emotional connection. Sayers et al. (2018) found that couples who did not communicate regularly during deployment experienced increased emotional distancing and disruption to a smooth transition in the post-deployment reintegration phase. According to Knobloch et al. (2021), consideration regarding the way married couples communicate could have a lasting impact on their relationship. Due to this sensitivity, the term "affectionate communication" was introduced in this study to clarify the level of agreement or turbulence that might occur within a couple's relationship during the post-

deployment reintegration phase. Rossiter and Ling (2022) stated that the reintegration period

poses a higher risk for negative communication and interaction between spouses. Clark et al.

(2018) identified numerous communication patterns that couples might have throughout the

cycle of deployment. The diverse types of communication were associated with three aims:

relationship maintenance, daily life updates, and future goals.

Similarly, Mallonee et al. (2020) described communication barriers that significantly

impact a couple's adjustments during post-deployment reintegration. The researchers found that

two-thirds of spouses reported that an inability to communicate regularly during the service

member's deployment negatively affected their perception of relationship satisfaction (Mallonee

et al., 2020). Collaboratively, O'Neal et al. (2018) found that spouses with ongoing

communication during a service member's deployment experienced a smoother transition during

the post-deployment reintegration phase.

Financial Stressors. Financial stability can play a critical role in considering a service

member's readiness for deployment. Financial uncertainty can increase stress and distractions,

impairing the service member's focus and preparedness. Consequently, military couples'

financial stability can significantly impact the post-deployment reintegration transition (Ross et

al., 2017). When service members and non-deployed spouses experience financial strain, their

relationships may suffer negative consequences (Pflieger et al., 2018). Ross et al. (2017)

explored the relationship between money management and marital quality in a study with 219

military couples. The findings revealed that military couples facing more significant financial

concerns tended to experience more marriage difficulties, negative communication, hostility, and

decreased relationship satisfaction. Afifi et al. (2018) highlighted military couples' tendency to

avoid discussing critical financial topics within their marriage, often leading to conflict and stress.

Consequently, when couples are stressed and uncertain about their finances, they may seek support and inspiration from each other or become distant and place blame on each other. Kelley et al. (2018) stated that financial stressors occur daily in every marriage, some avoidable and others inevitable, due to unemployment, medical issues, or global market conditions. Given the complex nature of the military culture, McCoy et al. (2021) emphasized the importance for military couples to discuss financial responsibilities and communicate effectively about financial matters. Setting boundaries for economic management, particularly during periods of change like deployment, can help maintain smooth transitions throughout the deployment cycle.

Hawkins et al. (2018) further indicated that military families generally have sufficient income and perceive their financial circumstances as secure, except for service members with lower pay and lower relationship quality. However, certain aspects of military life, such as relocations, career changes for spouses, and deployments, may create uncertainty about financial stability. Therefore, the authors indicated that military couples might consider planning for financial emergencies before deployment and discussing more support due to the extended separations caused by deployment (Hawkins et al., 2018). Additionally, McCoy et al. (2021) suggested that communication about financial roles within the relationship can help reduce stressors during military deployment cycles. They proposed reestablishing boundaries for managing finances to decrease post-deployment stress effectively (McCoy et al., 2021).

Alcohol and Substance Abuse. Blow et al. (2013) found that alcohol-related misuse is associated with mental health decline among service members, which leads to military marital dissatisfaction. Additionally, there was still a need for continued research on alcohol misuse and

its impact on military marriages, especially during the post-deployment reintegration phase. Bommarito et al. (2017) found that military spouses are at higher risk for alcohol use post-deployment, which can negatively impact reintegration. According to Osilla et al. (2018), alcohol abuse significantly negatively impacts military service members and their spouses and creates barriers to seeking treatment. Spouses may also be at risk of heavy drinking due to their partner's influence on health behaviors, including alcohol use. Pethrus et al. (2019) claimed that Iraq, Afghanistan, and Gulf War veterans were more likely than civilians to be addicted to alcohol and drugs, which may raise divorce risk. Brady et al. (2019) investigated individual, interpersonal, and environmental risk factors associated with substance abuse among military personnel. Various risk factors for substance abuse were identified, such as younger age, male gender, low educational attainment levels, and preexisting mental health conditions. Relational issues like family conflict and social isolation contributed to higher rates of substance abuse among personnel, while combat exposure and perceived tension were environmental influences associated with deployment (Brady et al., 2019).

This rationale was less likely for the military veterans deployed to Afghanistan due to the low suicide rate; however, significant mental health challenges may not fully justify the increased divorce risk (Brady et al., 2019). Additional research found that alcohol and substance abuse are more prevalent in military veterans who served in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Gulf Wars than in the civilian population. The level of abuse identified may increase a military couple's risk of divorce. However, it has been challenging to acquire consistent data on alcohol and substance abuse, and alcohol abuse is related to mental illness.

Implications Resulting from Deployment and Relationship Barriers

The previous discussion explained the deployment and relationship barriers that can challenge married couples within the post-deployment reintegration phase. Correspondingly, the challenges have relationship attachment implications related to relationship dissatisfaction and emotional disconnection. In the post-deployment reintegration process, deployment-related mental, emotional, and relationship stressors, in addition to relationship barriers, can increase the risk of separation and divorce.

Emotional Disconnection

Cafferky et al. (2022) argued that understanding the ECOD is crucial for comprehending the emotional connection of military couples throughout the ECOD, along with the couple's attachment patterns, which can significantly impact the couple's ability to maintain an emotional connection. Specifically, the transition within the ECOD can trigger attachment-related responses, particularly during a stressful reintegration process, which can test the couple's resilience (Cafferky et al., 2022). According to Long (2021), the ECOD framework provides a context for the emotional journey of military couples during the reintegration phase. However, they indicated not to negate couples' lived experiences as they navigate the complexities of military life and deployment. Often, couples live in the moment of these transitions, unaware of the next deployment (Long, 2021).

Wood et al. (2019) revealed that military deployments involve unforeseen threats within the couple's marriage that can occur abruptly, challenging the consistency of their emotional availability and responsiveness to each other, which is essential to secure attachment. Cheney (2017) argued that the military couple's emotional connection during reintegration could be challenging due to the prolonged effects of the separation, individual emotional needs, and

expectations. The non-deployed spouse may long for the emotional connection much sooner than the reintegrating spouse could provide, especially if the returning spouse experienced psychological trauma during the deployment (Cheney, 2017).

O'Neal et al. (2018) emphasized the depth of the emotional experiences of ambiguous losses during deployment as they cope with their spouse's absence and the uncertainty of their return. Wenger et al. (2018) emphasized many aspects of the reintegration experiences that can impact the service members' relationship with their spouses; chief among them was the pressure to immediately resume responsibilities and pick up where things ended before the deployment. These experiences can cause emotional distance between spouses, making it more challenging to reestablish and sustain a healthy emotional connection. Conversely, Mikulincer and Shaver (2018) indicated that when emotional bonds are strained, the relationship can feel insecure and fragmented, leading to anxiety and avoidant behaviors. Addressing relationship challenges can become critical during reintegration, mainly when insecure attachment patterns dominate the couple's ability to recreate attachment bonds after a prolonged separation. Knobloch et al. (2020) concluded that when the emotional connection is lacking, other issues can threaten the married couple's relationship satisfaction, leading to questions regarding commitment, infidelity, mental health, compatibility, and relationship uncertainty.

Relationship Dissatisfaction

The effects of the ECOD and attachment dynamics can significantly impact relationship satisfaction for military couples during the reintegration phase of deployment. The ECOD stages of deployment and their implications for emotional challenges during the deployment cycle can play an integral role in how married couples perceive relationship satisfaction (Knobloch-Fedders et al. 2020; Long, 2021). As military couples experience unpredictable changes in

military life, their perception of marriage may change (Giff et al., 2020). The change in their

perception can decrease relationship satisfaction, causing one or both spouses to feel alone and

disconnected, making it challenging to feel secure about the relationship's future (Bakhurst et al.,

2018; Fallis et al., 2016). Additionally, Riviere et al. (2017) found that relationship discontent

can also lead to significant stress and anxiety during deployment, making it more challenging to

adjust to post-deployment life.

Moreover, when service members return home to an unsatisfying relationship, they may

experience additional stress and difficulty reintegrating into family life (Giff et al., 2020; Sandoz

et al., 2015). Knobloch et al. (2018) conducted a study that shed light on two concepts that may

contribute to decreased relationship satisfaction in military couples during reintegration. The

study examined reunion uncertainty and reintegration interference as predictors of relationship

satisfaction. The study included 1,110 military couples in long-term relationships. Participants in

the study rated several aspects of relationship satisfaction: (1) level of certainty based on issues,

such as readjusting to married life, getting to know each other after a long period of separation,

and communication; (2) level of partner interference, which was based on their ability to make

their own decisions, feeling smoother with their spouse, level of personal development post-

deployment, and disruption to their social life; and (3) difficulty of reintegration, which was

based on challenges with reconnecting with their spouse, spousal mood changes, concern

regarding the next deployment, and overall trouble rebalancing life together. The study revealed

that many couples rated relationship distress, partner interference, and communication

breakdown as the causes of relationship dissatisfaction (Knobloch et al., 2018).

In addition to the areas identified in the study, Karney and Trail (2017) identified that

trauma exposure, long work hours, and high operational tempo can increase stress levels and

mental health challenges for both partners, affecting their relationship satisfaction. Sina et al. (2018) found that anxious-avoidant and ambivalent attachment couples have the lowest marital satisfaction compared to couples with secure attachment styles. Therefore, considering married couples' attachment patterns can provide valuable context for understanding the adverse experiences they may encounter and how attachment styles can influence their sense of security or insecurity (Wood et al., 2019). Bakhurst et al. (2018) emphasized that relationship dissatisfaction could significantly impact reintegration for military couples, exacerbating challenges.

Risk of Separation and Divorce

Wang et al. (2015) highlighted the significant impact of Iraq and Afghanistan on deployment separation and divorce among military married couples, but the causes and factors involved required additional research. Gros et al. (2019) discovered various relevant factors that may increase the risk of separation and divorce. They found that around one-third of service members returning from Iraq and Afghanistan experienced separation or divorce, and the causes were not exclusively attributed to psychiatric symptoms or physical health issues (Gros et al., 2019). According to further research, there are a variety of risk factors that can contribute to separations and divorces, including multiple deployments, financial strain, mental illness, job loss, potential alcohol dependence, a lack of intimacy, and infidelity (Balderrama-Durbin et al., 2017).

Skomorovsky et al. (2017) investigated the challenges faced by military spouses when their partners were diagnosed with physical or mental health conditions that may have presented during the reintegration phase. The non-military spouses often assumed the role of caregivers, making personal sacrifices, such as giving up career aspirations to provide care. As caregivers,

they may have had unmet emotional needs, which could have led to marital dissatisfaction, increasing the risk of separation and divorce. Understanding the factors that influence the relationship between the military member's health, the well-being of the spouse, and the likelihood of divorce is crucial (Skomorovsky et al.). Overall, Reed-Fitzke and Lucier-Greer (2020) and Skomorovsky et al. (2017) noted that married couples are faced with significant stress and complexities, with some couples considering separation and divorce due to the strains of prolonged relationship conflict after deployment.

Summary

The post-deployment reintegration ECOD, which consists of five phases and various subcategories of emotional responses expressing the strong level of emotions that married couples can experience, is a culture characteristic of military life for married couples (Knobloch-Fedders et al. 2020). Some families may struggle to negotiate the post-deployment phase, which can span several months. The final phase of ECOD is the post-deployment inclusive or reintegration subcategory. The post-deployment phase can be a complex element of the reintegration process; it explains how married couples must change and revise their routines to integrate the returning deployed service member into the household. According to a previous study, the reintegration process after a spouse's deployment is one of the most stressful periods of the deployment cycle (Knobloch et al., 2018c). Similarly, military service members frequently return home to situations that have altered significantly, making them feel uneasy and apprehensive about their capacity to adjust. As a result of the fast transition, married couples may find it difficult to reestablish emotional relationships (Blow et al., 2017).

According to the ECOD, military spouses cope through protective behavior to limit emotional discomfort, as demonstrated by Cafferky et al. (2022). For example, some military

spouses cope with the ECOD by becoming emotionally disengaged from their relationships, causing stress, or becoming more combative with their spouses (Cafferky et al., 2022). As a result, one of the most significant risk factors for separation and divorce among spouses during the post-deployment phase is a lack of effective communication (Knobloch et al., 2021). The research found that couples had poorer communication during the reintegration phase, requiring them to invest more effort to maintain their connection. As a result, Moser et al. (2016) recommended that couples therapists and relationship educators gain a comprehensive awareness of the unique needs of military families. According to Beasley and Ager (2019) and Holmström (2022), attachment theory could help married couples manage attachment issues for effective reintegration and relationship satisfaction. The attachment theory approach served as the theoretical underpinning for the investigation (Knobloch-Fedders et al., 2020). The subsequent operational research questions guided the research methodology, based on a review of the literature and attachment theory and coping theory. As identified by other researchers, additional pressures that may contribute to marital distress during reintegration include mental and emotional health challenges, infidelity risk, and financial strains (Balderrama-Durbin et al., 2017; Knobloch-Fedders et al., 2018; Mallonee et al., 2020; Wood et al., 2022).

Chapter Three: Methods

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative study was to discover how long-term military married couples mitigate the risk of separation and divorce after multiple deployments involving reintegration. Participants were married couples, where one spouse was an active-duty military member. In addition, one of the inclusion criteria was that married couples must have been married for at least 10 years and have experienced multiple post-deployment reintegration phases. The adult attachment theory, which Bowlby (1977) and Ainsworth (1979) developed, was the theoretical framework that informed this research. Bowlby's (1977) and Ainsworth's (1979) contributions to the evolution of attachment theory assisted with the understanding of how early attachment experiences influence relationships. The hermeneutic phenomenological approach was chosen as the research design because it sought to understand the lived experiences of individuals and discover how they make meaning of their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Gyollai, 2020; van Manen & van Manen, 2021). The hermeneutic phenomenological methodology recognizes that individuals can have different perspectives and interpretations of their experiences. It also sought to uncover these interpretations through an in-depth analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Gyollai, 2020; van Manen & van Manen, 2021). Therefore, this study sought to collect data from married couples who provided their unique perspective on how they were able to mitigate separation and divorce after multiple deployment reintegration phases (Cafferky & Shi, 2015; Gros et al., 2019; Pethrus et al., 2019).

Design

The hermeneutic phenomenological methodology was the approach to discovering how long-term military married couples mitigate the risk of separation and divorce after multiple deployment reintegration phases. *Phenomenology* is a qualitative philosophical method that seeks to investigate and understand subjective experiences. There are various approaches to phenomenological research designs. Accordingly, transcendental and hermeneutic phenomenology are prominent phenomenological approaches (Moustakas, 1994). Edmund Husserl, a German philosopher from the early 20th century, developed transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas). Husserl presumed that studying subjective experiences could reveal basic consciousness structures that shape reality (Moustakas). *Transcendental phenomenology* is a rigorous research method that suspends worldview assumptions and focuses on experience (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Moustakas, 1994). To contrast, hermeneutic phenomenology studies everyday meaning and reveals hidden meanings and structures in people's lives, especially marginalized groups. It emphasizes context while acknowledging human interpretation's subjectivity (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004). Hermeneutic phenomenology was chosen for this study after considering both the advantages and disadvantages of both approaches. Therefore, the hermeneutic phenomenological approach supported the purpose of this research in discovering the subjective post-deployment reintegration experiences of the long-term military married couple. Furthermore, the qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological design is an interpretive approach to support collecting and analyzing data. Therefore, the methodology integrated interviews and reflective journal methods within the data collection process to align findings with the following research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Giff et al., 2020; Neubauer et al., 2019).

Research Questions

The research questions aligned with the purpose of this study and were designed to align with the research approach. In addition, by collecting data aligned with the research questions, the study generated rich descriptions for the discovery of how long-term married couples mitigate the risk of separation and divorce. The following research questions guided this hermeneutic phenomenological research study.

Central Research Question

How do long-term married couples describe their internal working models (IWMs) and adult attachment styles, which (1) conceptualize their romantic love and relationship satisfaction lived experiences as well as (2) describe the common meanings and shared practices that assist them with mitigating the risk of separation and divorce?

Sub-Question One

How do long-term married couples explain their IWMs and adult attachment styles?

Sub-Question Two

How do long-term married couples conceptualize their romantic love based on their IWMs and adult attachment styles?

Sub-Question Three

How do long-term married couples conceptualize their relationship satisfaction based on their IWM and adult attachment style?

Sub-Question Four

How do long-term married couples describe the post-deployment reintegration practices that assist them with mitigating the risk of separation and divorce?

Setting

Qualitative researchers typically collect data where participants directly encounter the research problem, as the field setting provides a crucial context for understanding the research phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2017). In this research, the chosen setting was the state of Georgia in the United States. According to the Department of Defense Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy (2021), Georgia as one of the six states with the highest number of active-duty service members: approximately 69,391. In 2021, the report stated that there were 1,162,591 active-duty U.S. service members. In addition, the policy identified that 54.5% of the service members were concentrated in six states, with Georgia being one of them (DoD, ODASD (MC&FP), 2021).

. Thus, long-term military married couple participants were recruited from Georgia.

Participants

One of the important considerations in selecting participants for a research study is ensuring that they are representative of the population being investigated and meet the study's inclusion criteria while avoiding any exclusion conditions. Creswell and Poth (2017) stated that the recruitment procedure should be appropriately planned to ensure that the study participants meet the inclusion criteria for those willing to participate and follow the study protocol. A purposeful snowball sampling recruiting method was implemented after institutional review board (IRB) approval (see Appendix A). The researcher located participants through various methods, including electronically disseminating an emailed recruitment letter directly to military couples through community organizations (see Appendix B), posting a recruitment notice on social media platforms for special interest groups (see Appendix C), posting the same notice on professional website message boards (see Appendix C), and posting a flyer (see Appendix D). In

addition, non-responsive email participants received a follow-up email (see Appendix E) 1 week after the initial email was disseminated. All participant recruitment methods ceased after 15 married military couples had been enrolled in the study. After 12 couples responded, a waiting list was created as a contingency plan to have alternates in case any participants disenrolled from the study. Thus, participants in this research included 12 long-term military married couples with or without children.

To participate in the study, the inclusion criteria included that the married couple must have been married for a minimum of 10 years, which was considered long-term for this research. In addition, the married couple participants must have included one active-duty military spouse who had served in multiple deployments, with the most recent being within the last 12 months before participating in the study. The exclusion conditions for potential participants in this study included non-active service members, non-married couples, married couples that had been married for less than 10 years, and married couples that had not experienced multiple post-deployment reintegration phases. The service member spouses were enrolled in any of the following branches of the military: Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, and/or Space Force. For confidentiality, the military bases that participants were recruited from were described as installations located within the state of Georgia that represented all military members from the various branches based at their location. The bases in Georgia that fit this demographic profile were in Savannah, Marietta, St. Mary's, Hinesville, Warner Robins, Grovetown, and Columbus. In addition, all the recruitment branch locations had military service members that experienced multiple deployments, were married, and were over the age of 18 years.

In some research studies, there may be personal or organizational conditions that influenced participants or their experiences at the time of the study. Personal and organization conditions may include changes in personnel, budget cuts, and other trauma. In this study, there were no personal or organizational conditions that influenced participants or their experiences that might have affected the interpretation of the study data.

Procedures

Moustakas' (1994) approach to phenomenology research consists of a series of procedures designed to assist researchers in exploring and understanding participants' lived experiences. Before proceeding with data collection, the researcher awaited approval from the Liberty University IRB. Once IRB approval was obtained, data collection commenced with the goal of enrolling 12 participating military married couples through various recruiting methods. The recruiting process included distributing an electronic recruitment letter through email (see Appendix B), posting electronic posts on social media and website platforms (see Appendix C), posting flyers (see Appendix D), and follow-up communications (see Appendix E), until 12 couples had been secured to participate in the study. Once 12 military married couples agreed to participate in the study, they were sent an electronic version of the informed consent form (see Appendix F) and were requested to electronically sign and return it before participating in the research data collection phase. The consent form included informing the participants that they could voluntarily exit the interview without explanation or repercussion by informing the researcher of their decision. Data collection consisted of three phases: pre-interview assessment (see Appendix H), semi-structured interviews, and a reflective journal. The first phase collected data through a 60–90-minute interview process. The second and final data collection phase was a reflective journal with cognitive representation exercises.

The exit debriefing procedure for the interviews included asking the participants to member check their completed transcripts and informing them that they would receive a copy of the research results. The recorded interviews were transcribed and forwarded to participants for the member-checking activity. After the participants returned the member-checked transcripts, the transcripts were processed and organized using the QDA Miner Lite (2018) qualitative analysis software. The data was thematically analyzed using the hermeneutic circle analysis approach. The research participants' records were protected using an encrypted database system that only the researcher could access. Data will be destroyed 3 years after the research's completion or immediately following a follow-up study.

The Researcher's Role

The researcher sought to discover military couples' experiences of post-deployment reintegration into married life. The researcher was a licensed professional and certified clinical mental health counselor who has worked in the mental health field for over 20 years. Being married personally, the researcher had a keen interest in learning about relationships, marriage, and family dynamics related to the military; additionally, she worked in marriage and family counseling with married couples. By undertaking this research, the researcher hoped to broaden her knowledge and understanding of marriage and strengthen her professional practice. Moreover, the researcher hoped to advance the public's understanding of human behavior and social relationships through this research on military marriage.

Data Collection

This section provides a description of the location, frequency, and duration of the data collection process. Military married couples participated in three data collection activities: (1) pre-interview assessment; (2) semi-structured recorded interviews; and (3) reflective journal

exercises. Prior to conducting the participant interviews, the researcher administered, with author permission (see Appendix H), the Adult Attachment Scale (AAS). The AAS addressed the research questions, aligned with the theoretical frameworks, and showed how the theoretical constructs were based on reliable instruments. Specifically, the AAS assisted with identifying each participant's attachment style. Identifying the couples' attachment styles enabled the researcher to examine how the married couples' attachment styles influence their perceptions, emotions, and behaviors. The AAS pre-interview assessment is a self-reported survey that both spouses were asked to complete prior to conducting their semi-structured interview (see Appendix H). Once the participants completed the AAS assessment, they were scheduled to participate in an interview.

The 24 military married participants, consisting of 12 couples, participated in semi-structured recorded interviews where each couple was interviewed separately. According to Bjørnholt and Farstad (2014), conducting joint interviews with couples can have certain advantages. For example, the participants may feel more in control of their shared narrative. A married couple's interview allowed the researcher to observe and analyze communication patterns between spouses, as well as gain a valuable understanding of their interactions and relationship dynamics.

The interview was guided by an interview protocol (see Appendix I), which was informed by the principles of adult attachment theory. The topics covered in the interviews were based on the lived post-deployment reintegration experiences of military married couples, with a specific focus on how they managed their IWMs, romantic love, and relationship satisfaction, along with the common meanings and shared practices that assisted them with mitigating the risk of separation and divorce.

Following the interview phase, the participants were invited to participate in a reflective journal. A reflective journal (see Appendix J) collected cognitive representation information through journal prompts, allowing participants to express their experiences and insights regarding their post-deployment reintegration phase in a written format. Finally, the participant interview responses further developed the instrument.

Interviews

In qualitative research, the interview is identified as a qualitative data collection method that can be used to help the researcher further understand the participants' perspective and uncover their lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Furthermore, the interview is described as a data collection approach that entails a face-to-face or virtual interaction between a researcher and a participant to gather information about a research topic (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The semi-structured interviews took place via Zoom. Only audio recordings were made; there were no video recordings of the interviews to ensure anonymity. Data collection occurred between October 8–December 6, 2023. The interviews were anticipated to last between 60–90 minutes (see Appendix I). Respondent semi-structured interviews lasted on average 50 minutes.

The aim of the research was to interview 12 long-term military married couples. After IRB approval and the return of the participants' pre-interview assessments, participant interviews were scheduled every 2 weeks. The couples' interviews were conducted and recorded on the Zoom platform. Participants were asked to access Zoom from a quiet and comfortable space. The researcher conducted all the interviews, including the pre-interview assessment and semi-structured interviews. The pre-interview assessment included the informed consent form. Five minutes were spent reading and discussing the informed consent form, and the next 5 minutes were spent collecting pre-interview data like marital status, years married, military status, age,

and ethnicity information. After the semi-structured interviews were completed, respondents submitted their reflective journal exercises within 1 week of completing the semi-structured interviews.

The data was recorded using a digital Zoom recorder. Each interview was recorded separately in MP3 format. After all the interviews were completed, all the MP3 recordings were transcribed into individual text files. There were 12 text files in all. Each of the 12 text files was entered into QDA Minor Lite (2018) text analytics software.

To ensure the privacy and confidentiality of all participants, this study implemented rigorous procedures. All data files, including recordings and transcripts, were securely stored through password protection. Written and hard copies were also kept on a password-protected computer until they were converted into electronic format. Furthermore, an online backup service regularly backed up all electronic files. Only the researcher had and will have access to the research data, which will not be used outside the study without participant consent. Participant names were replaced with pseudonyms to protect participant identities. Interviews were conducted privately to ensure confidentiality and prevent overhearing.

Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me how you met and how long you have been married?
2. How would you describe the interactions with your spouse during your most recent post-deployment reintegration?
3. With romantic love being defined as the emotional connection that transcends friendship, how would you describe romantic love within your relationship?

4. With relationship satisfaction being defined as a couple's level of mutual satisfaction and fulfillment in their relationship, how would you describe relationship satisfaction within your marriage?

- Follow-up question: Are there any specific strategies that either of you can think of that assist the both of you with maintaining satisfaction within your relationship during the post-deployment reintegration phases?

- Follow-up question: From all the strategies that you shared, what would you consider to be the most instrumental in helping to maintain a long-term, strong relationship?

5. Can you explain how these significant strategies give you the ability to overcome marital challenges?

- Follow-up question: Can you provide a specific example of how you used the strategy(s) to interact with your spouse during the post-deployment reintegration phase?

Focus Groups

Another data collection method that was proposed within the research design was an optional focus group. Creswell and Poth (2017) proposed that a focus group is another form of data collection that can provide in-depth insights from the participants. The benefit of a focus group is that participants can expand upon other participants' responses based on the shared conversation. The qualitative methodologist stated that focus groups are advantageous when participant interactions are likely to increase the amount of valuable information, when participants are homogenous, when the group is cooperative, and when data collection has a limited time and participants may be hesitant to contribute information within a one-on-one

interview setting. In addition, the hosting of focus groups through online technology has additional considerations.

The focus group within this study was proposed to utilize the Zoom online platform. The considerations advised by Creswell and Poth (2017) were related to managing the discussion and the development of questions that were designed to initiate a response from a group of participants. The researcher planned to manage the focus group discussion with a small group of homogeneous participants using a protocol containing two questions (see Appendix K). The researcher prepared for the focus group discussion after the interview phase was completed.

The researcher planned to schedule, oversee, and facilitate the optional focus group after inviting couples to participate after the interviews. The aim had been to have at least one spouse representing each married couple participate in the focus group; however, the focus group would have been conducted with a minimum of three participants that agreed to participate in the data collection activity.

Before starting the Zoom-based focus group activity, the researcher planned to remind participants that the discussion and their responses would be recorded and that they could discontinue their focus group participation at any point by informing the research facilitator of their intent or by just logging off the Zoom platform. The Zoom focus group would have been recorded, and the recordings and the transcripts would have been kept confidential and private through the researcher's password-connected account.

To ensure the privacy and confidentiality of all participants, this study implemented rigorous procedures. All data files, including recordings and transcripts, would have been securely stored through password protection. Written and hard copies would have also been kept on a password-protected computer until they could be converted into electronic format.

Furthermore, an online backup service would have regularly backed up all electronic files. Only the researcher would have had access to the research data, which would not have been used outside the study without participant consent. Their names would have been replaced with pseudonyms throughout the focus group to protect participant identities.

Focus Group Questions

1. How have you maintained a sense of connection and intimacy in your marriage despite the demands of post-deployment reintegration uncertainties?

2. How would you describe your relationship dynamics that contributed to your ability to overcome post-deployment reintegration relationship challenges?

Document Analysis

After each individual interview, each of the participants was asked to complete a reflective journal activity (see Appendix J). The researcher provided instructions on completing the reflective journals before sending each participant a digital version of the reflective journal email on the scheduled interview day. After the interview, the participants were asked to download the reflective journal. The participants were provided time after the Zoom interview to complete the reflective journal prompts. The participants were asked to upload the digital copy and forward it to the researcher's provided email.

The reflective journal activity was a document analysis instrument that included participants responding to writing prompts that generated cognitive representations of their reintegration experiences (Vicary et al., 2016). The reflective journal assisted the researcher with understanding how long-term married couples explain their IWMs and adult attachment styles. In addition to significant childhood moments, relationships, events, and other influential experiences, cognitive representations were associated with those experiences. The participants

reflected on each topic for a thoughtful response that provided a cognitive representation of their experiences to better understand how they aligned with adult attachment theory. Prior to the reflective journal activity, the participants were informed that the exercise provides a valuable opportunity to further contribute to the findings of this research study that aims to better understand the meaningful experiences that have shaped their adult relationships. In addition, it was explained that their completed journal entries were anonymized to protect their identities and that their participation in the study was entirely voluntary.

Furthermore, participants were informed that they were free to share as much or as little as they feel comfortable, allowing them to maintain control over their personal information. To facilitate a meaningful reflective journaling experience, participants received clear guidelines on completing the journal prompts. The participants were encouraged to explore and express their thoughts, emotions, and experiences related to the journal prompts. The researcher emphasized that honesty and openness were vital in their journal entries, allowing for an authentic capture of their journal.

To ensure the privacy and confidentiality of all participants, this study implemented rigorous procedures. All data files were securely stored through password protection. Written and hard copies were also kept on a password-protected computer until they were converted into electronic format. Furthermore, an online backup service regularly backed up all electronic files. Only the researcher had and will have access to the research data, which will not be used outside the study without participant consent. Their names were replaced with pseudonyms to protect participant identities.

Reflective Journal Prompts

1. Please describe significant childhood moments.

2. Please describe significant childhood relationships.

3. Please describe significant life events.

4. Please describe any other influential experiences.

Adjustments in the Data Collection Process

Originally, there were supposed to be four data collection activities: 1) pre-interview assessment (pre-interview was not considered a data collection); 2) semi-structured recorded interviews; 3) reflective journal exercises; and 4) focus groups. However, the focus groups were removed for two reasons. First, the data collection period for the first three activities took longer than expected. Second, the information that was collected from the semi-structured recorded interviews and the reflective journal exercises had reached a point of saturation and was becoming redundant. Data saturation is when the insights from interviews become repetitive or no new insights are gained (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014) Therefore, this was an additional reason for discarding the focus groups. The extended amount of time nor the removal of focus groups did not break with IRB protocol.

Data Analysis

There were several steps in the data analysis process of the semi-structured recorded interviews. The interviews were audio recorded via Zoom and transcribed to text documents. Once the 12 interviews were transcribed, the 12 text documents were input into QDA Miner Lite, a qualitative analysis software used to assign labels/codes to text passages that are highlighted by the researcher. These codes represented ideas that were communicated in the responses to the interview questions. Entering the text into QDA Miner Lite was step one. Step two was to apply level one codes to the responses to seven interview questions. The seven interview questions ranged from questions 2–8 and were:

2. How would you describe the interactions with your spouse during your most recent post-deployment reintegration?

3. With romantic love being defined as the emotional connection that transcends friendship, how would you describe romantic love within your relationship?

4. With relationship satisfaction being defined as a couple's level of mutual satisfaction and fulfillment in their relationship, how would you describe relationship satisfaction within your marriage?

5. Follow-up question: Are there any specific strategies that either of you can think of that assist the both of you with maintaining satisfaction within your relationship during the post-deployment reintegration phases?

6. Follow-up question: From all the strategies that you shared, what would you consider to be the most instrumental in helping to maintain a long-term, strong relationship?

7. Can you explain how these significant strategies give you the ability to overcome marital challenges?

8. Follow-up question: Can you provide a specific example of how you used the strategy(ies) to interact with your spouse during the post-deployment reintegration phase?

Each of the 12 transcripts was read and coded with level one codes that reflected the responses of the marital couple for each of the seven questions. After all 12 transcripts were read and coded, level two codes were created in step three by examining the level one codes and combining level one codes together that reflected a similar theme. In step four, level two codes or themes were used to address the four research sub-questions. The verbatim comments reflected the themes that were derived from the semi-structured recorded interviews.

As mentioned previously, there were three data collection sources. They included: 1) pre-interview assessment, 2) semi-structured recorded interviews, and 3) reflective journal exercises. Adult attachment style data was collected during the pre-interview assessment, while data on IWMs was collected using the reflective journal exercises. Finally, the interviews among the 12 married military couples were conducted via recorded Zoom sessions. Details about how adult attachment style, IWMs, and semi-structured interview data was analyzed follows.

The aim of hermeneutic phenomenological data analysis, as an interpretative phenomenology approach, is to generate results that have a rich and full depiction of participants' lived experiences with a phenomenon (Suddick et al., 2020). The hermeneutic circle method represented the data analysis process that was utilized to analyze the data within this study. Gellweiler et al. (2018) described two approaches to interpreting data within the hermeneutic circle. The first approach involves starting with subthemes, where core meanings emerge, and then progressing towards overarching themes representing the whole. The second approach involves beginning with overarching themes and exploring their subthemes (Gellweiler et al., 2018).

Gadamer (2013) described the hermeneutic circle framework as based on comprehending the participants' journey through various text forms, such as narratives, interviews, and reflective journal records. The hermeneutic circle consists of distinct stages. Prior to the first stage, the researcher begins a process of pre-understanding, which involves integrating existing knowledge and individual experiences into interpretation. In the first stage, the researcher engages in the initial engagement stage, which entails seeking a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. In the second detailed analysis, the researcher identifies patterns and key concepts within the phenomenon. The researcher further builds upon the analysis and pre-understanding in

the interpretation stage, which involves deriving meaning from the collected data. The next stage is contextualization, where the researcher considers social, cultural, historical, and theoretical factors to gain a broader perspective. Through reflective iteration, the researcher reexamines earlier stages and refines their understanding through reflection. The fusion of horizons stage focuses on bridging the gap between the researcher's perspective and the intended meaning of the text or phenomenon. Finally, in the stage of final interpretation, a nuanced understanding of the text or phenomenon is achieved. By following the hermeneutic framework, researchers can navigate the circle and better understand the data they are analyzing (Gadamer, 2013).

The researcher applied a hermeneutic circle approach to analyzing the interview transcripts, focus group data, and reflective journal data. The hermeneutic circle process is an iterative process that requires multiple phases of reading, writing, and re-writing until the data analysis process has been saturated (Cohen et al., 2000). During each hermeneutic circle phase, themes were identified and compared for an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. After the hermeneutic circle process was completed with no further identification of new themes or understandings, the results provided rich findings that captured the essence of the phenomenon, which, in this research, was the military married couple's reintegration adult attachment experiences. Therefore, by utilizing the hermeneutical circle analysis method, the data analysis process began with a naïve reading of all the data that was collected to orient the researcher and gain a general understanding of the context of the participants' lived experiences. After completing the orienting reading, a detailed reading and thorough analysis of all the transcripts, reflective journals, and memo documents was applied to identify themes and significant units of meaning.

Since the hermeneutical circle analysis is a phenomenological interpretive approach to analyzing qualitative data, as Creswell and Poth (2017) asserted, the researcher remained open to discovering emergent categorical themes within the data during each phase of the process. After completing the initial orienting reading process, the next hermeneutic circle data analysis phase identified meaningful unit excerpts that were analyzed for points of convergence and divergence. It was repeated to align this phase with the hermeneutic circle process until saturation was achieved. Repeating the data analysis process for convergent purposes is a form of data triangulation (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Triangulation in the data analysis phase improved the trustworthiness of the research findings by using multiple methods to analyze the data.

A member-checking activity was another triangulation method integrated within the data analysis process to improve the credibility and dependability of the results. Accordingly, participants were asked to confirm, clarify, and elaborate on any responses provided within the interview and focus group transcripts, along with the reflective journal content that the researcher identified as discrepant during the hermeneutic circle data analysis process. Discrepant data is described as missing, contradictory, or needing to fully elaborate on participant response content (Heppner et al., 2015). The participant feedback helped establish accuracy regarding their data inputs and improve the credibility of the thematic analysis process associated with the findings. In addition, the member-checking activity ensured that when a Liberty University reader evaluates whether the results are credible by reviewing the thematic analysis process, the discussed research findings will be trustworthy (Heppner et al., 2015).

Finally, to assist with the hermeneutic circle data analysis process, the researcher utilized QDA Miner Lite qualitative software. Employing a data analysis software program to assist with processing and organizing qualitative data has been well supported in literature (Creswell &

Poth, 2017). The methodologist recommends using such computer-assisted programs because the software improves the effectiveness and efficiency of data analysis and increases the likelihood of finding meaning within the data.

<center>**Trustworthiness**</center>

The hermeneutic phenomenological circle data analysis process has been recognized as a trustworthy approach to generating credible, dependable, confirmable, and transferable research findings (Suddick et al., 2020). Elo et al. (2014), along with Creswell and Poth (2017), asserted that researchers should verify trustworthiness during every step of the data analysis process, including preparation, organization, analysis, and reporting. There are various strategies a researcher can integrate into their research design to ensure trustworthiness. For this research, the trustworthy strategies included the iterative hermeneutic circle data analysis process for data saturation, a member-checking activity, and a data analysis software program. In addition, a university reader reanalyzed the research findings to ensure that they were trustworthy.

<center>**Credibility**</center>

Credibility is established in research when steps are taken to guarantee the accuracy and reliability of the study findings (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The credibility that was employed within this study included: (1) prolonging engagement with the respondents during the interviews and focus group process; (2) having participants member check their transcripts for input accuracy; (3) ensuring that adequate data was collected; (4) utilizing the hermeneutic circle reiterative data analysis process to achieve saturation within the data analysis; and (5) being diligent about being aware of researcher bias through engaging in reflexivity practices. These credibility strategies within a qualitative research methodology enhanced the reliability and validity of the research results for trustworthy findings (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Elo et al., 2014).

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability and confirmability associated with research findings relate to other researchers having the ability to replicate all methodology processes and procedures used to collect and interpret the data (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Correspondingly, the research methods in this study utilized the dependability and confirmability strategy of an audit trail that employed recording activities related with the data collection, analysis, and interpretation decisions made throughout the research. The audit trail approach ensured that the research procedures are transparent and could be replicated by others utilizing the research design (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Transferability

Transferability refers to the external validity of the research findings. External validity refers to research findings that are transferable to other contexts or settings that collect data from a different group of participants. To ensure transferability within this research, an audit trail was created through memo activities. The memo activities provided detailed descriptions of the research context, settings, procedures, reflective thoughts of the researcher, and any other relevant information that needed to be captured during this study. This memo strategy established transferable findings and assisted the researcher in being aware of any biases or subjective thoughts that may have influenced the study process and conclusions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Elo et al., 2014).

Ethical Considerations

This qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological research followed the ethical guidelines of the IRB, as well as the ethical practices recommended by the American Psychological Association (APA), American Counselors Association (ACA), and the National Board of

Certified Counselors (NBCC). Following the advice of Creswell and Poth (2017), the researcher considered ethical issues for each phase of the research process. For instance, the study procedures were not implemented until after receiving IRB approval to ensure that the research methodology aligned with the ethical considerations set forth by Liberty University. After IRB approval was obtained, potential participants that met the inclusion criteria for this study were electronically invited to participate with a recruitment letter (see Appendix B). The recruitment letter also had a demographic questionnaire attached that assisted in making sure that all participants met the inclusion criteria of the study (see Appendix G).

The information obtained from each completed questionnaire was kept in a secure location for those respondents who were eligible to participate. For those who were ineligible, the information was deleted. For those participants who were eligible to participate in this study, they were asked to complete an informed consent form (see Appendix F) that explained the ethical considerations and procedures of the study prior to the data collection activity. A primary ethical consideration within the consent form was notifying the participants of their right to withdraw from the study or discontinue participation at any time. As recommended by Creswell and Poth (2017), after participants signed and returned the consent to participate in the study, to protect their identities and ensure confidentiality, participant anonymity was established by assigning pseudonyms for all participants and data collection locations. Additional data protection protocols included an encrypted database system that only the researcher had access to. Finally, all data will be permanently deleted 3 years after the research is completed or immediately following a follow-up study.

Summary

The qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological research design of this study aimed to understand the lived experiences of post-deployed reintegration-phase married couples. The guiding theoretical framework of the research was Bowlby's (1977) and Ainsworth et al.'s (1979) adult attachment theory. The research questions, data collection, and analysis were informed by the theoretical framework and the review of the literature. The central research question of this study was designed to discover how long-term married couples describe their IWMs and adult attachment styles, which (1) conceptualize their romantic love and relationship satisfaction lived experiences and (2) describe the common meanings and shared practices that assist them with mitigating the risk of separation and divorce. The data collection phase collected data through interviews and a reflective journal. Data collection was planned to be implemented over a span of 24 weeks. Prior to the application of a thematic analysis, participants checked all data to assure the accuracy of their inputs and increase the trustworthiness of the findings. The thematic analysis applied to the collected data followed the hermeneutic circle reiterative process for data saturation and rich descriptions of the research results. In addition, a Liberty University reader reviewed the thematic analysis process and collaborated on the research findings, which, likewise, increased the trustworthiness of the research findings. Although ethical considerations were discussed last in this chapter, the ethical treatment of participants was integrated throughout the entire research design.

Chapter Four: Findings

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative study was to discover how long-term military married couples mitigate the risk of separation and divorce after multiple deployments involving reintegration. This study's participants consisted of 12 military married couples, where one spouse was either an active-duty or a veteran military service member. Once the participant completed the demographic eligibility form, they were notified of their eligibility.

The study data collection methods included military married couples' interviews and the completion of reflective journal prompts. Twelve couples completed military married couple interviews; each individual participant completed reflective journal prompts within 24 separate journals. This chapter also includes a description of each military married couple's attachment experiences and a discussion of the data from their perspective. The research questions were answered based on the codes and themes identified from the data analysis, along with the results.

Participants

There was a total of 12 married couples that participated in this study. The married couples were ethnically diverse. The age range of the couples was between 18–64 years. The majority (n = 9) of the military personnel in these marital relationships were veterans, while the remaining minority (n =3) were active-duty military members. Finally, a majority (n = 9) of the married couples were Army families. The remaining service personnel were Air Force (n=2) and Navy (n=1). Table 1 contains the demographic information of the 12 married couple participants along with their pseudonyms (also see Table 2).

Table 1

Participant Demographics by Couples

Married Couples	Age Group (Years)	Ethnicity Spouse 1	Ethnicity Spouse 2	Active or Veteran	Military Branch	Years Married
Asa/ Audrey	55–64	White/Caucasian	White/Caucasian	Veteran	Army	34
Blain/ Belinda	35–44	Black or African American	Black or African American	Veteran	Army	22
Carter/ Cindy	35–44	Black or African American	Black or African American	Veteran	Navy	22
Danny/ Daisy	25–34	Hispanic	Hispanic	Active	Army	14
Evan/ Emma	25–34	Other	Black or African American	Veteran	Air Force	11
Falcon/ Farrah	35–44	White/Caucasian	Black or African American	Active	Army	10
George/ Gina	35–44	Black or African American	Black or African American	Active	Army	16
Harper/ Hedi	45–54	White/Caucasian	White/Caucasian	Veteran	Army	23
Ian/Irene	45–54	Hispanic	White/Caucasian	Veteran	Army	15
Jackson/ Jade	45–54	Black or African American	Black or African American	Veteran	Air Force	23
Keith/ Kayla	55–64	Black or African American	Black or African American	Veteran	Army	39
Liam/ Leslie	35–44	Black or African American	Black or African American	Veteran	Army	23

Table 2

Participant Demographics Summary

	N	%	M	SD
Age Group				
25–34	2	16.67		
35–44	5	41.67		
45–54	3	25		
55–64	2	16.67		
Ethnicity				
Black or African American	14	58.3		
White/Caucasian	6	25.0		
Hispanic	3	12.5		
Other	1	4.2		
Adult Attachment Style*				
Close/Close	5	41.7		
Close/Depend	2	16.7		
Close/Anxiety	4	33.3		
Anxiety/Depend	1	8.3		
Years Married	12		21.2	8.5

Asa and Audrey

Asa was raised in West Virginia in a family where religion was important; raised in a Catholic family, he experienced his first Communion at 8 years old and confirmation at 12 years old. Subsequently, he later joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints at the age of 19 years old. Asa was also the first in his family to attend college; he joined the Army at 17 years old, which was a career choice that worked well since he loved the outdoors and was athletic. His deployment history consisted of four deployments to Afghanistan before retiring in 2009.

Audrey was born in West Virginia, one of 14 siblings—12 biological and two adopted. Being raised in a large family yielded several benefits for Audrey, such as creating strong relationships with her nine sisters. Audrey dedicated the early years of marriage to her family, which included being a stay-at-home mother to her children. Asa met Audrey in their hometown at a local restaurant where Audrey worked. However, the couple briefly separated due to Asa's

active-duty status at their meeting. They reconnected while Asa was home on military leave and married shortly after. They had been married for the past 34 years.

Blain and Belinda

Blain and Belinda were from the same community, growing up in the inner city in upstate New York. Both spouses also experienced trauma very early in life; for example, Belinda's mother died when she was 2 years old, she was raised by her grandmother, and she was also a crime victim multiple times during her adolescent years. Belinda eventually became a caregiver for her grandmother and younger brother. Blain experienced early childhood trauma, such as the death of a parent and the murder of a sibling, which significantly impacted his early years.

Blain and Belinda met through a mutual friend during their junior year of high school, and they characterized their relationship as that of best friends. After their senior year, Belinda went off to college, and Blain joined the military after graduating from high school. Neither of them could recall when their relationship transitioned from friends to dating due to the long distance. Their common bond of growing up in the same neighborhood and understanding each other's struggles drew them closer together and strengthened their friendship bond. The couple became parents to their first child shortly after high school in 2001; they became a military married couple a year later, in 2002, at the courthouse.

Carter and Cindy

Carter and Cindy were both born and raised in the South and were both Navy veterans. Carter served his military obligation, and Cindy retired. Carter was raised in the inner city by a single mother with his four brothers after the death of his father. Carter also had positive male mentors who provided guidance during his youth. His early life was somewhat defined by personal challenges within his family, from which he developed a resilience that empowered him

as an adult; for example, he grew up in an environment where gangs and drugs were normalized, witnessing a person being murdered and having to testify against a family member at a murder trial. Cindy experienced many life challenges as well, such as her mother passing away when she was 12 years old, and while her grandparents were significant in her life, Cindy and her sister lived in foster care. Carter and Cindy met when they were both enlisted in the U.S. Navy. For a few years, they maintained a close friendship; they married in 2001 and became the parents of two children. Carter left the Navy first, and Cindy served several tours in Iraq and Afghanistan before retiring in 2018.

Danny and Daisy

Danny and Daisy were raised in Florida; while working at the airport, they met through mutual friends and discovered they also attended the same high school. Danny came from a close-knit family that was marked by tragedy, with his mother passing away when he was 17 years old. Meanwhile, Daisy immigrated to the United States when she was 8 years old, during which she reconnected with her parents, two siblings, and many relatives. Danny and Daisy dated for 2 years and married shortly after graduating from high school in 2009, within 2 months of Danny joining the Army. He completed his first military deployment in 2011. They had three children and had been married for 14 years.

Evan and Emma

Evan and Emma had been married for 10 years. They had two children. Evan was raised in a single-parent household in the Midwest, where his mother supported him and his siblings. He joined the Air Force after high school. He completed two combat tours in Afghanistan among several deployments before completing his military obligation. Emma grew up in England with vivid memories of spending time with her family, specifically her parents, siblings, and

grandparents. Evan and Emma met after she moved to the United States; they met in their senior year of high school. They began dating before Evan joined the Air Force in 2012, and they had two young children.

Falcon and Farrah

Falcon and Farrah were a dual military couple in the Army. They first met while on active duty while attending the same advanced training military course. They dated for 3 years before marrying in 2012 and had one daughter. Falcon was raised in North Carolina with his parents and siblings until they divorced when he was in elementary school. Falcon experienced some challenges after his parents' divorce, feeling conflicted about living in one house with his parents and between two households. Falcon served over 20 years in the Army, completing multiple deployments and retiring 5 years ago. Farrah, her parents, and her sister immigrated to Florida from the Caribbean when she was 10 years old. She had completed multiple deployments and was currently serving on active duty.

George and Gina

George and Gina met at a pool party through mutual friends; they were married the same year George joined the Army 16 years ago, and they had one son. George was raised in Georgia with his parents, where his mother played a more significant role in life than his father. George grew up in a large community, where family and church were critical to his development. He grew up in a household where multiple family members lived together and often moved. Gina was born into a family where her father was on active military duty. Gina was born in Texas but relocated to Georgia with her parents and one sibling. After graduating from high school, Gina went to college in Chicago. George had served several tours in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Harper and Hedi

Harper and Hedi met on a November night in Austin, Texas, over 25 years ago, during college night at an event entitled "Dance Across Texas." Hedi was in college at the University of Texas, and Harper had just completed basic training and was stationed at Fort Hood for about 5 months when they met. Harper's parents divorced when he was an infant; he grew up with his dad and stepmother, whom he considered his mom since around 7 years old, and reconnected with his birth mother at the age of 14 years old. Harper served a total of 21 years in the Army in the capacity of enlisted and officer. He completed four tours of combat within 4 years while on active duty. Hedi grew up in Texas with her parents until their divorce in 1994 and recalled struggles with her self-esteem, mental health, and family challenges. Hedi excelled at academics, where she experienced success, which was often overshadowed by several tragic experiences during high school. For instance, she had a near-death experience at the age of 17 years old when several of her friends were shot at a party, and a few years later, she witnessed a mass shooting at her school in 1993. Military life shaped their marriage and family; their worldview was influenced by multiple combat deployments and explicitly living in Germany.

Ian and Irene

Ian and Irene became friends in high school and went to the prom in the same car on separate dates in 1988. Ian had always been interested in dating Irene. However, they would remain friends throughout the 1990s. Ian eventually joined the Army, and Irene went off to college. After some time passed and Ian was on leave in his home state of New York, in 2006, they reconnected and began dating; after completing premarital classes, they stressed that a marriage based on mutual faith had a better chance of longevity. They had been married since 2008 and raised two sons together. Ian experienced multiple deployments beginning in 2008,

early in the marriage, with one of the most difficult occurring in 2010. After serving back-to-

back tours in Afghanistan, Ian capped out and transitioned to retirement in 2013.

Jackson and Jade

Jackson and Jade met in middle school in the eighth grade. Jade's father joined the Army,

which rooted the family in Germany. After 2 years of living in Germany, Jade eventually

returned to the United States and reconnected with Jackson in high school during their senior

year in 1994. The couple solidified their commitment during Jade's first year of college. Jackson

lived between the United States and the West Indies. He attended school in both countries,

excelling in academics and athletics. Jackson was raised in a single-parent home with his mother

and four siblings; he also had a consistent relationship with his father, whom he saw daily. He

spent his primary years in the West Indies with his grandmother. Jackson joined the Air Force

after high school; he experienced multiple deployments and was medically retired. Jackson and

Jade had been married for 23 years and raised two children together.

Keith and Kayla

Keith and Kayla met more than 39 years ago in Florida. They had three adult daughters;

Keith was a retired Army veteran with multiple combat deployments spanning over 25 years of

military service. Keith had a history of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) due to the

challenges experienced during deployments in Iraq. Kayla spent many years as a stay-at-home

mother, returning to work on an installation in Fort Stewart, Georgia. She retired in 2019. The

couple enjoyed spending time with their adult children, spouses, and grandchildren.

Liam and Leslie

The married military couple, Liam and Leslie, had shared a journey of love spanning 23

years. They had one daughter. Their story began when Leslie, then enlisted in the Air Force,

crossed paths with Liam, a civilian, during one of her duty shifts. Their initial encounter occurred when Liam crossed paths with Leslie while she was on duty on the installation. During future interactions, they noticed their shared life experiences, specifically around their military backgrounds. Both were military dependents, with their fathers having served in the armed forces. The connection deepened as Liam was inspired by their shared military backgrounds. Unbeknownst to Leslie, Liam was scheduled to join the Air Force, and they became a dual military couple. Soon after getting married, Liam and Leslie decided to make changes in their relationship to start a family. Leslie transitioned out of the military as Liam continued his active duty. Their military journey culminated when Liam retired after 20 years of dedicated service in the Air Force.

Results

The purpose of this qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study was to discover how long-term military married couples, married for 10 or more years, mitigated the risk of separation and divorce after experiencing multiple post-deployment reintegration phases at military installations in Georgia. A problem existed regarding an increased risk of separation and divorce among post-deployed reintegrating married couples. Wood et al. (2019) claimed that military deployments may be particularly stressful for married couples. Since 2001, over two million married service members have returned home from military deployments, with approximately 250,000 experiencing three or more deployments (Chandler et al., 2018; Zamir et al., 2020). The significance of this research was that it explored the post-deployment reintegration experiences of long-term married couples while contributing to the conversation within the marriage and family counseling field focused on relationship dynamics.

The central research question for this study was: How do long-term married couples describe their internal working models (IWMs) and adult attachment styles, which (1) conceptualize their romantic love and relationship satisfaction lived experiences as well as (2) describe the common meanings and shared practices that assist them with mitigating the risk of separation and divorce? There were four sub-questions associated with this central question. The four sub-research questions investigated were:

Sub-question One: How do long-term married couples explain their IWMs and adult attachment styles?

Sub-question Two: How do long-term married couples conceptualize their romantic love based on their IWMs and adult attachment styles?

Sub-question Three: How do long-term married couples conceptualize their relationship satisfaction based on their IWM and adult attachment style?

Sub-question Four: How do long-term married couples describe the post-deployment reintegration practices that assist them with mitigating the risk of separation and divorce?

Theme Development

Each of the 12 interview transcripts was read and coded with level one codes that reflected the responses of the marital couple for each of the seven questions. After all 12 transcripts were read and coded, level two codes were created in step three by examining the level one codes and combining level one codes together that reflected a similar theme. In step four, level two codes or themes were used to address the four research sub-questions. The verbatim comments reflected the themes that were derived from the semi-structured recorded interviews.

As mentioned previously, there were three data collection sources. They included: 1) pre-interview assessment, 2) semi-structured recorded interviews, and 3) reflective journal exercises. Adult attachment style data was collected during the pre-interview assessment, while data on IWMs was collected using the reflective journal exercises. Finally, the interviews among the 12 married military couples were conducted via recorded Zoom sessions. Details about how adult attachment styles, IWMs, and semi-structured interview data was analyzed as follows.

Research Question Responses

Sub-Question One: How do long-term married couples explain their adult attachment styles and IWMs?

Adult Attachment Style. Adult attachment style ratings were calculated by summing the 18 questions from the original Adult Attachment Style inventory (Collins & Read, 1990; Simpson et al., 1996). There were three categories of adult attachment style: close, depend, and anxiety. The close scale measures the extent to which a person is comfortable with closeness and intimacy (Collins & Read, 1990; Simpson et al., 1996). The close scale was computed from questions 1, 7, 9, 13, 15, and 17. The depend scale measures the extent to which a person feels he/she can depend on others to be available when needed. The depend scale was computed from questions 3, 6, 8, 14, 16, and 18. Finally, the anxiety subscale measures the extent to which a person is worried about being abandoned or unloved. Anxiety was computed from questions 2, 4, 5, 10, 11, and 12. Respondents were assigned the adult attachment style where they scored the highest on the three scales. Five of the 12 couples shared the same attachment style, whereas both spouses had the close attachment style. Three couples shared the pairing of close and anxiety attachment style. There were two couples with an attachment style pairing of close/depend, and one couple with the pairing of anxiety/depend (see Table 3).

Table 3

Adult Attachment Style

Married Couple	Adult Attachment Style
Asa/Audrey	Close/Depend
Blain/Belinda	Close/Close
Carter/Cindy	Anxiety/Depend
Danny/Daisy	Close/Close
Evan/Emma	Close/Anxiety
Falcon/Farrah	Close/Close
George Gina	Close/Close
Harper/Hedi	Close/Depend
Ian/Irene	Anxiety/Close
Jackson/Jade	Anxiety/Close
Keith/Kayla	Close/Anxiety
Liam/Leslie	Close/Close

Internal Working Models. Internal working models are defined as the mental representations that guide how individuals perceive themselves, their partners, and their relationships in general based on childhood/caregiver experiences (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Bretherton, 1999). To provide information about their IWMs, each spouse of the 12 couples was asked to complete a reflective journal exercise. The reflective journal exercise asked the respondents to respond to four statements: 1) Please describe significant childhood moments; 2) Please describe any other influential experiences; 3) Please describe significant childhood relationships; and 4) Please describe significant life events. Based on their responses, respondents were classified by the researcher as a combination of stable, unstable, caring, supportive, and harsh childhood environments. These classifications were based on thematic analysis of the reflective journals that were completed by the respondents. The results of the thematic analysis are discussed. Table 4 contains both the adult attachment style and IWM classifications.

Table 4

Adult Attachment Style and IWMS

Married Couples	Adult Attachment Style	Internal Working Model (IWMs)
Asa/Audrey	Close/Depend	Stable Supportive/Stable Loving Caring
Blain/Belinda	Close/Close	Unstable Harsh/Stable Harsh
Carter/Cindy	Anxiety/Depend	Stable/Stable Supportive
Danny/Daisy	Close/Close	Stable Loving/Stable Supportive
Evan/Emma	Close/Anxiety	Stable Supportive/Stable Caring
Falcon/Farrah	Close/Close	Unstable/Stable Caring
George/Gina	Close/Close	Unstable Harsh/Stable Supportive Caring
Harper/Hedi	Close/Depend	Unstable/Unstable Harsh
Ian/Irene	Anxiety/Close	Stable Caring/Stable Supportive
Jackson/Jade	Anxiety/Close	Stable Supportive/Unstable
Keith/Kayla	Close/Anxiety	Harsh/Stable Supportive
Liam/Leslie	Close/Close	Stable Caring Supportive/Unstable Supportive Harsh

Respondents were given the classification of stable if they reported that they grew up in a stable environment where they could build stable family relationships, stable friendships, and general consistency in their lives. In some instances, this was a two-parent household, in other instances, it was a single-parent household with extended family or community support. Table 5 contains verbatim comments that support the stable environment designation.

Table 5

Theme One: Stable Environment

Mom and Dad staying married until they passed. Excellent example of working together to build a fulfilling life. (Asa)

My mom and dad always held hands. They always sat next to each other in church. And I can remember going and cuddling with them in their bed, and then all the other kids coming and piling on together. Seeing their relationship, seeing my dad come into the kitchen when my mom was cooking and kissing her and squeezing on her, had me grow up thinking that this was normal. (Audrey)

My mother (she had to raise four boys by herself) and with Reggie (a family friend). Reggie helped my mother and brothers and I when my dad passed away. (Carter)

Living in Germany as a kid - traveling with family and playing sports. Building lifelong friendships with people. (Liam)

Raised in single-parent household with three brothers and one sister from 3rd grade through college graduation. I saw my other parent almost daily. Participating in sports allowed me to excel outside of the classroom setting while providing a challenge to look forward to on most days. (Jackson)

My dad worked and my mom stayed home and took care of us until we were 16 and 14 and then she returned to work. (Irene)

For participants who indicated that they moved often when they were young or lived in foster care, they received an unstable designation. Additionally, those who expressed being bullied and/or not establishing connections with their parents and/or people in their community also received the designation of unstable. Table 6 contains verbatim comments that were used to classify participants as growing up in an unstable environment.

Table 6

Theme Two: Unstable Environment

My sister and I lived in foster care for 2 1/2 years. I was sexually abused as a child by a relative. (Cindy)
One that comes to mind is when my parents divorced. I struggled with my own independence because I was being pulled in two directions. (Falcon)
I moved around a lot, I use to witness my Dad hit my Mom. (George)
I remember being bullied by kids in elementary for being the "fat girl." It made me not want to exist and hate myself. When I was going into 8th grade we had to move and sell our house because my dad sucked with money. We moved to a less affluent neighborhood and my old friends treated me as less than. In 1994, my dad sent my mom divorce papers out of the blue, and I learned he had a girlfriend the last 10 years, which explained missing holidays. He worked and lived out-of-town for the Army Corp of Engineers and wasn't around much. (Heidi)
Father was in military, multiple moves… parents divorced when I was in high school… Lived with both parents, didn't feel overly close to either parent… (Jade)
We moved a lot because of the military. (Leslie)

Respondents who reported that they were close with family members were classified as having a caring environment. For example, comments from respondents with this designation discussed being taken care of by siblings or spending quality time with parents and/or siblings. Table 7 contains a list of verbatim comments related to those belonging to a caring environment.

Table 7

Theme Three: Caring Environment

I grew up being taken care of by my siblings and then taking care of my siblings. My mother taught us to take care of each other, how to take care of each other. She was often in charge of the women's organization at church, and we were taught if she wasn't home by three, we were to start dinner. At that time, it was probably for eight or 10 kids. But we were always taught how to care for one another. (Audrey)
My relationship with my mom and older sister. They were the most significant part of my childhood. (Farrah)
Spending family time with my parents and brother… I'm a daddy's girl, so had/have a close relationship with my dad. My relationship with my brother. We were each other's playmates when we couldn't go outside with friends and this fostered a close relationship. (Gina)
My closest relationship was with my father as he was retired by the time I was born. In my adolescence, I was diagnosed with and fought leukemia. (Ian)
I had a normal childhood. I grew up with two parents and my younger brother, who is 2 years younger than I am. My dad worked and my mom stayed home and took care of us until we were 16 and 14 and then she returned to work. (Irene)

Supportive environments differ from caring environments in that support comes from outside the nuclear family. So, examples would be mentorship programs, guidance from teachers, and being a part of organized sports. Table 8 contains verbatim comments from the respondents.

Table 8

Theme Four: Supportive Environment

The men in our church fellowship helped mentor me. (Liam)
My youth pastors and music directors were very important to me. I did experience some bullying and those relationships were important in a toxic way. Music was a big thing for me. I always felt alive and accepted in musical atmospheres. (Leslie)
My high school sophomore English teacher, Mrs. Hardy. She turned me onto books with *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn*. My high school principal, Mr. Rosier. He was tough but fair. His example helped me pursue education so I could accomplish goals. (Asa)
Living in Germany as a kid - traveling with family and playing sports. Building lifelong friendships with people. (Liam)
I met many teachers along the way who challenged me early since school was boring as I was several years ahead of the other students. Participating in sports allowed me to excel outside of the classroom setting while providing a challenge to look forward to on most days. (Jackson)
Discussions with my mother and grandmother regarding being independent and making my own income. (Gina)

The final classification for the respondents was the designation of a harsh childhood environment. Harsh childhood environments are those where there was violence, exposure to deaths, bullying, and abuse. Table 9 shows the verbatim comments that are affiliated with harsh environments.

Table 9

Theme Five: Harsh Environment

I used to witness my Dad hit my Mom. (George)

I remember being bullied by kids in elementary for being the "Fat girl." It made me not want to exist and hate myself. At 17 I was at a party where seven of my friends were shot, witnessed 2 of them. I felt the bullets whooshing past me. My friend Chad died when I was a freshman. He was hit by a car when crossing the street. It was awful. (Hedi)

The first time that I had seen someone get shot, the person was shot in the face. My house was raided by the police as a kid. I had to testify in my Aunt's murder trial. (Carter)

My mother passed away from a drug overdose, right in front of me, when I was 12 years old. 1. My sister and I lived in foster care for two and a half years. 2. I was sexually abused as a child by a relative. (Cindy)

School was stressful for me. I was smart but not a good student and this incurred a lot of harsh discipline at home. (Leslie)

Sub-Question Two: How do long-term married couples conceptualize their romantic love based on their IWMs and adult attachment styles?

To address sub-question two, the themes derived from question three of the semi-structured recorded interviews were used, along with the category groupings of the attachment style and IWM. Question three asked: With romantic love being defined as the emotional connection that transcends friendship, how would you describe romantic love within your relationship? There were three prominent themes that were generated from the responses of the 12 married couples. The first two themes related to respondents who communicated a positive conceptualization of romantic love. The third theme represented the responses of those who reflected a non-romantic conceptualization of their marriage. There were five couples that reflected a less romantic conceptualization of romantic love, and there were seven couples who communicated a less romantic conceptualization of their marriage. There were five couples that communicated a more positive romantic relationship.

Theme One: Focusing on the Happiness of the Other Person through Romantic Activities. The first theme that represented a positive conceptualization of romantic love was

focusing on the happiness of the other person through romantic activities. The couples who conveyed this position stressed the importance of putting your spouse first and doing things as a couple. There was an emphasis on action relating to romantic love. For example, one respondent noted, "I would also describe our romantic love has changed as it does over time, but we have always focused on the happiness of the other. Mm-hmm. <affirmative> I still do things to hear him squeal with happiness" (Audrey). There were a number of different romantic activities that were noted in the interviews. For example, Gina stated, "I'm thinking for me, from my perspective, I think we bond and have our romantic love, so to speak, a lot over fine dining. That is our big thing." Another remarked about going on dates and taking dance lessons together: "I think that we date, we definitely date. He's very romantic. We take dance lessons together and we do things to keep our marriage close" (Irene). Table 10 contains the verbatim responses related to the various activities' respondents reported doing together as a couple.

Table 10

Theme One: Focusing on the Happiness of the Other Person Through Romantic Activities

On the other end of that, husband does the dishes. Even if he cooks with me, he does the dishes. I don't particularly care for the dishes, but he just does them. So, I can go sit down, get off my feet, even if I've been off my feet all day. (Audrey) – **Action**

I would also describe our romantic love has changed as it does over time, but we have always focused on the happiness of the other. Mm-hmm. <affirmative> I still do things to hear him squeal with happiness. You know, two nights ago, I made pasta for the second night in a row. I don't like pasta. I don't eat that much pasta. It's not good for me. (Audrey) – **Focus on the happiness of the other person** – **Activities**

So, so let me give you our mantra, kind of my wife brought that up, but something that we've lived by, and it's, it's dependent on both spouses doing this, but it's: forget about yourself and focus on the happiness of your partner. (Asa) – **Focus on the happiness of the other person**

I'm thinking for me, from my perspective, I think we bond and have our romantic love, so to speak, a lot over fine dining. That is our big thing. (Gina) – **Fine dining** – **Activities**

Well, my husband's a bigger movie guru than I am, but definitely bonding over a Netflix movie, spending time at home while he's cooking. (Gina) – **Movies** – **Activities**

But I think I would have to say just the dates just to be more general dates and doing adult activities as well. (Gina) – **Going on dates** – **Activities**

I'm an extrovert, it's nothing for me to just be out and meet people and do whatever. My wife's more of an introvert. So, in addition to that, it's certain things that I would like to do that she doesn't like to do. But as the marriage progressed, we learned that it's more important for us to try to do things together that one person may not really want to do, then just always focus on I want to do this. (George) – **Doing things as a couple** – **Activities**

But that was something that my wife loved to do was go to different stores and go to Target and go to the mall. And even if she didn't plan on buying anything, she would just say that that was her relaxed time. (George) – **Window shopping together** – **Activities**

I think that we date, we definitely date. He's very romantic. We take dance lessons together and we do things to keep our marriage close. (Irene) – **Date, take dance lessons** – **Activities**

So, we really had to, because our lives were so busy, we really had to make time to be together and to make sure that we definitely went on a date without the kids. Without them. We had to cut out time and just make that time happen. Even if we didn't really want to. We were like, nope, this is our Sunday to go out, or this is our Saturday to go out. We're going to go out, and we're just going to do without the kids, and we're going to do it. I think that that paid off dividends in the long run. It really did. When you're married for a really long time, I think you have to do those things to keep steady interaction with the person you love. (Ian) – **We date** – **Activities**

We had gotten a really, really good mentor from the church once who had mentioned that you have to keep each other first. You have to keep each other first. And life kind of showed us that in the long run, couples who only stay together for their children fall apart when their children eventually leave. (Ian) – **Keep each other first**

Results for Sub-Question Two: Theme One, Adult Attachment Style, and IWM. The

respondents who commented about focusing on the happiness of the other person through

romantic activities had IWMs from their youth that were stable environments, caring

environments, and supportive environments. So, it can be argued that these respondents are trying to replicate in their current relationships what they experienced as children.

The attachment styles associated with the couples under this theme were close/depend, close/close, and anxiety/close. Close reflected the extent to which a person is comfortable with closeness and intimacy. This meant that these spouses are comfortable focusing on the happiness of their partner and engaging in romantic activities (dates) that will bring mutual enjoyment. Depend measured the extent to which a person feels he/she can depend on others to be available when needed. Those classified as depend may feel comfortable focusing on the happiness of their spouse if they feel they can depend on them. Those with an anxiety attachment style are worried about being abandoned or unloved. Given these fears, for these respondents to have successful marriages, they may need significant amounts of reassurance that they will not be abandoned or unloved by their spouse. These reassurances may take the form of putting their spouse's happiness first and date nights. Therefore, it was clear why these spouses would need to be in a relationship that focuses on the happiness of the other person through romantic activities. So, these attachment styles aligned with the perception of romantic love described among those who focus on the happiness of the other person through romantic activities.

Theme Two: Emotional Connection Between Spouses. In addition to romantic activities, respondents with a positive conceptualization of romantic love also noted the importance of the emotional connection between spouses. This was the second theme under the positive conceptualization of romantic love. Emotional connection was characterized as being aware of your spouse's feelings and needs. Hedi stated it this way:

I think that I would describe it as the, something that we miss so much because of deployments was the day-to-day, the day-to-day grind of seeing each other of, oh, it's

been a long day. Oh, is there anything I can do, you know, to help you feel better from your long day? Do you need to talk? Just being in each other's presence sometime to me is that, is that emotional connection and just sometimes can just look at him and I'm like, oh, what's going on?

It was also noted that challenges helped strengthen the emotional connection between spouses. For example, Jackson noted:

So, we dated about 6 years. So that part of the friendship, I believe, helped the romantic side of things as well. Along with both professional and personal challenges that we've faced throughout, you know, my career. I think those things also help with the connection and also allow us to look backwards and say, if we can get past some of those things, we can pretty much get past almost anything.

Even those who did not consider themselves romantic, still stressed the importance of the emotional connection between spouses:

So <laugh>, first thing I'll say is romantic is romantic love, I guess emotional connection. I'm glad you put that in there, because I'm not a romantic, even though my wife loves it. So, I, I suck on that regard. But I, I, I think for me, the, the, the, the friendship piece comes from communication, compromise and trusting each other and listening to each other. (Harper)

Table 11 contains verbatims comments related to the importance of the emotional connection between military spouses.

Table 11

Theme Two: The Emotional Connection Between Spouses

But really for me, the emotional connection comes from the small things. And it comes from Hedi's desire to support me and make me better. And hopefully I do the same, but she shows she cares, she shows she loves me. (Harper) – **She supports me and makes me better** – **Emotional connection**

The emotional connection comes from the day-to-day, being around and discussing the deeper parts of the day. And I'll explain that with my day work. How was work dear? Well, work was fine. Well, how are you doing, dear? Well, actually, it's been a pretty long day, and I'm pretty burnt out, and I could just use a hug or, you know, go up there and grab her butt. (Harper) – **Discussing deeper parts of the day** – **Emotional connection**

So <laugh>, first thing I'll say is romantic is romantic love, I guess emotional connection. I'm glad you put that in there, because I'm not a romantic, even though my wife loves it. So, I, I suck on that regard. But I, I, I think for me, the, the, the friendship piece comes from communication, compromise and trusting each other and listening to each other. (Harper) – **Communication, compromise, and trusting each other** – **Emotional connection**

I think that I would describe it as the something that we miss so much because of deployments was the day-to-day, the day-to-day grind of seeing each other of, oh, it's been a long day. Oh, is there anything I can do, you know, to help you feel better from your long day? Do you need to talk? Just being in each other's presence sometime to me is that, is that emotional connection and just sometimes can just look at him and I'm like, oh, what's going on? (Heidi) – Being in tune with the other person – **Emotional connection**

And just having, having, just being in tune with emotional connection, it's being in, in tune with each other's emotions and being able to support those emotions. And sometimes it's listening to the, what those emotions mean. (Heidi) – **Being in tune with each other emotions – Emotional connection**

I think we had a really good friend foundation first. And then it, you know, evolved into this, you know, I can't vision envision my life <laugh>, you know, without you. (Jade) – **Can't imagine life without you**

So, we dated about 6 years. So that part of the friendship, I believe helped the romantic side of things as well. Along with both professional and personal challenges that we've face throughout, you know, my career. I, I think those things also help with the connection and also allows us to look backwards and say, if we can get past some of those things, we can pretty much get past almost anything. (Jackson) – **Friendship helped the romantic; challenges strengthen our emotional connection** – **Emotional connection**

So, for me he's my best friend, and so he's the person that I call when I want to cry, when I want to laugh, when I just need to scream. So, for me that emotional connection is very important, and even when I was deployed, that emotional connection was there, but it to me, it's like the since our relationship you have to be friends before you can be anything else… (Cindy) – **He's my best friend; Friend before anything else**

Yeah. So, we were saying that for us, friendship, the, the way that we're built, friendship is the thing that unlocks romantic love for us. We enjoy fun together, having just random conversations, just kind of, you know, how like, like those different neurons just kind of start to light up when you're connecting. Mm-hmm. <affirmative> And, so, for us that, you know, that neuro pathway just starts to light up when we feel safe with each other, when we feel like we're interacting as friends, and it evolves to romantic love. And for us it evolves into, you know, physical intimacy. (Leslie) – **Friendship first**

Results for Sub-Question Two: Theme Two, Adult Attachment Style, and IWM. The

respondents who emphasized emotional connection between spouses as it relates to defining

romantic love, had an IWM of stable, supportive, unstable, and harsh. Being aware of one's feelings and needs may be more important to those who grew up in unstable and harsh environments. They may seek to have stability and support through the relationship of a non-family member (i.e., spouse), which is similar to what they experienced when they were young. Those from stable supportive environments had relatively stable homes, but their support came from those outside of their nuclear family.

The attachment style for all those who promoted the importance of emotional connection between spouses was close. Specifically, the spousal profiles were close/depend, close/anxiety, and close/close. Again, those with a close attachment style were comfortable with closeness and intimacy. So, this attachment style aligned closely with placing importance on the emotional connection in the relationship. In fact, because of their emphasis on the emotional connection in the marriage, the spouse with a close attachment style may be an ideal partner for people with the depend and anxiety attachment styles. Through a healthy emotional connection with their spouse, the close partner affirms the depend partner who feels he/she can depend on others to be available when needed. Additionally, the close partner's focus on emotional connection reassures the anxiety partner, who is worried about being abandoned and unloved. So, each attachment style aligned with the importance of having an emotional connection in the marital relationship.

Theme Three: Friendship First/Romantically Challenged. Among those who were romantically challenged, they consistently emphasized friendship between the couples more than romance, dating, or even an emotional connection. For example, one respondent indicated that:

> I, I have attachment issues. <laugh> And one thing is I will always, I would tell anybody this to make sure in your relationship, your foundation besides the high power that you believe in, and God, whatever you believe in, make sure you guys establish a friendship.

And because at the end of the day when all this fails, you guys can fall back and just have something to laugh about. (Belinda)

Evan reflected on the challenge that some respondents expressed when asked about romantic love in their relationship. He stated that at times he was okay with being just friends and not romantic:

I think for me it's been, I have taken her as a friend first because we used to be friends first before we became romantic partners. And for me it's kind of weird because I was raised very differently, not to express emotion and open up quite a lot and all that stuff, while her, she was raised to just show him off and be laughing and all this stuff. So, on some day,s she feel like we are good and romantic at all this stuff, and on some days, she feel like I'm necessarily hard and tough, and I don't want to let free and just laugh openly. So, I think there are moments where I feel like we are really good romantic partners, but on some days, I'm just okay with being friends.

Being romantic was identified as a chore:

Romantic love. Yeah. I'm not the romantic guy. <laugh> Okay. Yeah. How about flowers? I buy, I, I buy stuff like that. Yeah. I try to, I know she likes stuff like that, so I go ahead and do it. You know, I, I try to keep her happy. That's a task though. <laugh> Yeah. I try to keep her happy, but that's a task. So yeah. I do, I do, I do, I do little things. (Keith)

With this group, the discussions focused more on friendship compared to the group that had stronger romantic inclinations. There was talk among this group related to emotional connection, but the emphasis was friendship. See Table 12 for the verbatim comments.

Table 12

Theme Three: Friendship First/Romantically Challenged

I, I have attachment issues. <laugh> And one thing is I will always, I would tell anybody this to make sure in your relationship, your foundation besides the high power that you believe in, and God, whatever you believe in, make sure you guys establish a friendship. And because at the end of the day when all this fails, you guys can fall back and just have something to laugh about. (Belinda) – **At least have friendship in case love fails**

Now, in regards to romantic, interesting enough, like not too long ago, we told our daughter, it's like, you think we got married? 'cause we was in love, love came, it came along the way. So, being that our kids now are college age, when I was literally saying to people, I have to really figure out is if do, if we really like each other, do we actually love each other? (Belinda) – **Marriage initially occurred because of the status of the relationship having a child together**

It's like a romance, supposed, has to keep on evolving, and, and it can be tricky at times. It's like peaks and valleys, you know, you have your highs, you have your lows, but they're constantly peaks. It is, it is just, is a, just the constant battle. (Blain) – **Best friend**

So, what women see is one thing, men see is something totally different, and trying to like explain that sometimes like in in the beginning, it was it was difficult just trying to get that understanding amongst each other, like, you know, knowing love is there, you can feel the love is there, but like just like communication is that, was, is more, so the key because you could say something and be taken out of context, and then, like, you know, the first thing like I'm going to say, the first thing, but like women tend to like they're not going to want to have sex or do anything physical with you because then you might have said something… (Carter) – **Different perceptions of the relationship and communication challenges put spouses at odds with one another** – **Lukewarm**

So, yes, it's really good. It's just, you know, the same issue that pop up in any relationship. Yeah. Like communication or like with money and stuff like that. Like it's, I'd say, yeah, I'd say I'd say nine on intensity. (Danny) – **Better communication and money management**

I mean, we, we both learned to communicate better. We both have learned to express our feelings no matter how they come out. We both have learned to like, how we deal with money. I used to be really bad with my, now, I'm, I'm, I'm, you know, good. We both have learned, to know each other's, you know, points, if that makes any sense. (Daisy) – **Better communication and money management**

I think for me it's been, I have taken her as a friend first because we used to be friends first before we became romantic partners. And for me, it's kind of weird because I was raised very differently, not to express emotion and open up quite a lot and all that stuff while her, she was raised to just show him off and be laughing and all this stuff. So, on some days, she feel like we are good and romantic at all this stuff, and on some days, she feel like I'm necessarily hard and tough, and I don't want to let free and just laugh openly. So, I think there are moments where I feel like we are really good romantic partners, but on some days I'm just okay with being friends. (Evan) – **Sometimes we're romantic, sometimes we're friends**

For me, I would say is the care that comes from a partner. The fact that you feel like you have someone you can sort of rely on having a best friend, someone who knows you even better than you feel like you know yourself. So, for me is having that person who understands you and accepts you for who you are and sort of becomes your support system. (Emma) – **He's my best friend and support system**

I mean, I think in our relationship, it's interesting because yes, it is romantic love, but I think for us, the partnership, the friendship, I actually like him. That comes first for me if I understand the question correctly. (Farrah) – **Friendship and partnership comes first**

I would say being friends first and getting to know one another. (Kayla) – **Friends first**

Romantic love. Yeah. I'm not the romantic guy. <laugh> Okay. Yeah. How about flowers? I buy, I, I buy stuff like that. Yeah. I try to, I know she likes stuff like that, so I go ahead and do it. You know, I, I try to keep her happy. That's a task, though. <laugh> Yeah. I try to keep her happy, but that's a task. So yeah. I do, I do, I do, I do little things. (Keith) – **Being romantic is a chore**

Results for Sub-Question Two: Theme Three, Adult Attachment Style, and IWM. It

should be noted that of the three respondents who achieved an anxiety attachment style, all three

were in the friendship first/romantically challenged category when it came to describing

romantic love. Those with an anxiety attachment style are worried about being abandoned and

unloved. So, it makes sense that their emphasis would be on friendship rather than building an

emotional connection or engaging in romantic acts, as they may never be convinced of their

spouse's love and commitment towards them. Friendship may be a way of managing their

expectations. The remaining respondents under this theme had close or depend attachment styles.

Additionally, the IWM categories for these respondents were stable, unstable, supportive, harsh,

and caring. Those who chose friendship as the first definition of romantic love may have been

looking for the safe and stable choice in marriage. Stability may be appealing to these couples, as

the majority (n=7) had an IWM of stable. Focusing on friendship in marriage may be

foundational and a way to manage expectations around romance, love, and intimacy. For

example, Farrah said, "I mean, I think in our relationship it's interesting because yes, it is

romantic love, but I think for us, the partnership, the friendship, I actually like him. That comes

first for me if I understand the question correctly."

Sub-Question Three: How do long-term married couples conceptualize their relationship

satisfaction based on their IWM and adult attachment style?

To address this research question, the researcher used questions four and five from the

semi-structured recorded interviews, the IWM, and the attachment style data. Question four

asked: With relationship satisfaction being defined as a couple's level of mutual satisfaction and

fulfillment in their relationship, how would you describe relationship satisfaction within your

marriage? Question five asked: Are there any specific strategies that either of you can think of

that assist the both of you with maintaining satisfaction within your relationship during the post-

deployment reintegration phases? From the interviews, there were three themes that were

discovered from the military spouses that address: How do long-term married couples

conceptualize their relationship satisfaction based on their IWM and adult attachment style? The

first theme was my spouse supports me, the second theme was ability to communicate with each

other, and the third theme was quality time.

   Theme One: Spouse Supports Me. For a majority of the couples (n=8), receiving and or

giving support to their spouse is central to relationship satisfaction. Support can take many

forms. For example, Audrey noted, "He has always come with me and supported me in

volunteering when I've asked him to and my children. And we're all better for it. Thank you for

saying yes, love." Some assisting in activities that your spouse enjoys was considered support.

Support was also deemed to be unconditional and that your spouse wants the best for you:

> …but for me it very much comes from the ability to be myself to know that I have a
>
> person there that's always going to be in my corner, regardless, um, and then that allows
>
> me the opportunity for growth, so for me that's how I describe relationship satisfaction,
>
> knowing that I'm loved, that I'm caring about, that this person wants the very best for
>
> me. (Cindy)

From the responses, unconditional support was not just important to the relationship, but also the

stability of the individual. For example, Keith noted:

> I know she's going to be there. I know she's going to be there. I mean, and I know she's
>
> there for me. Mm-hmm. That is, that, that's, that's one of the things that, that, that, that's

one of the things that keeps, keeps me grounded. It, it allows me to it, it allows me to, to

hang in there. Mm-hmm. <affirmative> I know that she can reach me when nobody else

can. So, I say the, the satisfaction of knowing that, that she's there for me, and she's not

going anywhere. I mean, that means a lot.

Being supportive also included elevating your spouse to be better:

I would. I'm completely satisfied in my marriage. Yeah. I can't think of an area that my

husband doesn't fulfill. He pushes me, he challenges me. He encourages me. There really

isn't an area that I'm not challenged or fulfilled in this marriage. (Farrah)

It appeared from the responses that there was nothing more important to having relationship

satisfaction than being supportive to your spouse. See Table 13 for the verbatim comments

related to my spouse supports me.

Table 13

Theme One: My Spouse Supports Me

He has always come with me and supported me in volunteering when I've asked him to and my children. And we're all better for it. Thank you for saying yes, love. (Audrey) – **Support one another in each other's activities**

…but for me it very much comes from the ability to be myself to know that I have a person there that's always going to be in my corner, regardless, um, and then that allows me the opportunity for growth, so for me that's how I describe relationship satisfaction, knowing that I'm loved, that I'm caring about, that this person wants the very best for me (Cindy) – **I'm cared for and this person wants the best for me**

I would say being in a situation where you feel like you are getting 100% from your partner and feeling like he's got your back and that there's nothing more you could ask for, which I feel like is a constant work in progress. (Emma) – **You're getting 100%; He's got your back**

I would. I'm completely satisfied in my marriage. Yeah. I can't think of an area that my husband doesn't fulfill. He pushes me, he challenges me. He encourages me. There really isn't an area that I'm not challenged or fulfilled in this marriage. (Farrah) – **Completely satisfied – He pushes me, challenges me, encourages me**

I'm satisfied in our marriage, I would say that satisfaction comes from, I have to agree with the physical, emotional, intellectual piece of all that. I think that satisfaction is derived from, because to describe it, is all derived from having, you know, the mutual interests, but then having each, having our own thing and then supporting each other in those things. (Hedi) – **Supporting each other's interests**

Good sex lifting me up and supporting me and letting me be what I want to be in life with the university where I teach. (Irene) – **Good sex; supporting me**

I had an opportunity to do a study abroad. I am going to be gone for a month. And he's like, go have a great time. And he doesn't say, oh no, what about the things here? And same thing for him. He has an opportunity to go and do something that I'm not included on. And I'm like, yes, this is great for you. (Irene) – **Supporting each other's interests**

And it was at that point when we were going through everything for years leading up to the retirement, that I realized that the satisfaction within the marriage is, was, different for me than it was at the beginning of the marriage. You, you know, you know someone loves you, and you feel that you love 'em, but when that person at such a young age is willing, you know, to help you take showers, help you get dressed, and those things like that, that, that says a lot, especially when you're offering them, them the opportunity to leave if they want to. So, I would say the satisfaction at that point became more than just, I guess you can say emotional and physical within the marriage. It was also spiritual as well as just that feeling that this person has my back no matter what, and they're going to be there for me, not just say they're going to be there. (Jackson) – **Wife has my back after health issues** – **Support**

I don't want you to have to be my caregiver. I'm going to still, you know, get you the house, and I promise you that I would get you one day, you know, when we got married. And so basically, like he said, said, you know, I'm not going to be mad at you if you choose to leave. I'll still do the things. And I'm looking at him like, what? Like, that just wasn't even an option. Like, and it actually made me mad <laugh> <laugh> because I'm just like, what are you talking about? Like, do you not get, like when I said I do, and when I committed to you, like I meant in sickness in health, they're rich or poor, like all the things. (Jade) – **I support him through sickness and health**

I know she's going to be there. I know she's going to be there. I mean, and I know she's there for me. Mm-hmm. That is that, that's, that's one of the things that, that, that, that's one of the things that keeps, keeps me grounded. It, it allows me to it, it allows me to, to hang in there. Mm-hmm. <affirmative> I know that she can reach me when nobody else can. So, I say the, the satisfaction of knowing that, that she's there for me, and she's not going anywhere. I mean, that means a lot. (Keith) – **She's always going to be in my corner** – **Support**

Results for Sub-Question Three: Theme One, Adult Attachment Style, and IWM. Of the respondents who communicated the importance of spousal support, the IWMs were stable, unstable, caring, supportive, and harsh. They spanned the gamut of the IWMs. Thus, it appeared that regardless of your IWM, spousal support is an important element to relationship satisfaction. Regarding adult attachment styles, the respondent classifications were depend, close, and anxiety. Again, it appeared that regardless of the adult attachment style, spousal support is the key to relationship satisfaction.

Theme Two: Ability to Communicate With Each Other. Another important element of relationship satisfaction was the ability to communicate with each other. This aligned well with the previous theme, spousal support, because it can be argued that spousal support cannot occur without good communication. Good communication is not something that comes easy or is present immediately, according to respondents. For example, Cindy noted:

>…the ability to communicate with each other, hmm, and it's taken a long time to get to this point. I mean, like I said, in December it'll be 22 years, but I really can't like, I honestly can't see doing life with anyone else other than Mr. C, like, and that's like, that's heartfelt.

Farrah, also concurred that effective communication between the spouses took time:

> So, it was a lot of time for us to really get through the bumps in our marriage, learning to communicate with each other those first couple of years, where things can be a little bit difficult or challenging. So, just really learning to bring that courtship into our marriage and really understanding each other and how we function as a couple. It really helped to set a foundation for us, and I can kind of know exactly how my husband's going to respond to certain things.

Table 14 contains the verbatim comments related to ability to communicate with each other.

Table 14

Theme Two: Ability to Communicate with Each Other

…the ability to communicate with each other, hmm ,and it's, it's taken a long time to get to this point. I mean, like I said, in December it'll be 22 years, but I really can't like, I honestly can't see doing life with anyone else other than Mr. C, like, and that's like, that's heartfelt. (Cindy) – **Satisfaction took time to develop** – **Communication**

I mean, we, we both learned to communicate better. We both have learned to express our feelings no matter how they come out. We both have learned to like how we deal with money. I used to be really bad with my now I'm, I'm, I'm, you know, good. We both have learned, to know each other's, you know, points, if that makes any sense. (Daisy) – **It's good** – **Communication**

So, it was a lot of time for us to really get through the bumps in our marriage, learning to communicate with each other those first couple of years, where things can be a little bit difficult or challenging. So, just really learning to bring that courtship into our marriage and really understanding each other and how we function as a couple. It really helped to set a foundation for us, and I can kind of know exactly how my husband's going to respond to certain things. (Farrah) – **We built a strong base before our daughter was born** – **Communication**

So basically, the communication skills. Mm-hmm. And where I would say talk about it. And, and if you need to seek answers, go to someone, counselor. Somebody that won't take both, both sides. (Kayla) – **Communication skills**

Results for Sub-Question Three: Theme Two, Adult Attachment Style, and IWM.

Depend, close, and anxiety were the adult attachment styles of the respondents who communicated the importance of communication relating to relationship satisfaction. Communication is such a central component of any relationship that it was not surprising that it was important to all adult attachment styles. Additionally, the IWM classifications for the respondents under this theme were stable, supportive, and caring. As youths, these respondents lived in stable home environments and received support from people inside or outside the home. They may have been exposed to good communication during their youth and were trying to replicate this, albeit with some challenges, in their marriage.

Theme Three: Quality Time. The final theme that reflected what was important for relationship satisfaction among military spouses was quality time. Like communication, quality time was a necessary component of spousal support, as noted from the quotations where respondents said that supporting their activities was important. Hedi reflected the connection

between quality time and supporting one another by saying, "I just know he, he will always read, he will always want to learn things and experience new things. We love adventure and travel and have a love of the same things." Being a military family where one or both spouses were deployed in the field for months at a time gave spouses a great appreciation for quality time spent together (see Table 15):

> It does make a difference that we're a military family, that with several deployments and geographical bachelor and bachelorette, as they say in the military world, that really has for me, made me be more aware of when we are spending time together, that it is quality time, and it's time worthwhile to. Whereas, I think if we were, I don't know, back in Atlanta seeing each other every day, I don't think that, and I could be wrong, but I just don't think that I would be as intentional with everything to be honest, because I think it would be a point where it's like, oh yeah, it's the mundane. (Gina)

Table 15

Theme Three: Quality Time

Yeah. But I will get a caveat. So, fulfilled to me means a final, a static position. And, and in that respect, we're not. Yeah, that's true. We're still doing things together. We're still learning things together. (Asa) – **Satisfaction is not stagnant** – **Quality Time**

I can give you a couple examples. First, I discovered that my husband used to sing rock music to himself during mass as a teenager to get through it. I thought it was hilarious. I shared it with my kids. Hmm. But we were, <laugh> we were just chatting, and he's like, I used to sing this <laugh>. (Audrey) – **Learn new things about each other**

Hey look, we always do what you want to do, but what about what I want to do? And I had to step back and say that is true. So, things like I don't know how to shoot pool. My husband loves to shoot pool, so sometimes if we can't think of what we are going to do, I'll bring that up and then hopefully encourage him to try to help me learn the best that I can, which he has done. And that's been cool. (Gina) – **Doing what's best for the marriage** – **Quality time**

It does make a difference that we're a military family, that with several deployments and geographical bachelor and bachelorette, as they say in the military world, that really has for me, made me be more aware of when we are spending time together, that it is quality time, and it's time worthwhile to. Whereas, I think if we were, I don't know, back in Atlanta seeing each other every day, I don't think that, and I could be wrong, but I just don't think that I would be as intentional with everything to be honest, because I think it would be a point where it's like, oh yeah, it's the mundane. (Gina) – **Greater appreciate for quality time**

I would say satisfied. And as compared to not satisfied. Yes, dear. There you go. Got, we gotta score points to win. Couple of mutual satisfaction and fulfillment. So, for us, it's the satisfaction of being, being able to spend time around each other. (Harper) – **Satisfied** – **Quality time**

I just know he, he will always read, he will always want to learn things and experience new things. We love adventure and travel and have a love of the same things. (Hedi) – **Doing things together**

Results for Sub-Question Three: Theme Three, Adult Attachment Style, and IWM.

The adult attachment styles associated with quality time were close and depend. As mentioned previously, close measured the extent to which a person is comfortable with closeness and intimacy, and depend measured the extent to which a person feels he/she can depend on others to be available when needed. Both of these attachment styles valued quality time, as they value closeness and believe that they can depend on their spouse to be available when needed. Quality time was necessary for spousal support, which was also valued by those who had a close/depend attachment style. It was worth noting that there were no respondents classified with an anxiety attachment style among those who stated that quality time was important to marital satisfaction.

As with the spousal support theme, all the IWM categories were presented among the respondents who communicated that priority time was important. The IWMs were stable, unstable, supportive, caring, and harsh. Just like with the spousal support theme, those that grew up in stable caring and/or supportive environments may have wanted to replicate the quality time that they experienced from those who cared for and supported them when they were young. For those who experienced unstable and/or harsh environments as youths, they may desire what they did not experience when they were growing up.

Sub-Question Four - How do long-term married couples describe the post-deployment reintegration practices that assist them with mitigating the risk of separation and divorce?

A review of the respondent interviews revealed that there were three themes that addressed sub-question four. These themes were derived from the responses of questions 6 and 7 in the respondent interviews. Question 6 asked: From all the strategies that you shared, what would you consider to be the most instrumental in helping to maintain a long-term, strong relationship? Question 7 asked: Can you explain how these significant strategies give you the ability to overcome marital challenges? The first theme that reflected the strategies that were most instrumental in maintaining a long-term strong relationship was related to the quality of spousal interaction, which was characterized as communication, quality time, and counseling. The second and third themes related to how these significant strategies give couples the ability to overcome marital challenges. The two themes were personal improvements and couple or relationship improvements. The details of all three themes are explored.

Theme One: Quality Spousal Interaction. The first theme, quality spousal interaction, was primarily characterized by communication. A plurality of respondents indicated that

communication was the most instrumental strategy in maintaining a long-term strong

relationship. For example, Falcon stated:

> Definitely communication is top of the list, allowing the other person their own time. Of
>
> course, when she leaves, we're going to miss her, and we're going to want her all to
>
> ourselves when she gets back, and don't leave the room without me, but she has to have
>
> her decompression time once she's back, or vice versa, when I was gone, allowing, don't
>
> be on my hip the whole time. It's more of an individual thing for the group. Does that
>
> make sense?

Another component of quality spousal interaction was quality time. For example, one respondent

stated:

> If I were to add anything to our process, I would like how Irene had mentioned that we go
>
> dance, we go to dance classes together. If I could have done that back then, I would've
>
> thought that that would've been amazing, amazing to go do something only with two of
>
> us that we could go. (Ian)

The final component of quality spousal interaction was counseling. Counseling was described as

using an intermediary to assist individuals and couples to see the relationship more objectively.

For example, it was stated:

> I will go back to like what I said. I, I would say, you know, seek counseling because,
>
> yeah. When you look at yourself in the mirror, you might feel like your stuff doesn't
>
> stink. Mm-hmm. <affirmative> You know what I'm saying? But you can't see where the
>
> other person is coming from. You need a real impartial party like to, to like really sit
>
> down and listen to what's going on, and understand, because you can't talk to your
>
> friends and your family. (Carter)

Table 16 contains the verbatim comments that support the theme, Quality Spousal Interaction.

Table 16

Theme One: Quality Spousal Interaction (Communication/Quality Time/Counseling)

So, just communication and then making time to just spend with the family, right? So, like, I, yeah, I, I'm a, a lot more stressful job now, but like, you know, I try to come home. I don't really ever complain about work. Like, I just tell her funny stories and stuff… (Danny) – **Family time**; **Communication**

Communication. (Daisy) – **Communication**

Definitely communication is top of the list, allowing the other person their own time. Of course, when she leaves, we're going to miss her, and we're going to want her all to ourselves when she gets back, and don't leave the room without me, but she has to have her decompression time once she's back, or vice versa, when I was gone, allowing don't be on my hip the whole time. It's more of an individual thing for the group. Does that make sense? (Falcon) – **Communication; Personal space**

I think it's one thing that really worked for us, in communication. We established our foundation with communication very early on in our relationship. We don't communicate the same way. So, we had to figure out how we communicate as a married couple. And that's something we established a really long time ago that has truly helped with any kind of integration, any kind of, when we leave, any kind of argument, whatever the case may be. I think establishing that communication, how we communicate as a couple or married couple early on was imperative to our foundation and how we deal with integration and absence and things of that nature. (Farrah) – **Communication**

I would say, I just said this for the last one, but I'm really big on the listening and just being able to pick up on just different body from your significant other with different things, and just already knowing without it having to be spoken, it doesn't have to be spoken. (Gina) – **Being a good listener**

I would say it has to be compassionate, effective communication, active listening, reflective listening within the relationship. Because not doing that leads to a lot of misunderstandings. And understanding lacking compassion for your partner is, is, you know, shows a hardness that, you know, we, this is with your partner, this is with the pers, this is your person. (Hedi) – **Communication**

If I were to add anything to our process, I would like how Irene had mentioned that we go dance, we go to dance classes together. If I could have done that back then, I would've thought that that would've been amazing, amazing to go do something only with two of us that we could go. (Ian) – **Quality time**

First, praying, <laugh> and, and, and continue having date nights. (Kayla) – **Prayer and date nights** – **Quality time**

And communicating with each other. Do little things. You don't have to go and buy anything. You know, you, you know, hey, write something on a piece of paper or whatever. (Kayla) – **Communication**

I will go back to like what I said. I, I would say, you know, seek counseling because yeah. When you look at yourself in the mirror, you might feel like your stuff don't stink. Mm-hmm. <affirmative> You know what I'm saying? But you can't see where the other person is coming from. You need a real impartial party like to, to like really sit down, and listen to what's going on, and understand, because you can't talk to your friends and your family… (Carter) – **Counseling**

Yeah, I agree with Mr. C, I, I forgot about the counseling. <laugh> That is a good, that is a good strategy. Mm-hmm. <affirmative> And, and he's right. You know, you do have to work on yourself as you're working together as a team, you know, to make a better, a better product to come into one. So, I think that one of the best strategies is counseling individuals and couples. Mm-hmm. <affirmative> Counseling. (Cindy) – **Counseling**

I wouldn't say strategy per se. We've had to go for couples therapy just to, sort of, have a third party helping us navigate the new dynamics of our relationship. (Emma) – **Couple's therapy**

For me, I have always known that if we had any conflict in the marriage, I absolutely will be the one to blame because Emma is almost like a perfect person. And, so, the strategy for me has been to just accept whatever she wants us to try out to make this work. So, because I'm not a big fan of therapy, I'm not a big fan of city doubt [sitting down] talk about things, but now I have to try to do these things because it means something for her, and it mean that it'll help with it. And, so far, I think it did help, even though I was stubborn at first. (Evan) – **Couple's counseling**

Results for Sub-Question Four: Theme One, Adult Attachment Style, and IWM. For respondents with all the attachment styles, including close, depend, and anxiety, quality spousal interaction was the important in assisting with mitigating the risk of separation and divorce. This was similar to couples who stated that spousal support was the most important element for marital satisfaction. Those with a close or depend attachment style may have been looking to replicate the good communication and quality time they experienced from those who provided them with support during their youth. Respondents with an anxiety attachment style were afraid that they will be abandoned, so improving spousal interaction may be critical to minimizing their fear of abandonment.

All the IWM categories were represented among those who communicated that quality spousal interaction was important in assisting with mitigating the risk of separation and divorce. Those with IWMs of stable, supportive, and caring may have been looking to replicate the quality spousal support they experienced as youths either within their families or in other families. Spouses who experienced harsh and or unstable environments when they were younger, may rely on these interactions to provide a sense of ease and stability in the marriage. The fact that all IWMs were represented here revealed the universal importance of quality spousal interaction to mitigate the risk of separation and divorces.

Theme Two: Personal Improvements. Another theme reflected how strategies gave the ability to mitigate the risk of separation and divorce. The second theme was personal improvements. The most-noted personal improvement among married individuals was tolerance.

Tolerance took on many forms. One form was greater understanding. For example, Audrey stated:

> Instead of me resenting the time away from me and the kids, my understanding that this was important to him, it was important for his physical health, for his mental health. Right. That made him happy. Literally, it made him happy. Right. Helped me to see that this was important to him and to prioritize it and, and to not resent it. So, understanding them helps me to, to see a way that I can be happy by making him happy, if that makes sense.

Another form of tolerance was giving your partner the benefit of the doubt:

> It's giving my wife the benefit of the doubt instead of when she does something that irritates me, instead of looking at it as she's doing this against me, she's doing this to me. She wants to offend me. I give her the benefit of the doubt. I try to look at it from a positive side, like my wife said. I try to understand, okay, why'd she does this? 'cause she knows I don't like this. I don't take it personally. You know? (Asa)

Yet another form of tolerance was acceptance that people change:

> And then the other strategy I'll say is allow people to be who they are. Oftentimes, with deployments, and we learn this, it was, we're together, we're apart, we're together, we're apart, we're together, we're apart. Hey, we're moving again. We're together, we're apart. And that puts a lot of stress on both people. But when you come back together, that person changes. Because that's just the natural course of life. Hedi has changed over the years. I have changed over the years. But allowing each other to grow, make mistakes, pursue their hobbies or interests, whether it be education, doing, running, whatever the case may be, allowing that person to grow and be who they are, and embracing that and

encouraging that instead of stifling it or, or not being happy with them changing because

you don't necessarily like it. (Harper)

Table 17 contains verbatim examples of personal improvements remarks that were made during

the semi-structured interviews.

Table 17

Theme Two: Personal Improvements

Instead of me resenting the time away from me and the kids, my understanding that this was important to him, it was important for his physical health, for his mental health. Right. That made him happy. Literally, it made him happy. Right. Helped me to see that this was important to him and to prioritize it and, and to not resent it. So, understanding them helps me to, to see a way that I can be happy by making him happy, if that makes sense. (Audrey) – **Understanding spouse's needs makes me more tolerant**

It's giving my wife the benefit of the doubt instead of when she does something that irritates me, instead of looking at it as she's doing this against me, she's doing this to me. She wants to offend me. I give her the benefit of the doubt. I try to look at it from a positive side, like my wife said. I try to understand, okay, why'd she does this? 'cause she knows I don't like this. I don't take it personally. You know? (Asa) – **I don't take my wife's bothersome actions personally – Give her the benefit of the doubt – More tolerant**

But as a female who is not physical and who is diabetic, those are not options for me. Yeah. Mmm. Right. But in, in, in, in our society and the way I was taught, I just kind of let that go. But when I wanted to do something that wasn't good, like go to McDonald's, I felt guilty. Husband did this in full view of everybody. Right. And he is like, what? I like it. Right. But as a female, I felt guilty. Hmm. And I would hide it. So, what I had to learn is I have a right to happiness as well. Hmm. And so finally one day, when he's like, you know, went to McDonald's. <laugh> Yeah. (Audrey) – **I'm less judgmental – My happiness is important too**

Okay. I, I would say for, for me I would say just it, it helped me to try to be more understanding and to also, you know, take a, a deeper look at myself and try to evaluate the things that I could work on and try to do better. Because, you know, and you might think that, hey, I'm doing everything right, or I'm, at least I'm trying, but maybe like, what you're trying isn't, you know, you giving your all… (Carter) – **Allow me to be more self-ware and improve**

I think some of the biggest strategies that therapy has given me is self-reflection. Mm-hmm. <affirmative> And communication. So, you know, as a person that had a lot of childhood trauma, I kept a lot of that stuff tucked away into a little corner inside of my brain that mm-hmm. <affirmative> Did not allow me to think about it. That was my, that was my reaction to cover up as if it didn't happen. (Cindy) – **I'm more self-aware and have better communication**

Before I started therapy. You know, my, at the time, my response was to fight to be negative, to protect my internal child's self. And so, those were the tools that therapy gave me. We have done couples' therapy I think twice, but we've done more individual therapy than we've done couples' therapy. And so, you know, that's why I go back to same thing that he said, you have to work on yourself before you can work on each other as, as one. (Cindy) – **Therapy allows me to deal with personal issues**

I know my husband, I don't have, I've never felt in any way that he would intentionally do anything to hurt me. And for me, that's pretty significant. Knowing that I trust him, I understand him. Even if we can't talk right now, I don't think that anything that we're going through, like he said, is not solvable. (Farrah) – **I believe every problem has a solution**

Yeah, marriage has evolved and just knowing that I trust that when we're dealing with something, he's not intentionally trying to hurt me. (Farrah) – **Our marriage has evolved – I give him the benefit of the doubt that he's not trying to hurt me**

Just having that open communication while I'm trying to get that understanding, that was a big challenge for us. I'm just speaking for myself and from my view that I just didn't understand the concept of, wait a second, I thought you're supposed to get off at this time. So once again, just having that open communication once again. (Gina) – **Open communication gives me greater understanding.**

Yeah, I would add patience as well. I would add patience as well because kind to go off of what my wife was saying, not understanding the military lifestyle. I'm doing it so I get used to it pretty quick in the beginning, definitely, but that's not the case for your spouse. So, it's almost sometimes it gets to a point to where it's like, man, you should understand this by now. But that's not how it goes when it's the other person looking at the situation. So, it's just like, man, you was just there till this time, and you got to do that again tomorrow. (George) – **I have greater patience**

But the, the strategy is to make sure you use the right words and give the, give the right impression. And I'll give an example. If Hedi and I are having a disagreement, or we're having a discussion, and I don't like the way it's going, oftentimes, early in our relationship, I would say, I don't care. And what I was sim civilizing to her is, it's not that I, I don't, it's, I don't care. It's not, it's not about whatever that moment is. It's, I don't, I don't care to listen to her. (Harper) – **Make sure I use the right words**

And then the other strategy I'll say is allow people to be who they are. Oftentimes with deployments, and we learn this, it was, we're together, we're apart, we're together, we're apart, we're together, we're apart. Hey, we're moving again. We're together, we're apart. And that puts a lot of stress on both people. But when you come back together, that person changes. Because that's just the natural course of life. Hedi has changed over the years. I have changed over the years. But allowing each other to grow, make mistakes, pursue their hobbies or interests, whether it be education, doing, running, whatever the case may be, allowing that person to grow and be who they are, and embracing that and encouraging that instead of stifling it or, or not being happy with them changing because you don't necessarily like it. (Harper) – **Accept that people change and grow over time and that's ok**

Results for Sub-Question Four: Theme Two, Adult Attachment Style, and IWM.

Those from across the attachment style spectrum expressed experiencing personal improvements as a result of the strategies used to mitigate the risk of separation and divorce. The attachment styles included depend, close, and anxiety. There was no expectation that one attachment style would experience more personal improvements than the others. This was the same position for the IWMs. The IWMs that were represented by the respondents who stated they had experienced personal improvements were stable, unstable, care, and supportive.

Theme Three: Relationship Improvements. Not only were there individual improvements resulting from the post-deployment reintegration practices that assisted marital couples with mitigating the risk of separation and divorce, but there were also relationship improvements as well. Some of the relationship improvements that were noted dealt with communication. For example:

And I, I think more it's, it's a growth thing for speaking up, saying how I feel about certain situations and giving him the opportunity, allowing him to share what he's

thinking, his thoughts on what happened, and just kind of like moving forward to get

back to our foundation. (Belinda)

Other relationship improvements included less hostility towards one another:

We do get pissed off at one another, but I don't tell him to fuck off. He doesn't tell me to

fuck off. I just tell him, oh, I hate this stupid shit. You know? Or, or he does the same

thing. We don't really insult one another. We just, we just really, when we, when, I mean

we, our marriage has never been on a borderline. (Daisy)

Counseling was noted as one of the strategies that helped mitigate the risk of separation and

divorce. The benefits of counseling were that it helped provide strategies to help overcome

conflict: "It's helped us even in moments where we are having maybe conflict, we have better

coping strategies because we are doing the work to sort of understand these evolved versions of

ourselves" (Emma). Improved communication and support were also one of the positive

consequences of implementing strategies that mitigate marital challenges:

I think that sitting down and be able to have, have that communication and talk like that

can help work through it and show support to overcome, to be able to overcome those

challenges and to work through it instead of instead of just ignoring it. (Hedi)

Table 18 contains verbatim comments that describe how implementing strategies to mitigate

separation and divorce benefit the marital relationship.

Table 18

Theme Three: Relationship Improvements

And I, I think more it's, it's a growth thing for speaking up, saying how I feel about certain situations and giving him the opportunity, allowing him to share what he's thinking, his thoughts on what happened, and just kind of like moving forward to get back to our foundation. (Belinda) – **Allows each other to say what's on your mind**

But one of the things you can do with that glass, you can reinforce it, you can sit there, another coat on top of it to prevent it from being chipping, prevent from being, from breaking. You can avoid it. So, you get out in a, a, a hail storm. If you don't want to break your glass, don't go out there. So, again, I think recognition and, and, and prepared to embrace that by prevention measures, avoidance measures can help you overcome them, those strategies. (Blain) – **Makes the relationship more resilient**

We do get pissed off at one another, but I don't tell him to fuck off. He doesn't tell me to fuck off. I just tell him, oh, I hate this stupid shit. You know? Or, or he does the same thing. We don't really insult one another. We just, we just really, when we, when, I mean we, our marriage has never been on a borderline. (Daisy) – **We don't attack one another**

I look at a relationship like a tree, like a plant, however you want to look at it. It comes the roots, it comes the same, it comes the leaves, right? So, a relationship is the soil is everything that sustains everything. And then it's the roots. What are the roots? Communication, trust, same thing with the, the stem or the trunk, love. But you, you don't build a relationship out of love. You build a relationship out of trust. You build a relationship out of communication. You have communication, and you have trust, then you have love, then you have action, you have pretty much anything, like I said, like a plant. (Daisy) – **You build a relationship out of trust and communication, then love comes later**

It's helped us even in moments where we are having maybe conflict, we have better coping strategies because we are doing the work to sort of understand these evolved versions of ourselves. (Emma) – **Counseling has helped us develop coping strategies**

For me, I have always known that if we had any conflict in the marriage, I absolutely will be the one to blame because Emma is almost like a perfect person. And so, the strategy for me has been to just accept whatever she wants us to try out to make this work. So, because I'm not a big fan of therapy, I'm not a big fan of city doubt [sitting down] talk about things, but now I have to try to do these things because it means something for her, and it mean that it'll help with it. And so far, I think it did help, even though I was stubborn at first, didn't want to try these things out, but it made sense to her, and we had to try. (Evan) – **More tolerant of therapy and so far it's helping**

Yeah. I mean, we're going to grow from anything that we go through. (Falcon) – **Every problem has a solution**

I think that sitting down and be able to have, have that communication and talk like that can help work through it and show support to overcome, to be able to overcome those challenges and to work through it instead of instead of just ignoring it. (Hedi) – **Improved communication and support to overcome challenges**

And I piggyback off that just a touch. So, talk about problem solving in walls. The other strategy is you have to, if there's a problem, you have to address it. You can't ignore it. Mm-hmm. <affirmative> And how you address that, too, is a different type of strategy, but one, addressing the problem if there's a problem, whether it be something small or something big. And then two, how you address it is a different type of strategy, whether it be lift, listening, empathy, comfort swift kick in the butt, just depends on what needs to be done based on the problem at hand. (Harper) **– Deal with problems, don't ignore them**

I think putting each other first when I was always taught that the kids come first… (Irene) – **Put your spouse first**

I think that, and it sounds completely the opposite, but if you put the marriage first, somehow the kids realize that's the rock, that's the rock. (Ian) – **Put your marriage first**

But they've seen so much of us and that we do things together. We rely on each other. We stick by each other. And there are a lot of marriages that when they're integrating families that I remember when we were first doing this, and we first got married, there was a military wife who said to me, well, they're not your kids. And I said, they absolutely are my kids. I may have not have given birth to them, but they're my boys, they're my children. And Ian would say that, she's your mother here. She's the woman that's raising you. She is the one. And those boys know, and that could have torn us apart. (Irene) – **We work together and rely on each other**

But the actual post-deployment strategies help you because you, you have that ability to understand that each person, you know can function independently of everything. So, when you give them the space, they do know that, hey, when I'm ready, I can come talk to you. And it also provides an opportunity for both of you to kinda figure out what may have gone wrong, what may have been relayed in the wrong way. (Jackson) – **Giving your partner space helps you overcome marital challenges**

I think just going back to like our communication, just knowing each other, checking in, and at the same time, balancing and knowing like when to give space for people to kind of navigate some things, you know, on their own. And then, when the timing is right to come together to figure out the way ahead. (Jade) – **Giving your partner space helps you overcome marital challenges**

Results for Sub-Question Four: Theme Three, Adult Attachment Style, and IWM.

All three attachment styles were represented among the respondents who noted that they had

experienced relationship improvements. Those with close and depend attachment styles were

comfortable with closeness and intimacy. Therefore, it was not surprising that those with these

attachment styles would experience improvements collectively with their spouse, in addition to

personal improvement. Respondents with an anxiety attachment style were concerned about

abandonment. So, strategies that promote personal improvements in overcoming marital

challenges may be less important than strategies that promote improvements in both spouses and

the relationship in general. Seeing improvements in the relationship may ease their anxiety

around being abandoned by their partner.

All IWM categories were represented among the respondents for relationship

improvements. They included stable, unstable, caring, supportive, and harsh. It was expected that

all IWMs would describe how relationship improvements would help couples overcome marital

challenges. For example, those who grew up in a stable, supportive, and caring environment may

desire relationship improvements as much as they value individual improvements. Also, those

who grew up in unstable and/or harsh environments may prefer seeing relationship

improvements that are reflected in the relationship than in any single individual, seeing how they may not have witnessed this as youths.

Summary

This study's participants consisted of 12 military married couples, where one spouse was either an active-duty or veteran military service member. The married couples were ethnically diverse. The age range of the couples was between 18–64 years. The majority (n = 9) of the military personnel in these marital relationships were veterans. Finally, a majority (n = 9) of the married couples were Army families.

There were three data collection activities: pre-interview assessment, semi-structured recorded interviews, and reflective journal exercises. The semi-structured interviews were used to first complete the adult attachment scale (AAS) and then the semi-structured interview questions. Finally, the reflective journal exercises were completed and submitted to the researcher after the semi-structured interviews. Data collection occurred between October 8–December 6, 2023. Respondent semi-structured interviews lasted on average 50 minutes. After the all the data was collected, adult attachment style scores were computed for each individual spouse. There were three classifications for adult attachment styles. They were close, depend, and anxiety. Those whose highest scale score was close were comfortable with closeness and intimacy. Those whose highest scale score was depend believed they can depend on others to be available when needed. Finally, those who scored the highest score on the anxiety scale were worried about being abandoned or unloved.

There were four research sub-questions. The first sub-question asked: How do long-term married couples explain their IWM and adult attachment style? An IWM was defined as the mental representation that guides how people perceive themselves and is based on childhood

experiences. These classifications were based on thematic analysis of the reflective journals. The results indicated that the IWM classifications were stable (n=13), unstable (n =7), caring (n =5), supportive (n = 8), and harsh (n = 5). Those classified as stable grew up with stable family relationships, stable friendships, and general consistency in their lives. Unstable was assigned to those who moved often when they were young or lived in foster care. Caring was classified as those who were close with family members. Those with a supportive designation received support as a child from outside the nuclear family. Finally, harsh was those who experienced violence, exposure to deaths, bullying, and abuse as youths.

The second part of sub-question one was answered using the Adult Attachment Style survey (AAS). There were three adult attachment style classifications: close, depend, and anxiety. A close attachment style was a person who is comfortable with closeness and intimacy. A depend attachment style was a person who feels he/she can depend on others to be available when needed. Finally, an anxiety attachment style is a person who is worried about being abandoned or unloved. Results indicated that 16 spouses were close, three spouses were classified as depend, and five were classified under anxiety.

Sub-question two asked: How do long-term married couples conceptualize their romantic love based on their IWM and adult attachment style? The results revealed that three themes were discovered from the respondent interviews. There were two themes that emerged that reflected a positive conceptualization of romantic love and one theme that described a more friendship-based conceptualization of romantic love. The first theme that reflected a positive conceptualization or romantic love was focused on the happiness of the other person through romantic activities. The couples who conveyed this position stressed the importance of putting your spouse first and doing romantic things as a couple. The respondents who commented about

focusing on the happiness of the other person through romantic activities had IWMs from their youth that were stable environments, caring environments, and supportive environments. So, it could be argued that these respondents were trying to replicate in their current relationships what they experienced as children. The attachment styles associated with the couples under this theme were close/depend, close/close, and anxiety/close. Those with an anxiety attachment style were worried about being abandoned or unloved and sought assurance from their spouse, who had a close attachment style. Those classified as close and depend were comfortable in relationships and would not have had difficulty focusing on the happiness of the other person and engaging in romantic activities with their spouse.

The second theme that reflected a positive conceptualization of romantic love was emotional connection between spouses. Emotional connection was characterized as being aware of your spouse's feelings and needs. The respondents who emphasized emotional connection between spouses as it related to defining romantic love, had an IWM of stable, supportive, unstable, and harsh. Being aware of one's feelings and needs may have been more important to those who grew up in unstable and harsh environments. They may have sought to have stability and support through the relationship of a non-family member (i.e., spouse), which was similar to what they experienced when they were young. The attachment style for all those who promoted the importance of emotional connection between spouses was close. Specifically, the spousal profiles were close/depend, close/anxiety, and close/close. Given the emphasis of the close attachment style on the emotional connection in the marriage, the spouse with a close attachment style was an ideal partner for people with the depend and anxiety attachment styles.

The third theme reflected a less romanticized notion of love. It was friendship first/romantically challenged. These people consistently emphasized friendship between the

couples more than romance, dating, or even an emotional connection. Those with an anxiety attachment style were worried about being abandoned and unloved. So, it made sense that their emphasis would be on friendship rather than building an emotional connection or engaging in romantic acts. Those who chose the friendship first definition of romantic love may have been looking for the safe and stable choice in the marriage. Stability may be appealing to these couples, as the majority (n=7) had an IWM of stable. Focusing on friendship in marriage may be foundational and a way to manage expectations around romance, love, and intimacy.

The third sub-question was: How do long-term married couples conceptualize their relationship satisfaction based on their IWM and adult attachment style? The results indicated that three themes were produced from the married couple interviews. The first theme was my spouse supports me. The couples indicated that receiving and/or giving support to their spouse was central to relationship satisfaction. Of the respondents who communicated the importance of spousal support, the IWMs were stable, unstable, caring, supportive, and harsh. Regarding adult attachment styles, the respondent classifications were depend, close, and anxiety. Since all categories of adult attachment style and IWM were represented, it appeared that regardless of the adult attachment style or IWM, spousal support was the key to relationship satisfaction.

The second theme related to relationship satisfaction was the ability to communicate with each other. Results of the thematic analysis indicated that depend, close, and anxiety were the adult attachment styles of the respondents who communicated the importance of communication relating to relationship satisfaction. Communication is such a central component of any relationship that it was not surprising that all attachment styles would appreciate its importance. The IWM classifications for the respondents under this theme were stable, supportive, and

caring. It may be that these respondents were trying to replicate the stable, supportive, and caring environments in which they grew up.

Quality time was the third and final theme for sub-question three that was deemed important to relationship satisfaction among military spouses. The adult attachment styles associated with quality time were close and depend. Both of these attachment styles valued quality time, as they valued closeness and believed that they could depend on their spouse to be available when needed. All the IWM categories were presented among the respondents who communicated that priority time was important. Those that grew up in stable caring and/or supportive environments may have wanted to replicate the quality time they experienced from those who cared for and supported them when they were young. For those who experienced unstable and/or harsh environments as youths, they may have desired what they did not experience when they were growing up.

The fourth and final sub-question was: How do long-term married couples describe the post-deployment reintegration practices that assist them with mitigating the risk of separation and divorce. The first theme, quality spousal interaction, was primarily characterized by communication. Results indicated that quality spousal interaction was the most important for respondents with all the attachment styles, including close, depend, and anxiety. Improving spousal interaction may be critical to minimizing their fear of abandonment among those with the anxiety attachment style. Those with a close or depend attachment style may have been looking to replicate the good communication and quality time they experienced from those who provided them with support during their youth. Those with IWMs of stable, supportive, and caring may have been looking to replicate quality spousal support they experienced as youths, either within their families or in other families. Spouses who experienced harsh and or unstable

environments when they were younger, may have relied on these interactions to provide a sense of ease and stability in the marriage.

The second theme that reflected the post-deployment reintegration practices that assist with mitigating the risk of separation and divorce, was personal improvement. The most noted personal improvement among married individuals was tolerance. People from all attachment styles expressed experiencing personal improvements as a result of the strategies used to mitigate the risk of separation and divorce. There was no expectation that one attachment style would experience more personal improvements than the others. This was the same position for the IWM. The IWMs that were represented by the respondents who stated that they had experienced personal improvements were stable, unstable, care, and supportive.

The third theme related to mitigating the risk of separation and divorce was relationship improvements. The main relationship improvements that were noted dealt with communication, less hostility towards one another, and marital counseling. All three attachment styles were represented among the respondents who noted that they had experienced relationship improvements. Those with close and depend attachment styles were comfortable with closeness and intimacy. Respondents with an anxiety attachment style may have emphasized strategies that promoted improvements in both spouses and the relationship in general. Seeing improvements in the relationship may have eased their anxiety around being abandoned by their partner.

The final chapter consists of a discussion of the results. The results are discussed in the context of the theoretical framework and the literature review. The implications and recommendations for future research are also discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study was to discover how long-term military married couples, married for 10 or more years, mitigated the risk of separation and divorce after experiencing multiple post-deployment reintegration phases at military installations in Georgia. There are several sections in this chapter. The first section is the summary of findings. This section contains a summary of the findings found in Chapter Four related to the research questions. The second section is the discussion section. In this section, the results of the study are discussed in the context of the theoretical framework, adult attachment style and internal working models (IWMs), and the literature from Chapter Two. The third section reviews the theoretical, practical, and empirical implications of the study. The next section is the delimitations and limitations section. Recommendations for future research follows, and the final section in this chapter is the chapter summary.

Summary of Findings

The central research question under investigation was: How do long-term married couples describe their internal working models (IWMs) and adult attachment styles, which (1) conceptualize their romantic love and relationship satisfaction lived experiences as well as (2) describe the common meanings and shared practices that assist them with mitigating the risk of separation and divorce? This central question was addressed using four research sub-questions. The research questions and the associated findings follow.

Sub-Question One

The first sub-question asked: How do long-term married couples explain their IWMs and adult attachment style? The results indicated that there were five IWM classifications: stable,

unstable, caring, supportive, and harsh. Unstable was assigned to those who moved often when they were young or lived in foster care. Caring was classified as those who were close with family members. Those with a supportive designation received support as a child from outside the nuclear family. Harsh were those who experienced violence, exposure to deaths, bullying, and abuse as youths. Finally, those classified as stable grew up with stable family relationships, stable friendships, and general consistency in their lives.

There were three adult attachment style classifications: close, depend, and anxiety. A close attachment style was a person who is comfortable with closeness and intimacy. A depend attachment style was a person who feels he/she can depend on others to be available when needed. Finally, an anxiety attachment style was a person who is worried about being abandoned or unloved.

Sub-Question Two

Sub-question two asked: How do long-term married couples conceptualize their romantic love based on their IWM and adult attachment style? The results revealed three themes that were discovered from the respondent interviews. The first theme that reflected a positive conceptualization or romantic love was focusing on the happiness of the other person through romantic activities. The couples who conveyed this position stressed the importance of putting your spouse first and doing romantic things as a couple. The second theme that reflected a positive conceptualization of romantic love was emotional connection between spouses. Emotional connection was characterized as being aware of your spouse's feelings and needs. The third theme reflected a less romanticized notion of love. It was friendship first/romantically challenged. These people consistently emphasized friendship between the couples more than romance, dating, or even an emotional connection.

Sub-Question Three

The third sub-question was: How do long-term married couples conceptualize their relationship satisfaction based on their IWM and adult attachment style? This sub-question produced three themes. The first theme was my spouse supports me. The couples indicated that receiving and or giving support to their spouse is central to relationship satisfaction. The second theme related to relationship satisfaction was the ability to communicate with each other. Results of the thematic analysis indicated that the depend, close, and anxiety were the adult attachment styles of the respondents who discussed the importance of communication relating to relationship satisfaction. The third and final theme for sub-question three was quality time. The adult attachment styles associated with quality time were close and depend. Both of these attachment styles would value quality time, as they value closeness and believe that they can depend on their spouse to be available when needed.

Sub-Question Four

The fourth sub-question asked how long-term married couples describe the post-deployment reintegration practices that assist them with mitigating the risk of separation and divorce. There were three themes generated from this sub-question. The first theme was quality spousal interaction, primarily characterized by communication. Results indicated that quality spousal interaction was the most important for respondents with all the attachment styles, including close, depend, and anxiety. The second theme that reflected the post-deployment reintegration practices that assist with mitigating the risk of separation and divorce, was personal improvement. The third theme related to mitigating the risk of separation and divorce was relationship improvements. The main relationship improvements that were noted dealt with communication, less hostility towards one another, and marital counseling.

Discussion

In this section, the results are discussed first in the context of the theoretical framework. A description of adult attachment style is first provided, followed by the results that were expected based on the adult attachment style theory. Next, the results are compared to what was expected and an indication is made whether the results aligned or did not align with what was expected. This was the same process followed by research from the literature review. The research is summarized, and expectations are made about the results that were produced. The actual results of the study are compared to what was expected based on the research from the literature review. A statement is then made on whether the results supported or did not support what was expected.

Theoretical Framework

Adult attachment theory, initially developed by Bowlby in the 1950's, proposed that individuals develop specific attachment bonds based on their early experiences (Bowlby, 1958; 1969; 1973; 1977). There were two attachment styles that were relevant for this study from Bowlby's initial framework. They were the secure attachment style and insecure attachment style, which encompasses anxious, avoidant, and disorganized attachment styles. Yip et al. (2018) suggested that the secure adult attachment style can predict a couple's inner resources and self-sufficiency. Additionally, Bergeron et al. (2019) found that individuals with a secure adult attachment exhibit stronger resilience, commitment, and positive engagement in their relationships. Attachment styles characterized by insecurity can challenge establishing and maintaining a secure, trusting relationship with others. Molero et al. (2016) noted that insecure attachments, including anxious, avoidant, and disorganized attachment styles, often struggle with how they are perceived in relationships and feel apprehensive about intimacy and abandonment.

In this study, the adult attachment style instrument evaluated close, depend, and anxiety attachment styles. Close and depend are considered different types of secure attachment style, and anxiety is considered an insecure attachment style. The close scale measured the extent to which a person is comfortable with closeness and intimacy, which aligned with the secure attachment style. The depend scale measured the extent to which a person feels he/she can depend on others to be available when needed. This reflected the aspect of secure attachment that relates to commitment and positive engagement.

Sub-Question One

The first sub-question asked: How do long-term married couples explain their IWM and adult attachment style? Chui and Leung (2016) indicated that assessing internal working models and attachment styles is critical to studying long-term interpersonal relationships. This emphasis can align with previous research by Konrath et al. (2014), which indicated that there had been a decrease in secure attachment style in the U.S. population from 1988 (48.98%) to 2011 (41.62%). As such, the decision and commitment to sustain a long-term marriage were influenced by the unique characteristics and dynamics of the two individuals involved in the relationship (Stahnke, 2023). Therefore, it was expected that long-term married couples would explain their attachment styles similarly to the general population, and the percentage of respondents with a secure attachment style would be approximately 41%. Of the 24 respondents, 19 respondents had either a close or depend adult attachment style, which are considered secure attachments styles. This translated to 79%, which was above the 41% level in the population. Therefore, the expected distribution of secure attachment was not aligned with the anticipated results.

Sub-Question Two

This sub-question asked: How do long-term married couples conceptualize their romantic love based on their IWM and adult attachment style? Most of the respondents in this study had a secure attachment style, either close or depend. These secure adult attachment style relationships flourished due to the establishment of trust, dependability, effective communication, critical thinking skills, and the ability to manage emotions effectively based on their childhood experiences with primary attachment figures (Bedair et al., 2020; Collins, 2017). Therefore, it was expected that respondents would conceptualize their romantic love in positive ways, where trust, dependability, and effective communication were important ingredients.

The first theme that resulted from the qualitative analysis was focusing on the happiness of the other person through romantic activities. The second theme was emotional connection between spouses. Emotional connection was characterized as being aware of your spouse's feelings and needs. The third theme reflected a less romanticized notion of love. It was friendship first/romantically challenged. These themes reflected a positive conceptualization of romantic love that aligned with the adult attachment style theory reflected by those with secure attachment. Therefore, the results aligned with what was expected from the theory.

Sub-Question Three

The third sub-question asked: How do long-term married couples conceptualize their relationship satisfaction based on their IWM and adult attachment style? Zagefka et al. (2021) discovered that for those with a secure attachment style, life satisfaction was associated with attachment to a romantic partner. A secure attachment style provides a foundation of trust and satisfaction in married couples relationships. Additionally, individuals with a secure adult attachment exhibit stronger resilience, commitment, and positive engagement in their

relationships (Bergeron et al., 2019). Therefore, it was expected that the characteristics of trust, commitment, and positive engagement would be reflected in the themes produced to address this research question.

The first resulting theme was my spouse supports me. This aligned with the commitment characteristic of secure attachment. The second theme related to relationship satisfaction was the ability to communicate with each other. This aligned with positive engagement of the secure adult attachment style. The third and final theme was quality time. This also aligned with positive engagement. Therefore, the results for sub-question three aligned with what was expected based on the secure adult attachment style.

Sub-Question Four

The final sub-question asked how long-term married couples describe the post-deployment reintegration practices that assist them with mitigating the risk of separation and divorce. Given that adults with a secure attachment style are characterized as having trust, commitment, positive engagement, dependability, effective communication, critical thinking skills, and the ability to manage emotions effectively, it was expected that the post-deployment reintegration strategies would be constructive and effective. Specifically, these strategies should have reflected good communication, and problem-solving skills that come from good critical thinking skills. These strategies should have also included a commitment to overcoming challenges.

There were three themes produced to address this research sub-question. The first theme, quality spousal interaction, was the most important for respondents with all the attachment styles, including close, depend, and anxiety. This aligned with the positive engagement characteristic that was noted among those with a secure attachment style. The second theme that

reflected the post-deployment reintegration practices that assist with mitigating the risk of separation and divorce was personal improvement. Personal improvement aligned with the characteristics of commitment, as one is committed to the relationship, and the problem-solving skills to improve oneself to make the relationship better. The third theme related to mitigating the risk of separation and divorce was relationship improvements. Again, this aligned with both commitment and problem-solving skills that allow the spouses to work together to improve the relationship. The main relationship improvements that were noted dealt with communication, less hostility towards one another, and marital counseling. This aligned with the ability of those with a secure attachment style to manage emotions effectively. Therefore, the results aligned with what was expected.

Empirical Discussion

ECOD Post-Deployment Reintegration Phase

Research by Wood et al. (2019) extended Pincus et al.'s (2001) emotional cycles of deployment (ECOD) phases by examining how adult attachment styles may affect relationship during the various cycles. As mentioned previously, there are five deployment stages under Wood et al.'s (2019) system: pre-deployment, deployment, sustainment, redeployment and post-deployment. The research indicated that those with an anxious attachment style, which is a sub-category of the insecure attachment style, may display excessive worry about being separated and worry about their spouse's safety. During the deployment phase, those with avoidant attachment styles, another sub-category of insecure attachment style, may desire greater independence and suppress their emotions to cope with separation. Those with an anxious attachment style may go from anxious to relieved during the sustainment phase as they establish new routines, leading to a sense of control over changes related to the recent deployment. When

redeployment occurs in phase four, those with anxious attachment patterns may require close physical presence and comforting connections to others for emotional support. In phase five, during post-deployment, those with an avoidant attachment style may need time to recover before feeling ready to commit again fully. This can cause a strain in the marital relationship. Based on this research, it was expected that those with an insecure attachment style (e.g., anxious and avoidant) would have more marital difficulties during these phases than those with secure attachment styles, and that long-term married couples would be more likely to have secure adult attachment styles.

Sub-Question One

The question under investigation for sub-question one was: How do long-term married couples explain their IWM and adult attachment style? The results indicated that most of the long-term military married couples had a secure adult attachment style. Additionally, the IWMs associated with the secure attachment style were stable and supportive. These findings aligned with what was expected from the research of Wood et al. (2019), where persons with insecure adult attachment styles experienced difficulties with their marital relationships more than those with a secure adult attachment style. It was not expected that a majority of long-term married couples would have insecure attachment styles.

Sub-Question Two

Sub-question two asked: How do long-term married couples conceptualize their romantic love based on their IWM and adult attachment style? The themes revealed that focusing on the happiness of the other spouse, having an emotional connection with their spouse, and having a relationship built on friendship first were the key ideas around romantic loves. Wood et al. (2019) indicated that those with an insecure attachment style would express excessive worry

before deployment and an increase in intimacy troubling during post-deployment compared to those with a secure attachment style. Therefore, the findings of the current study aligned with what was expected from the literature.

Sub-Question Three

Sub-question three addressed: How do long-term married couples conceptualize their relationship satisfaction based on their IWM and adult attachment style? The results of the current study indicated that the conceptualization of romantic marriage was relatively positive. For example, the three themes were: my spouse supports me, the ability to communicate with one each other, and spending quality time with one another. Research by Wood et al. (2019) revealed how those with an insecure attachment style would have more challenges with communication and intimacy at various phases of deployment than those with a secure attachment style. The current study reflected more positive concepts of relationship satisfaction, which was expected from those with a secure adult attachment style. Therefore, the findings aligned with what was expected from the literature.

Sub-Question Four

The final question explored: How do long-term married couples describe the post-deployment reintegration practices that assist them with mitigating the risk of separation and divorce? Quality spousal interaction and personal and relationship improvements characterized the responses given to mitigate post-deployment reintegration challenges. These were the strategies that were used among long-term married military spouses. Conversely, research by Wood et al. (2019) noted more challenges during post-deployment among those with an insecure attachment style compared to those with a secure attachment style. Therefore, the result aligned

with what was expected, as the strategies were adaptive because the couples were still married, and the majority of respondents had a secure attachment style.

Reintegration Phase Relationship Stressors

The literature review included studies that reviewed mental and emotional stressors experienced by long-term married military couples who have experienced multiple deployments. Military-related stress often makes it difficult for military spouses to meet each other's emotional needs. O'Neal and Lavner (2022) noted that, in general, military life can increase stress levels for married couples. Concerning mental stressors, Knobloch et al. (2018) discovered that some military service members can experience a variety of mental health symptoms, such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These stressors can negatively impact all five phases of deployment (Messecar, 2017). For example, research has found that post-deployment stressors can increase based on how military spouses perceive the mental health outcomes of returning service members (Mallonee et al., 2020). Regarding emotional stressors, during reintegration, some couples report feeling distant and detached from their spouses. The negative experience may trigger intense emotional responses (Bakhurst et al., 2018; Clark et al., 2018). Unfulfilled needs, emotional instability, and reestablishing connection are concerns that may develop during reintegration (Wolf et al., 2017). These mental and emotional stressors put a strain on marital relationships and increase the likelihood of divorce (O'Neal & Lavner, 2022). Therefore, it was expected that long-term military married couples who have experienced multiple deployments would have developed strategies to minimize the negative effects of mental and emotional stressors related to the deployment phases.

Sub-Question One. Compared to the close and depend attachment styles (secure adult attachment styles), the anxiety adult attachment style (insecure adult attachment) were more

susceptible to the negative effects of emotional and psychological stressors. This was because the root of the anxiety attachment style is the anxiety of being abandoned and unloved. Therefore, the stressors associated with deployment may exacerbate this anxiety and make the prospectus of a long-term military marriage less likely than those who have a secure adult attachment style. In the current study, those with a secure attachment style far outnumbered those with insecure attachment style. Thus, the findings that addressed the research sub-question, how do long-term married couples explain their IWM and adult attachment style, were aligned with what was expected based on the literature on reintegration phase relationship stressors.

Sub-Question Two. Long-term married military spouses who exhibit a secure attachment style have demonstrated resilience to overcome the mental and emotional challenges that come with the various phases of deployment. This was evident by the fact that they remained married during multiple deployments. Additionally, given this resilience, their conceptualization of romantic love should be relative positive. The inquiry of sub-question two was: How do long-term married couples conceptualize their romantic love based on their IWM and adult attachment style? Results of the current study indicated that long-term married military couples focused on the happiness of their spouse through romantic activities (theme one). They also conceptualized romantic love as an emotional connection between spouses (theme two). Finally, long-term married military spouses emphasized friendship between couples more than romance, dating, and an emotional connection (theme three). Therefore, the results aligned with what was expected based on the research related to the reintegration phase relationship stressors. Their outlook on romantic love indicated that they effectively overcome the perils of these stressors, such as divorce.

Sub-Question Three. Those military spouses who have dealt most effectively with the emotional and psychological stressors of the reintegration phase relationship stressors were expected to have more positive conceptualizations of relationship satisfaction than those who less effectively dealt with these stressors. Results of the sub-question three revealed, as they conceptualized their relationship satisfaction, that their spouse supports them (theme one). They also believed that relationship satisfaction was the ability to communicate effectively with one another (theme two). Finally, they believed that relationship satisfaction encompassed spending quality time with one another (theme three). These attributes of relationship satisfaction aligned with the research on reintegration phase relationship stressors in that the stressors have not altered their experience in a negative way of relationship satisfaction as long-term military married couples.

Sub-Question Four. When long-term married military couples were asked, how do long-term married couples describe the post-deployment reintegration practices that assist them with mitigating the risk of separation and divorce, three themes were produced. These strategies were important because they emanated from those who have proven thus far that they can overcome the emotional and psychological stressors related to reintegration phases that can lead to divorce. Most of these respondents had a secure adult attachment style and were keenly aware, after multiple deployments, of what it takes to make reintegration into the family work. The first theme revealed that quality spousal interaction was important, as was personal improvement (theme two), and relationship improvements (theme three), relating to reintegration practices that assist with mitigating the risk of separation or divorce. Therefore, the results aligned with what was expected based on the previous research on reintegration phase psychological stressors.

Implications

Theoretical Implications

The current research provided strong support for the adult attachment theory, specifically as it related to the secure attachment style. Relationships among those with a secure attachment style from previous research flourished due to the establishment of trust, dependability, effective communication, critical thinking skills, and the ability to manage emotions effectively based on their childhood experiences with primary attachment figures (Bedair et al., 2020). The current research revealed that those with a secure adult attachment style focused on the happiness of the other spouse and were aware of their spouse's feelings and needs. The research also indicated that quality communication and quality time were important to relationship satisfaction among military couples (Carter & Renshaw, 2016a). These characteristics aligned with what was found in other research and supported the theoretical foundation of the adult attachment style.

The foundation of insecure adult attachment also provided theoretical support to the adult attachment style. For example, sub-question two asked: How do long-term married couples conceptualize their romantic love based on their IWM and adult attachment style? Theme three reflected a friendship first/romantically challenged position, where friendship was emphasized between couples more than romance, dating, and an emotional connection. This theme was supported by those with an insecure (anxiety) adult attachment style. It was argued that those with an anxiety attachment style were worried about being abandoned and unloved. So, focusing on friendship rather than building an emotional connection made sense because they were worried about being abandoned and unloved.

Empirical Implications

One of the major findings of the study was the large percentage of respondents who had a secure adult attachment style compared to the general U.S. population. Seventy-nine percent of respondents had a secure adult attachment style, while only 41.6% of adults in the United States have a secure attachment style. This implied that military couples in long-term marriage are far more secure than those in the general population. It would be interesting to see if this sizeable difference is seen in a quantitative study with a larger, more representative sample.

Another important empirical finding in this study was related to sub-question two and the conceptualization of romantic love. One of the themes produced from this sub-question was friendship first/romantically challenged. Here, the emphasis was on friendship over romance, dating, or emotional connection. Love appeared to be more about being committed to marriage than about romance or any of the media-driven notions of being in love that are focused on romance. The implication here was that long-term marital relationships among military personnel can exist without much flair or pomp and circumstance of romance. This perspective must be explored in a larger sample of military couples, as well as long-term married couples who are not in the military.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study lend themselves to several practice implications. For example, the couples provided insights into strategies for reintegrating into the family after post-deployment. One strategy was quality spousal interaction, operationalized as quality communication between spouses. This implied that teaching skills related to quality communication could minimize the challenges of post-deployment reintegration. Being open to both personal and relationship improvements were also strategies that were recommended by the

military spouses to minimize post-deployment reintegration issues. This implied that in couples'

therapy, one of the focuses could be on helping spouses achieve both individual and collective

changes that would result in a better marital relationship.

There were also recommendations for achieving relationship satisfaction between

military couples. One recommendation was to promote the experience that my spouse supports

me. So, from a practical standpoint, therapeutic approaches that help to promote spousal support

could be very beneficial. Promoting quality time and good communication between spouses in

therapy sessions might go a long way to promote relationship satisfaction.

Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations

This study's purpose dictated the delimitations. Specifically, the purpose of this

qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study was to discover how long-term military married

couples, married for 10 or more years, mitigated the risk of separation and divorce after

experiencing multiple post-deployment reintegration phases at military installations in Georgia.

Therefore, the first delimitation was that the respondents were married heterosexual couples. The

second delimitation was that the couples had to be married for at least 10 years, as this was

defined as a long-term marital relationship. The third delimitation was that at least one of the

spouses must have served in multiple deployments throughout their military services. This was

important because the researcher wanted spouses who had more opportunities to experience

reintegration challenges and to develop strategies for dealing with reintegration. The final

delimitation was that at least one of the couples should have just returned from deployment

within the past 12 months of conducting the interview. This was important because it assisted

with the recall of experiences. If the last deployment was several years ago, the circumstances around the deployment and subsequent reintegration may have been difficult to remember.

Limitations

Limitations are potential weaknesses in a study that are mostly out of the researcher's control (Leedy & Omrod, 2018). There were several limitations associated with this qualitative study. The first limitation was the small sample size. Data from smaller samples sizes, in this case, N=12, may have lower reliability than studies containing larger sample sizes. A second limitation associated with the smaller sample sizes of qualitative research compared to quantitative research was that the findings may not be projectable to the larger population of long-term military married couples. The third limitation of the study related to the qualitative inquiry process. Interviews focus on the depth and breadth of a topic by asking detailed questions and following up with probing questions to gain even more detail. However, using this approach does not reveal how prevalent the beliefs and perceptions are among the population from a statistically significance standpoint.

A fourth limitation was related to the data analysis process. Unlike the quantitative approach, which focuses on analyzing numeric data using established and tested data analysis techniques, quantitative data analysis is subjective. Content analysis is more subjective than statistically based approaches, and therefore, less reliable. Additionally, this data analysis approach may not interpret the results with a high degree of accuracy, given the subjective nature of interpretation. To ensure increased accuracy during the data analysis process, the interviews were recorded. Additionally, the researcher provided a robust and detailed account of the respondents' experiences during the data collection process. This aided in both accuracy and transferability.

Recommendations for Future Research

Many of the limitations of the current study were related to the qualitative design. The lack of predictability to the study, the limitations of the qualitative inquiry process, the subjective nature of analysis, the lower reliability, and the smaller samples sizes were all related to the qualitative design. Therefore, the first recommendation was to conduct a quantitative study to determine if the findings of this study, specifically the themes, are projectable to the larger population. Larger sample sizes would be required to improve the reliability and representativeness of the study.

The second recommendation was to use a correlation analysis to determine if the quantified themes are predictive of long-term marriage. The outcome variable in this analysis could be continuous number of years married, or it could be dichotomous, divorced versus not divorced married for at least 10 years.

A third recommendation was to use a sample aggregator that has four to five million people for data collection. This would increase the likelihood of obtaining a sizeable enough sample to complete the quantitative study, as the sample aggregators, like Qualtrics or SurveyMonkey, may have thousands of people who have served in the military.

A fourth recommendation was to replicate this qualitative study among the civilian population to see if the same things are relevant in long-term civilian relations, excluding the reintegration questions as they would not be relevant.

Finally, a fifth recommendation was to determine to what extent these themes are predictive of healthy relationships that are not military based. Are these themes just as important in civilian long-term marriages and non-civilian long-term marriages? This would be assessed by using quantitative study with a civilian population.

Summary

This study was very important for several reasons. First, it contributed to adult attachment style theory in that results of the four sub-questions supported what was expected by the theory. Second, this study provided practical significance in that the long-term married couples provided insight into strategies that bring clarity to how couples should think about key aspects of marital relationships. The study also provided insights on how miliary married couples should approach post-deployment reintegration that mitigates the likelihood of separation and divorce. There were also a few limitations associated with this study. However, the research provided steps to improve upon the current study, thereby reinforcing the value of the study.

It has been said that good research raises more questions, and there are a number of questions still to be answered. For example, is the large proportion of long-term military married couples who have a secure adult attachment style a close approximation of the population? Are the strategies and perceptions of the long-term married military couples shared by the broader long-term married military population? Can the strategies used to mitigate separation and divorce be used by non-military personnel who are married? This study may be the foundation upon which new insights can be developed and explored both in the military and civilian world.

References

Afifi, T. D., Davis, S., Merrill, A. F., Coveleski, S., Denes, A., & Shahnazi, A. F. (2018). Couples' communication about financial uncertainty following the Great Recession and its association with stress, mental health, and divorce proneness. *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, *39*, 205–219. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10834-017-9560-5

Agazio, J., Goodman, P., & Padden, D. (2014). Impact of deployment on military families. *Annual Review of Nursing Research*, *32*(1), 109–133. https://doi.org/10.1891/0739-6686.32.109

Ainsworth, M. D. S., & Bell, S. M. (1970). Attachment, exploration, and separation: Illustrated by the behavior of one-year-olds in a strange situation. *Child Development*, *41*(1), 49–67. https://doi.org/10.2307/1127388

Ainsworth, M. D. S., Blehar, M. C., Waters, E., & Wall, S. N. (1978). *Patterns of attachment: A psychological study of the strange situation.* Lawrence Erlbaum.

Ainsworth, M. D. S., Blehar, M. C., Waters, E., & Wall, S. N. (1979). *Patterns of attachment: A Psychological study of a strange situation.* Psychology Press. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315802428

Ainsworth, M. S. (1979). Infant-mother attachment. *American Psychologist*, *34*(10), 932–937. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.34.10.932

Armey, L., Kniesner, T. J., Leeth, J. D., & Sullivan, R. (2022). Combat, casualties, and compensation: Evidence from Iraq and Afghanistan. *Contemporary Economic Policy*, *40*(1), 66–82. https://doi.org/10.1111/coep.12536

Bakhurst, M., McGuire, A., & Halford, W. K. (2018). Trauma symptoms, communication, and relationship satisfaction in military couples. *Family Process*, *57*(1), 241–252. https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12285

Balderrama-Durbin, C., Cigrang, J. A., Osborne, L. J., Snyder, D. K., Talcott, G. W., Slep, A. M. S., Heyman, R. E., Tatum, J., Baker, M., Cassidy, D., & Sonnek, S. (2015). Coming home: A prospective study of family reintegration following deployment to a war zone. *Psychological Services*, *12*(3), 213–221. https://doi.org/10.1037/ser0000020

Balderrama-Durbin, C., Stanton, K., Snyder, D. K., Cigrang, J. A., Talcott, G. W., Smith Slep, A. M., Heyman, R. E., & Cassidy, D. G. (2017). The risk for marital infidelity across a year-long deployment. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *31*(5), 629–634. https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000281

Bartholomew, K., & Horowitz, L. M. (1991). Attachment styles among young adults: A test of a four-category model. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *61*(2), 226–244. https://doi.org/10.1037//0022-3514.61.2.226

Bartholomew, K., & Shaver, P. R. (1998). Methods of assessing adult attachment: Do they converge? In J. A. Simpson & W. S. Rholes (Eds.), *Attachment theory and close relationships* (pp. 25–45). The Guilford Press.

Beasley, C. C., & Ager, R. (2019). Emotionally focused couples' therapy: A systematic review of its effectiveness over the past 19 years. *Journal of Evidence-Based Social Work*, *16*(2), 144–159. https://doi.org/10.1080/23761407.2018.1563013

Bedair, K., Hamza, E. A., & Gladding, S. T. (2020). Attachment style, marital satisfaction, and mutual support attachment style in Qatar. *The Family Journal*, *28*(3), 329–336. https://doi.org/10.1177/1066480720934377

Bergeron, S., Brassard, A., Mondor, J., & Péloquin, K. (2019). Under, over, or optimal commitment? Attachment insecurities and commitment issues in relationally distressed couples. *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, *46*(3), 246–259. https://doi.org/10.1080/0092623x.2019.1683664

Bergmann, J. D., Renshaw, K. D., Allen, E. S., Markman, H. J., & Stanley, S. M. (2014). Meaningfulness of service and marital satisfaction in Army couples. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *28*(5), 701–706. https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000013

Bjørnholt, M., & Farstad, G. R. (2014). "Am I rambling?" On the advantages of interviewing couples together. *Qualitative Research*, *14*(1), 3–19. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794112459671

Blow, A. J., Bowles, R. P., Farero, A., Subramaniam, S., Lappan, S., Nichols, E., Gorman, L., Kees, M., & Guty, D. (2017). Couples coping through deployment: Findings from a sample of National Guard families. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, *73*(12), 1753–1767. https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.22487

Blow, A. J., Gorman, L., Ganoczy, D., Kees, M., Kashy, D. A., Valenstein, M., Marcus, S. M., Fitzgerald, H. E., & Chermack, S. (2013). Hazardous drinking and family functioning in National Guard veterans and spouses postdeployment. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *27*(2), 303–313. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0031881

Bommarito, R. K., Sherman, M. D., Rudi, J. H., Mikal, J. P., & Borden, L. M. (2017). Challenges facing military spouses during postdeployment reintegration: A review of the literature and current supports. *Military Behavioral Health*, *5*(1), 51–63. https://doi.org/10.1080/21635781.2016.1243494

Borah, E., & Fina, B. (2017). Military spouses speak up: A qualitative study of military and Veteran spouses' perspectives. *Journal of Family Social Work*, *20*(2), 144–161. https://doi.org/10.1080/10522158.2017.1284702

Boulding, E. (1950). Family adjustments to war separation and reunion. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *272*(1), 59–67. https://doi.org/10.1177/000271625027200109

Bowlby, J. (1958). The nature of the child's tie to his mother. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 39, 350–373.

Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and loss: Attachment* (Vol. 1). Basic Books.

Bowlby, J. (1973). *Attachment and loss: Separation, anxiety and anger* (Vol. 2). Basic Books.

Bowlby, J. (1977). The making and breaking of affectional bonds: I. Aetiology and psychopathology in the light of attachment theory. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, *130*(3), 201–210. https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.130.3.201

Brady, L. L., Credé, M., Harms, P. D., Bachrach, D. G., & Lester, P. B. (2019). Meta-analysis of risk factors for substance abuse in the US military. *Military Psychology*, *31*(6), 450–461. https://doi.org/10.1080/08995605.2019.1657754

Brandão, T., Matias, M., Ferreira, T., Vieira, J., Schulz, M. S., & Matos, P. M. (2020). Attachment, emotion regulation, and well-being in couples: Intrapersonal and interpersonal associations. *Journal of Personality*, *88*(4), 748–761. https://doi.org/10.1111/jopy.12523

Bretherton, I. (1999). Updating the "internal working model" construct: Some reflections. *Attachment & Human Development*, *1*(3), 343–357. https://doi.org/10.1080/14616739900134191

Cafferky, B., & Shi, L. (2015). Military wives emotionally coping during deployment: Balancing dependence and independence. *American Journal of Family Therapy*, *43*(3), 282–295. https://doi.org/10.1080/01926187.2015.1034633

Cafferky, B. M., Reyes, C. A. D., Beaver, S. L., & Shi, L. (2022). "We'll just draw the curtains!": Military wives' postures toward predeployment emotional preparation. *Family Relations*, *71*(1), 389–407. https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12591

Carter, S. P., & Renshaw, K. D. (2016a). Communication via different media during military deployments and post deployment relationship satisfaction. *Military Behavioral Health*, *4*(3), 260–268. https://doi.org/10.1080/21635781.2016.1153535

Carter, S. P., & Renshaw, K. D. (2016b). Spousal communication during military deployments. *Journal of Family Issues*, *37*(16), 2309–2332. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513x14567956

Carter, S. P., Renshaw, K. D., Allen, E. S., Markman, H. J., & Stanley, S. M. (2020). Everything here is fine: Protective buffering by military spouses during a deployment. *Family Process*, *59*(3), 1261–1274. https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12457

Cederbaum, J. A., Wilcox, S. L., Oh, H., Sullivan, K. S., Ell, K., & Hassan, A. M. (2017). The role of service member mental health and marital satisfaction in postdeployment family reintegration. *Military Behavioral Health*, *5*(4), 364–373. https://doi.org/10.1080/21635781.2017.1333061

Chandler, K. D., Dattilo, J., Taff, B. D., & Moeller, J. (2018). Leisure experiences of military couples post-deployment. *Family Relations*, *67*(5), 630–643. https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12321

Cheney, G. J. (2017). Emotional connection of military couples after 16 years of war: Integrating pastoral counseling and evidence-based theory. *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling*, *71*(3), 176–182. https://doi.org/10.1177/1542305017727452

Chui, W., & Leung, M. (2016). Adult attachment internal working model of self and other in Chinese culture: Measured by the Attachment Style Questionnaire — Short Form (ASQ-SF) by confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and item response theory (IRT). *Personality and Individual Differences*, 96, 55–64. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2016.02.068

Clark, M. A., O'Neal, C. W., Conley, K. M., & Mancini, J. A. (2018). Resilient family processes, personal reintegration, and subjective well-being outcomes for military personnel and their family members. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, *88*(1), 99–111. https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000278

Cohen, M. Z., Kahn, D. L., & Steeves, R. H. (2000). *Hermeneutic phenomenological research: A practical guide for nurse researchers*. SAGE Publications, Inc. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452232768

Collins, C. L., Lee, K.-H., & MacDermid Wadsworth, S. M. (2017). Family stressors and resources: Relationships with depressive symptoms in military couples during pre-deployment. *Family Relations*, *66*(2), 302–316. https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12251

Collins, N. L. (2003). Cognitive representations of attachment: The content and function of working models. In G. J. O. Fletcher & M. S. Clark (Eds.), *Blackwell handbook of social psychology: Interpersonal processes* (pp. 60–85). Blackwell Publishers. https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470998557.ch3

Collins, N. L., & Read, S. J. (1990). *Adult Attachment Scale*

Corry, N. H., Williams, C. S., Radakrishnan, S., McMaster, H. S., Sparks, A. C., Briggs-King,
    E., Karon, S. S., & Stander, V. A. (2021). Demographic variation in military life stress
    and perceived support among military spouses. *Military Medicine*, *186*(Supplement_1),
    214–221. https://doi.org/10.1093/milmed/usaa386

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2017). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among
    five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications, Inc.

Currier, J. M., Foster, J. D., & Isaak, S. L. (2019). Moral injury and spiritual struggles in military
    veterans: A latent profile analysis. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, *32*(3), 393–404.
    https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.22378

Department of Defense, Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Military
    Community and Family Policy. (2021). 2021 Demographics Report: Profile of the
    Military Community. Retrieved
    fromhttps://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Reports/2021-demographics-
    report.pdf.

DeVoe, E. R., Ross, A. M., Spencer, R., Drew, A., Acker, M., Paris, R., & Jacoby, V. (2019).
    Coparenting across the deployment cycle: Observations from military families with
    young children. *Journal of Family Issues*, *41*(9), 1447–1469.
    https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513x19894366

Dursun, S., Wang, Z., & Pullman, L. (2019). Military lifestyle stressors and social support in the
    well-being of military families. In R. Moelker, M. Andres, & N. Rones (Eds.), *The
    politics of military families* (1st ed., pp. 105–120). Routledge.
    https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429026492-8

Elo, S., Kääriäinen, M., Kanste, O., Pölkki, T., Utriainen, K., & Kyngäs, H. (2014). Qualitative content analysis: A focus on trustworthiness. *SAGE Open, 4*(1), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244014522633

Fallis, E. E., Rehman, U. S., Woody, E. Z., & Purdon, C. (2016). The longitudinal association of relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction in long-term relationships. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *30*(7), 822–831. https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000205

Freytes, I. M., LeLaurin, J. H., Zickmund, S. L., Resende, R., & Uphold, C. R. (2017). Exploring the post-deployment reintegration experiences of veterans with PTSD and their significant others. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 87(2), 149–156. https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000211

Fulton, J. J., Calhoun, P. S., Wagner, H. R., Schry, A. R., Hair, L. P., Feeling, N. R., Elbogen, E. B., & Beckham, J. C. (2015). The prevalence of posttraumatic stress disorder in Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF) Veterans: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Anxiety Disorders*, *31*, 98–107. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.janxdis.2015.02.003

Gadamer, H.-G. (2013). *Truth and method*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Gellweiler, S., Wise, N., & Fletcher, T. (2018). Understanding the "lived experience" of sport event volunteers: Using the hermeneutic circle as a guiding conceptual framework. *Event Management*, *22(4)*, 629–641. https://doi.org/10.3727/152599518x15300559276976

Giff, S. T., Renshaw, K. D., Carter, S. P., & Paige, L. C. (2020). Deployment-related coping strategies in military couples: Associations with relationship satisfaction. *Military Psychology*, *32*(6), 432–440. https://doi.org/10.1080/08995605.2020.1803725

Gleeson, A., Curran, D., Reeves, R., Dorahy, M. J., & Hanna, D. (2021). A meta-analytic review of the relationship between attachment styles and posttraumatic growth. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 77(7), 1521–1536. https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.23156

Goldsmith, K. M., & Byers, E. S. (2018). Perceived and reported romantic and sexual outcomes in long-distance and geographically close relationships. *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality*, *27*(2), 144–156. https://doi.org/10.3138/cjhs.2018-0016

Green, S., Nurius, P. S., & Lester, P. (2013). Spouse psychological well-being: A keystone to military family health. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, *23*(6), 753–768. https://doi.org/10.1080/10911359.2013.795068

Griffith, J. (2019). Relationships of deployment and combat experiences to postdeployment negative health conditions among Army National Guard soldiers. *Military Psychology*, *31*(2), 128–137. https://doi.org/10.1080/08995605.2019.1565908

Gros, D. F., Lancaster, C. L., Teves, J. B., Libet, J., & Acierno, R. (2019). Relations between post-deployment divorce/separation and deployment and post-deployment stressors, social support, and symptomatology in Veterans with combat-related PTSD symptoms. *Journal of Military, Veteran and Family Health*, *5*(2), 125–135. https://doi.org/10.3138/jmvfh.2018-0015

Gyollai, D. (2020). Getting into it in the wrong way: Interpretative phenomenological analysis and the hermeneutic circle. *Nursing Philosophy*, *21*(2), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1111/nup.12294

Hasim, M. J. M., Mustafa, H., & Hashim, N. L. (2018). From middle childhood to adulthood attachment: Measuring attachment stability in the context of married individuals in

Penang, Malaysia. *The Family Journal*, *26*(4), 444–454.

https://doi.org/10.1177/1066480718806522

Hawkins, S. A., Condon, A., Hawkins, J. N., Liu, K., Melendrez Ramirez, Y., Nihill, M. M., & Tolins, J. (2018). *What we know about military family readiness: Evidence from 2007–2017*. Office of the Deputy Under Secretary of the Army.

https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/AD1050341

Hazan, C., & Shaver, P. (1987). Romantic love conceptualized as an attachment process. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *52*(3), 511–524. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.52.3.511

Hazan, C., & Shaver, P. R. (1990). Love and work: An attachment-theoretical perspective. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *59*(2), 270–280.

https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.59.2.270

Hazan, C., & Shaver, P. R. (2017). Romantic Love Conceptualized as an Attachment Process. In Routledge eBooks (pp. 283–296). Informa. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351153683-17

Heppner, P. P., Wampold, B. E., Owen, J., Thompson, M. N., & Wang, K. T. (2015). *Research design in counseling* (4th ed.). Cengage Learning.

Hesse, E., & Main, M. (2000). Disorganized infant, child, and adult attachment: Collapse in behavioral and attentional strategies. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, *48*(4), 1097–1127. https://doi.org/10.1177/00030651000480041101

Hill, R. (1949). *Families under stress: Adjustment to crises of war separation and reunion*. Harper & Brothers.

Holmström, É. (2022). Enhancing the effects of emotion-focused individual and couples therapy by nonviolent communication. *Person-Centered & Experiential Psychotherapies*, *22*(1), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/14779757.2022.2100809

Karney, B. R., & Trail, T. E. (2017). Associations between prior deployments and marital satisfaction among Army couples. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *79*(1), 147–160. https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12329

Kelley, H. H., LeBaron, A. B., & Hill, E. J. (2018). Financial stress and marital quality: The moderating influence of couple communication. *Journal of Financial Therapy*, 9(2), 18–36. https://doi.org/10.4148/1944-9771.1176

Knobloch, L. K., Basinger, E. D., & Theiss, J. A. (2018a). Relational turbulence and perceptions of partner support during reintegration after military deployment. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, *46*(1), 52–73. https://doi.org/10.1080/00909882.2017.1409906

Knobloch, L. K., Knobloch-Fedders, L. M., & Yorgason, J. B. (2018b). Communication of military couples during deployment predicting generalized anxiety upon reunion. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *32*(1), 12–21. https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000344

Knobloch, L. K., Knobloch-Fedders, L. M., & Yorgason, J. B. (2018c). Mental health symptoms and the reintegration difficulty of military couples following deployment: A longitudinal application of the relational turbulence model. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, *75*(4), 742–765. https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.22734

Knobloch, L. K., Knobloch-Fedders, L. M., Yorgason, J. B., Wehrman, E. C., & Monk, J. K. (2021). Trajectories of relational turbulence and affectionate communication across the post-deployment transition. *Communication Monographs*, *89*(2), 189–210. https://doi.org/10.1080/03637751.2021.1963792

Knobloch-Fedders, L. M., Knobloch, L. K., Scott, S., & Fiore, H. (2020). Relationship changes of military couples during reintegration: A longitudinal analysis. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *37*(7), 2145–2165. https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407520917461

Konrath, S. H., Chopik, W. J., Hsing, C. K., & O'Brien, E. (2014). Changes in adult attachment styles in American college students over time: A meta-analysis. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 18(4), 326-348. https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868314530516

Lindseth, A., & Norberg, A. (2004). A phenomenological hermeneutical method for researching lived experience. *Scandinavian Journal of Caring Sciences*, *18*(2), 145–153. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6712.2004.00258.x

Logan, K. V. (1987). The emotional cycle of deployment. *Proceedings*, *113*(2), 43–47. https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/1987/february/emotional-cycle-deployment

Long, E. (2021). Living liminal lives: Army partners' spatiotemporal experiences of deployment. *Armed Forces & Society*, *48*(3), 589–608. https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327x21995966

Main, M., Kaplan, N., & Cassidy, J. (1985). Security in infancy, childhood, and adulthood: A move to the level of representation. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, *50*(1/2), 66–104. https://doi.org/10.2307/3333827

Main, M., & Solomon J. (1986). Discovery of an insecure-disorganized/disoriented attachment pattern. In T. B. Brazelton & M. W. Yogman (Eds.), *Affective development in infancy* (pp. 95–124). Ablex Publishing.

Mallonee, S., Riggs, D., & Stander, V. (2020). The impact of family stressors and resources on military spouse's perception of post-deployment reunion stress. *Military Psychology*, *32*(6), 369–379. https://doi.org/10.1080/08995605.2020.1785268

McCoy, M., O'Neal, C. W., Gale, J., Goetz, J., & Mancini, J. A. (2021). Financial boundary ambiguity among military spouses. *Family Relations*, *70*(4), 1265–1279. https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12520

McIntosh, J. E., Opie, J., Greenwood, C. J., Booth, A., Tan, E., Painter, F., Messer, M., Macdonald, J. A., Letcher, P., & Olsson, C. A. (2024). Infant and preschool attachment, continuity and relationship to caregiving sensitivity: Findings from a new population-based Australian cohort. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry and Allied Disciplines, 65(1),* 64–76. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.13865

Meadows, S. O., Tanielian, T., & Karney, B. R. (Eds.). (2017). *The deployment life study: Longitudinal analysis of military families across the deployment cycle*. RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1300/RR1388/RAND_RR1388.pdf

Meek, N. A., Totenhagen, C. J., Hawkins, S. A., & Borden, L. M. (2016). Staying connected on the home front: Communication and well-being of civilian spouses during deployment. *Journal of Family Studies*, *25*(3), 287–304. https://doi.org/10.1080/13229400.2016.1248856

Messecar, D. C. (2017). Finding their way back in: Family reintegration following guard deployment. *Military Medicine*, *182*(Supplement_1), 266–273. https://doi.org/10.7205/milmed-d-16-00109

Mikulincer, M., & Shaver, P. R. (2018). Attachment theory as a framework for studying relationship dynamics and functioning. In A. L. Vangelisti & D. Perlman (Eds.), *The*

Cambridge handbook of personal relationships (2nd ed., pp. 175–185). Cambridge

University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316417867

Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods*

Sourcebook (3rd ed.). Sage Publications, Inc

Molero, F., Shaver, P. R., Fernández, I., Alonso-Arbiol, I., & Recio, P. (2016). Long-term

partners' relationship satisfaction and their perceptions of each other's attachment

insecurities. *Personal Relationships*, *23*(1), 159–171. https://doi.org/10.1111/pere.12117

Moser, M. B., Johnson, S. M., Dalgleish, T. L., Lafontaine, M.-F., Wiebe, S. A., & Tasca, G. A.

(2016). Changes in relationship-specific attachment in emotionally focused couple

therapy. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, *42*(2), 231–245.

https://doi.org/10.1111/jmft.12139

Muetzelfeld, H., Megale, A., Friedlander, M. L., & Xu, M. (2020). Relations between attachment

insecurity and role and outcome expectations for couple therapy. Journal of Family

Therapy, 43(1), 64–77. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-6427.12306

Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. SAGE Publications, Inc.

https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412995658

Neubauer, B. E., Witkop, C. T., & Varpio, L. (2019). How phenomenology can help us learn

from the experiences of others. *Perspectives on Medical Education*, *8*(2), 90–97.

https://doi.org/10.1007/s40037-019-0509-2

Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy.

(2021). *2021 demographics: Profile of the military community*. Department of Defense.

https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Reports/2021-demographics-

report.pdf

O'Neal, C. W., & Lavner, J. A. (2022). Latent profiles of postdeployment reintegration among service members and their partners. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *36*(1), 35–45. https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000894

O'Neal, C. W., Lucier-Greer, M., Duncan, J. M., Mallette, J. K., Arnold, A. L., & Mancini, J. A. (2018). Vulnerability and resilience within military families: Deployment experiences, reintegration, and family functioning. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 27(10), 3250–3261. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-018-1149-6

O'Neal, C. W., Mancini, J. A., & Bowen, G. L. (2020). Connecting experiences of community shared responsibility and collective competence to the well-being of adults in military families. *Journal of Community Psychology*, *48*(5), 1637–1650. https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.22357

O'Neal, C. W., Richardson, E. W., & Mancini, J. A. (2020). Community, context, and coping: How social connections influence coping and well-being for military members and their spouses. *Family Process*, *59*(1), 158–172. https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12395

Osilla, K. C., Pedersen, E. R., Tolpadi, A., Howard, S. S., Phillips, J. L., & Gore, K. L. (2018). The feasibility of a web intervention for military and veteran spouses concerned about their partner's alcohol misuse. *Journal of Behavioral Health Services & Research*, *45*(1), 57–73. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11414-016-9546-3

Pethrus, C.-M., Reutfors, J., Johansson, K., Neovius, K., Söderling, J., Neovius, M., & Bruze, G. (2019). Marriage and divorce after military deployment to Afghanistan: A matched cohort study from Sweden. *PLOS ONE*, *14*(2), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0207981

Pflieger, J. C., LeardMann, C. A., McMaster, H. S., Donoho, C. J., & Riviere, L. A. (2018). The impact of military and nonmilitary experiences on marriage: Examining the military spouse's perspective. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, *31*(5), 719–729. https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.22321

Pietromonaco, P. R., & Collins, N. L. (2017). Interpersonal mechanisms linking close relationships to health. *American Psychologist*, *72*(6), 531–542. https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000129

Pincus, S. H., House, R., Christenson, J., & Adler, L. E. (2001). The emotional cycle of deployment: A military family perspective. *U.S. Army Medical Department Journal*, 15–23. https://stimson.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15290coll3/id/898

Ponti, L., & Tani, F. (2019). Attachment bonds as risk factors of intimate partner violence. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, *28*(5), 1425–1432. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-019-01361-4

Provalis Research. (2018). *QDA Miner Lite* (Version 2018). https://provalisresearch.com/products/qualitative-data-analysis-software/

Reed-Fitzke, K., & Lucier-Greer, M. (2020). The buffering effect of relationships on combat exposure, military performance, and mental health of U.S. military soldiers: A vantage point for CFTs. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, *46*(2), 321–336. https://doi.org/10.1111/jmft.12402

Renshaw, K. D., & Campbell, S. B. (2017). Deployment-related benefit finding and postdeployment marital satisfaction in military couples. *Family Process*, *56*(4), 915–925. https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12249

Richardson, S. M., Pflieger, J. C., Woodall, K. A., Stander, V. A., & Riviere, L. A. (2020). A
model of deployment readiness among military spouses: The role of mental health and
deployment-related personal growth. *Military Behavioral Health*, *8*(4), 378–395.
https://doi.org/10.1080/21635781.2020.1825240

Riggs, S. A., Raiche, E., Creech, S. K., McGuffin, J., & Romero, D. M. (2020). Attachment,
couple communication, and family functioning in relation to psychological distress
among service members and veterans. *Couple and Family Psychology: Research and
Practice*, *9*(4), 239–255. https://doi.org/10.1037/cfp0000154

Riviere, L. A., Merrill, J. C., & Clarke-Walper, K. (2017). Marital status and marital quality
differences in the postdeployment mental and physical health of service members.
Military Behavioral Health, *5*(3), 254–264.
https://doi.org/10.1080/21635781.2017.1316803

Rosalina, G., Tiatri, S., & Verauli, R. (2020). Correlation between internal working model of
attachment and marital satisfaction of young adults. In *Proceedings of the Tarumanagara
International Conference on the Applications of Social Sciences and Humanities*
(TICASH 2019). Atlantis Press. https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.200515.109

Rossiter, A. G., & Ling, C. G. (2022). Building resilience in US military families: Why it
matters. *BMJ Military Health*, *168*(1), 91–94. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjmilitary-2020-
001735

Russotti, J., Hathaway, A., Metzger, J., & Cerulli, C. (2015). The impact of deployment on
attachment relationships. *Military Behavioral Health*, *4*(2),
https://doi.org/10.1080/21635781.2015.113334Sandberg, J. G., Bradford, A. B., &
Brown, A. P. (2017). Differentiating between attachment styles and behaviors and their

association with marital quality. *Family Process*, *56*(2), 518–531.

https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12186

Sandoz, E. K., Moyer, D. N., & Armelie, A. P. (2015). Psychological flexibility as a framework

for understanding and improving family reintegration following military deployment.

Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, *41*(4), 495–507.

https://doi.org/10.1111/jmft.12086

Sayers, S. L., Barg, F. K., Mavandadi, S., Hess, T. H., & Crauciuc, A. (2018). Deployment

communication: Underlying processes and outcomes. *Journal of Family Psychology*,

32(1), 3–11. https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000339

Shaver, P. R., Belsky, J., & Brennan, K. A. (2000). The adult attachment interview and self-

reports of romantic attachment: Associations across domains and methods. *Personal

Relationships*, *7*(1), 25–43. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6811.2000.tb00002.x

Siegel, A., Levin, Y., & Solomon, Z. (2018). The role of attachment of each partner on marital

adjustment. *Journal of Family Issues*, 40(4), 415–434.

https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513x18812005

Simpson, J. A., Rholes, W. S., & Phillips, D. (1996). Conflict in close relationships: An

attachment perspective. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 71(5), 899-914.

https://doi.org/10.1037//0022-3514.71.5.899

Sina, F., Najarpourian, S., & Samavi, S. A. (2018). The prediction of marital satisfaction through

attachment styles and love story. *Iranian Journal of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences*,

12(4), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.5812/ijpbs.62774

Skomorovsky, A. (2014). Deployment stress and well-being among military spouses: The role of

social support. *Military Psychology*, *26*(1), 44–54. https://doi.org/10.1037/mil0000029

Skomorovsky, A., Martynova, E., Lee, J. E. C., & Dursun, S. (2017). Spousal perceptions of military members' health and their well-being and divorce considerations: The role of caregiver burden. *Military Behavioral Health*, *5*(4), 406–416. https://doi.org/10.1080/21635781.2017.1335256

Solomon, D. H., Knobloch, L. K., Theiss, J. A., & McLaren, R. M. (2016). Relational turbulence theory: Explaining variation in subjective experiences and communication within romantic relationships. *Human Communication Research*, *42*(4), 507–532. https://doi.org/10.1111/hcre.12091

Stahnke, B. (2023). To be or not to be: Advice from long-term spouses in a mixed methods study. *The Family Journal*, *31*(2), 262–268. https://doi.org/10.1177/10664807221123555

Street, T., Lewin, A., Woodall, K., Cruz-Cano, R., Thoma, M., & Stander, V. A. (2022). Gender differences in marital and military predictors of service member career satisfaction. *Family Relations*, *71*(4), 1515–1537. https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12697

Suddick, K. M., Cross, V., Vuoskoski, P., Galvin, K. T., & Stew, G. (2020). The work of hermeneutic phenomenology. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *19*, 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920947600

Thompson, R. A., Simpson, J. A., & Berlin, L. J. (2022). Taking perspective on attachment theory and research: Nine fundamental questions. *Attachment & Human Development*, *24*(5), 543–560. https://doi.org/10.1080/14616734.2022.2030132

van Manen, M., & van Manen, M. (2021). Doing phenomenological research and writing. *Qualitative Health Research*, *31*(6), 1069–1082. https://doi.org/10.1177/10497323211003058

Vicary, S., Young, A., & Hicks, S. (2016). A reflective journal as learning process and contribution to quality and validity in interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Qualitative Social Work*, *16*(4), 550–565. https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325016635244

U.S. Department of State. (n.d.). U.S. Relations with Syria. State. https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-syria/

Wang, L., Seelig, A., MacDermid Wadsworth, S., McMaster, H., Alcaraz, J. E., & Crum-Cianflone, N. F. (2015). Associations of military divorce with mental, behavioral, and physical health outcomes. *BMC Psychiatry*, *15*(1), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-015-0517-7

Weiss, J. K., & Anzur, C. K. (2023). "Sometimes, during deployment, it seems like we won't make it": U.S. military deployment transition issues as a precursor to couples' reintegration issues. *Journal of Family Issues*, 0192513X2311629. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513x231162968

Wen, I., Price, L. E., Spray, A. M., & Marmar, C. R. (2020). Mending broken bonds in military couples using emotionally focused therapy for couples: Tips and discoveries. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, *76*(5), 865–870. https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.22921

Wenger, J. W., O'Connell, C., & Cottrell, L. (2018). *Examination of recent deployment experience across the services and components* [RR-1928-A]. RAND Corporation. https://doi.org/10.7249/RR1928

Wilson, S. R., Marini, C. M., Franks, M. M., Whiteman, S. D., Topp, D., & Wadsworth, S. M. (2018). Communication and connection during deployment: A daily-diary study from the perspective of at-home partners. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *32*(1), 42–48. https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000333

Wolf, M. R., Eliseo-Arras, R. K., Brenner, M., & Nochajski, T. H. (2017). "This will help your children": Service providers' experiences with military families during cycles of deployment. *Journal of Family Social Work*, *20*(1), 26–40. https://doi.org/10.1080/10522158.2016.1259135

Wood, V. M., MacDonald, T. K., Charbonneau, D., & Urban, S. (2019). Adult attachment and spousal reactions to military deployment separations and reunions. *Personal Relationships*, *26*(4), 602–627. https://doi.org/10.1111/pere.12296

Wood, V. M., Tam-Seto, L., MacDonald, T. K., & Urban, S. (2022). Adult attachment and spousal reports of conflict and quality of partner interactions during a post-deployment reunion. *Journal of Military, Veteran and Family Health*, *8*(3), 72–83. https://doi.org/10.3138/jmvfh-2021-0108

Yip, J., Ehrhardt, K., Black, H., & Walker, D. O. (2018). Attachment theory at work: A review and directions for future research. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *39*(2), 185–198. https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2204

Zagefka, H., Andrew, N., Boelen, B., Cummings, O., Denton, R., Harris, S., Knoetig, L., Mahmood, M., Shahid, A., Swan, M., Tarter, J., Welch, A., & Williams, R. (2021). Attachments to mother, father, and romantic partner as predictors of life satisfaction. *The Family Journal*, *30*(4), 570–578. https://doi.org/10.1177/10664807211064147

Zamir, O., Gewirtz, A. H., Cheng, C. H., Zhang, N., & Lavee, Y. (2020). Psychological distress and communication quality in military couples after deployment to war. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *34*(4), 383–391. https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000589

Appendix A

Institutional Review Board Approval

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

September 13, 2023

Marchell Coleman
Michael Howard

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY23-24-130 Military Married Couples Re-Integration Adult Attachment Experiences: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study

Dear Marchell Coleman, Michael Howard,

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) if at least one of the following criteria is met:
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; or

For a PDF of your exemption letter, click on your study number in the My Studies card on your Cayuse dashboard. Next, click the Submissions bar beside the Study Details bar on the Study details page. Finally, click Initial under Submission Type and choose the Letters tab toward the bottom of the Submission Details page. Your information sheet and final versions of your study documents can also be found on the same page under the Attachments tab.

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, PhD, CIP
Administrative Chair
Research Ethics Office

Appendix B

Participant Recruitment Letter

Dear Potential Participant:

I am Marchell Coleman, a doctoral student in the School of Behavioral Sciences' Community Care and Counseling program with a focus on Marriage and Family Counseling at Liberty University. To fulfill the requirements of my degree, I am conducting research for my dissertation. The purpose of my research is to better understand long-term military married couples' post-deployment re-integration experiences. Long-term, meaning 10 years or more.

For this study, "post-deployment reintegration" is defined as the process of military service members and their spouses transitioning back from a deployment mission. It involves adjusting to changes in routines, roles, and relationships as service members return home and reintegrate into their families, communities, and daily lives.

This correspondence is to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be a military married couple that has been married for at least 10 years, from any branch of the military (Army, Navy, Air Force, Coast Guard, Marine Corps, and Space Force), an active-duty service member who has completed multiple deployments, with the most recent being within the past 12 months.

The potential married couple of participants will be asked to complete a five-minute demographic questionnaire to determine their eligibility for the study. If the military married couples qualify to participate in the study, they will be asked to complete a 10-minute assessment prior to scheduling a 60–90-minute interview. The participants will be invited to participate in an optional follow-up focus group. However, all participants will be asked to complete a reflective journal exercise after the interview process. The focus group's participation is optional. Participation in all research activities is voluntary.

The researcher will protect the identities of participants and keep their data confidential. In research reports, participants will be identified using pseudonyms rather than their names or personal identifiers. Research data will be securely stored to prevent unauthorized access using password-protected databases or encrypted storage systems. The researcher will ensure that unauthorized personnel cannot access the data. If you would like to be considered for participation in this study, please complete the attached Demographic Questionnaire.

If respondents to this invitation meet the participation criteria of this study, they will be emailed an informed consent form.

The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent form and return it to me prior to the interview.

Any respondents who are found to be ineligible for the study will have their demographic questionnaire shredded.

To thank all military married couples of participants for their voluntary participation in this study, they will be given a $50 Amazon gift card upon completion of the study.

If you have any questions, please email me, Marchell Coleman, at
███████████████████ .

Thank you for potentially participating in this military married couples research!

Respectfully,

Marchell Coleman

Appendix C

Social Media and Website Message Board Post

Are you a married active-duty or veteran military couple that has been married for over 10 years?

Have you and/or your spouse experienced multiple-post-deployment phases?

If you answered "yes" to both questions, you are invited to participate in a research study that explores how military married couples mitigate the risk of separation and divorce after experiencing multiple post-deployment phases. The study is being conducted by a Doctoral Candidate, Marchell Coleman, from Liberty University.

If you choose to participate, you will be asked to participate in an interview, a focus group (optional), and a journal activity. You will receive a $50 Amazon gift card for your participation in this study. Participation is voluntary. For more information, contact ███████████████████████████ .
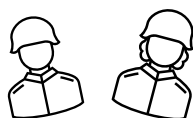
Appendix D

Recruitment Flyer

Are you a married active-duty or veteran military couple that has been married for over 10 years?

Have you and/or your spouse experienced multiple post-deployment phases?

Participate in a Research Study We Need Your Insights

If you answered "yes" to both questions, you are invited to participate in a research study that explores how military married couples mitigate the risk of separation and divorce after experiencing multiple post-deployment phases. The study is being conducted by Marchell Coleman, a Doctoral Candidate from Liberty University.

What Is involved?

Participate in an in-depth interview!

Join a focus group (optional)!

Engage in a journal activity!

YOUR PARTICIPATION MATTERS!

As a token of our appreciation, you will receive a $50 Amazon gift card for your invaluable contribution to this study. Please note that participation is entirely voluntary.

CONTACT INFORMATION For more information or to sign up for the study, contact Marchell Coleman at Email: ██████████████████

Appendix E

Participant Follow-Up Communication

As a reminder, you are invited to participate in a research study that explores how long-term military married couples mitigate the risk of separation and divorce after experiencing multiple deployments. The study is being conducted by a Doctoral Candidate, Marchell Coleman, at Liberty University.

You are receiving this follow-up message because you are eligible to participate in a research study based on being active-duty or veteran military service members, having been married for over 10 years and you and your spouse having experienced multiple post-deployment phases. Your participation in this doctoral research study may help other military couples mitigate the risk of separation and divorce. For your participation in this study, you will receive a $50 Amazon gift card.

If you would like to contribute to an increased understanding of how to support military married couples to mitigate the risk of separation and divorce after experiencing multiple post-deployment phases, please feel free to respond to this email at ███████████████████ confirm or deny your interest in the study. Participation is voluntary.

Appendix F

Participant Informed Consent

Introduction and Purpose of the Study

This invitation is extended to individuals interested in participating in a research study focused on examining the experiences of military married couples during the post-deployment reintegration phase. To be eligible for participation, individuals must meet the following criteria be at least 18 years old, have been married for a minimum of ten years, and have one spouse who is an active-duty military service member and has completed multiple deployments. Marchell Coleman is a Doctoral Candidate in the School of Behavioral Sciences at Liberty University is conducting this study.

Description of the Research

This research study seeks to discover how long-term military married couples navigate the challenges associated with post-deployment reintegration and reduce the risk of divorce by using attachment theory as its framework. The goal is to gain personal accounts and insights from military spouses regarding their unique experiences within this context.

Procedures

Please complete the demographic survey by following this link, and then I will reach out to discuss participating in our study. If selected for participation, the researcher will give the following instructions on the next steps in the study process:

1. The participants will be asked to complete a 10–15-minute **pre-assessment questionnaire** before the scheduled interview.
2. The participants will be asked to participate in a 60–90-minute **interview** with their active-duty military spouse. Immediately after the interview, the participants will be asked to complete a reflective journal exercise.
3. The participants will be asked to participate in an optional 60–90-minute **focus group**.
4. The participants will be asked to participate in a **member-checking** process to review the researchers' completed transcripts.

Important: Please note that interviews, reflective journal exercises and focus groups will take place on Zoom and will be video or recorded.

Potential Risks and Discomforts

The risks associated with participating in this study are minimal and comparable to the risks encountered in your everyday life.

Potential Benefits

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

Benefits to society include:

In addition to the benefits to society, a research study on the reintegration experiences after deployment and the attachment styles of military married couples has several other benefits:

- This research can inform the development and enhancement of programs and interventions to support military couples during reintegration. In addition to increasing their well-being, it aims to make their relationships more satisfying by addressing their specific challenges.
- By understanding military couples' reintegration experiences and attachment styles, interventions can be designed to reduce divorce risk, promoting marital stability within the military community.
- Studying military married couples' reintegration experiences helps develop strategies to support service members and their families, enhancing military readiness and mission success.
  The study expands knowledge in military psychology and attachment theory, offering valuable insights into military couples' reintegration experiences and the role of attachment styles. It informs future research, policies, and interventions for military families' well-being.

Compensation

Upon fulfilling all participation requirements, each spouse will receive a $50 gift card. The gift will be transferred electronically once it has been completed.

Confidentiality

This study will consist of rigorous privacy and confidentiality procedures to protect the participants in this study. Measures will be taken to ensure the security of data files, including recordings and transcripts, through password protection. Written and hard copies will be stored on a password-protected computer until they are converted into electronic format. Additionally, regular backups of all electronic files will be conducted using an online backup service. Access to research data will be limited to the researcher and will not be used outside this study without participant consent.

To protect participants' identities, each participant will be assigned pseudonyms, replacing their actual names in all study-related information. Interviews, focus groups, and other discussions associated with this study will be conducted privately to ensure confidentiality and prevent anyone from overhearing conversations.

As part of this research, interviews will be recorded and transcribed. The researcher will then keep them on a password-protected computer for three years before permanently erasing them. Only the researcher will have access to them. It should be noted, however, that in focus groups where multiple participants participate, it cannot be guaranteed that discussions within will not leak to individuals outside. All reasonable measures will be taken throughout the research process to ensure participant confidentiality.

Decision to Withdraw from Study

Participating in this research study is strictly voluntary. You can decline to answer any question or withdraw at any point without a reason. If you wish to opt out, please contact Marchell Coleman via email at ███████████████████████ or by phone ███████████████
If you withdraw from the study, any information or materials provided will not be included in the data collection, analysis, and findings. Any data collected from you except focus group data will also be destroyed without being included in this research project. Your decision will be respected without adversely affecting our relationship with the researchers or institutions involved.

Contacts and Questions

The researcher responsible for conducting this study is Marchell Coleman. If you have any questions or inquiries about the study, please feel free to reach out to the researcher directly via email at ███████████████████████. Alternatively, you can contact the researcher by phone at ██████████.

Dr. Michael Howard, EDD, LMFT, LCAS, oversees this study. If you have any further inquiries that may require the advice of someone outside of the research team or require additional clarifications regarding its conduct, the Institutional Review Board is an ideal contact. You can reach them at 1971 University Blvd., Suite 1837, Lynchburg, VA 245015; alternatively, they can be reached via email: irb@liberty.edu

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

By signing this document, you are indicating your consent to take part in this study. Before signing, be sure to fully comprehend its purpose and nature; this document will remain in both your personal files as well as with the researcher for record-keeping purposes.
If you have any questions or concerns after signing this document, please contact the study team using the provided contact details. If there are further inquiries, they will be happy to assist.
I have carefully read and understood the information presented above. I have sought clarification by asking questions, and I have received satisfactory answers. By providing my signature, I willingly consent to participate in this study and the researcher has my permission to audio-record/video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Researcher's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix G

Couples Demographic and Screening Questionnaire

This research study's purpose is to investigate the post-deployment reintegration experiences of military married couples. An online questionnaire will collect demographic information to complete the enrollment and eligibility processes. Please provide the first names of both spouses.

Please specify Spouse 1 and Spouse 2.

Spouse 1 _____ Spouse 2 _____

1. **Please provide both you and your spouse's email addresses. Please specify as Spouse 1 or Spouse 2.**

Spouse 1 _____ Spouse 2 _____

2. **For each spouse, please select the appropriate age range: <u>Spouse 1</u>.**
   O 18-44
   O 45 -64
   O 65 and over

3. **For each spouse, please select the appropriate age range: <u>Spouse 2</u>.**
   O 18-44
   O 45 -64
   O 65 and over

4. **Question for <u>Spouse 1</u>: What is your race?**
   O Black or African American
   O Hispanic
   O American Indian or Alaska Native
   O Asian
   O Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
   O Mixed/Biracial
   O Other _____

5. **Question for <u>Spouse 2</u>: What is your race?**
   O Black or African American
   O Hispanic
   O American Indian or Alaska Native
   O Asian
   O Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
   O Mixed/Biracial
   O Other _____

6. **Marital Status: Please indicate your current marital status.**

O Married
O Unmarried

5A. Have you and your spouse been married for 10 or more years?
O Yes
O No

5B. Are you or your spouse an active-duty military service member?
O Yes
O No

5C. If not, do you or your spouse have a history of military service and have been discharged or separated from the military for at least 12 months?
O Yes
O No

7. **Please select the branch of the military that at least one spouse has served in, either currently or in the past.**
   O Army
   O Navy
   O Air Force
   O Marine Corps
   O Coast Guard
   O Space Force

Your information will be treated with strict confidentiality and used solely for survey purposes.

Thank you for your participation.

Appendix H

Adult Attachment Permission and Scale

Department of Psychology   **University of California**

Santa Barbara

August 2008

Dear Colleagues:

Thank you for your interest in the Adult Attachment Scale. In this document you will find a copy of the original and revised Adult Attachment Scales, along with information on scoring. You will also find some general information about self-reported measures of adult attachment style and a list of references from our lab.

Please feel free to use the Adult Attachment Scale in your research and, if needed, to translate the scale into a different language. If you do translate the scale, I would appreciate it if you could send me a copy of your translation so that I can (with your permission) make the translation available to future researchers.

Before choosing the Adult Attachment Scale for your research, please be sure to investigate other self-reported measures of adult attachment. There have been many developments in the field since my original scale was published, and you may find that newer scales – such as Brennan, Clark, & Shaver's (1988) Experiences in Close Relationships scale (ECR) – are better suited to your needs. I have included some references that will help you find information on these newer measures.

Thank you for your interest in our work, and good luck with your research.

Sincerely,

Nancy Collins

Professor, UCSB

ncollins@psych.ucsb.edu

Adult Attachment Scale (Collins & Read, 1990)

Please read each of the following statements and rate the extent to which describes your feelings about <u>relationships</u>. Please think about all your relationships (past and present) and respond in terms of how you generally feel in these relationships. If you have never been involved in a romantic relationship, answer in terms of how you think you would feel.

Please use the scale below by placing a number between 1 and 5 in the space provided to the right of each statement.

1---------------2--------------3--------------4--------------5

**Not at all
characteristic
of me**

**Very
characteristic
of me**

(1) I find it relatively easy to get close to others. _____

(2) I do <u>not</u> worry about being abandoned. _____

(3) I find it difficult to allow myself to depend on others. _____

(4) In relationships, I often worry that my partner does not really love me. _____

(5) I find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like. _____

(6) I am comfortable depending on others. _____

(7) I do <u>not</u> worry about someone getting too close to me. _____

(8) I find that people are never there when you need them. _____

(9) I am somewhat uncomfortable being close to others. _____

(10) In relationships, I often worry that my partner will not want to stay with me. _____

(11) I want to merge completely with another person. _____

(12) My desire to merge sometimes scares people away. _____

(13) I am comfortable having others depend on me. _____

(14) I know that people will be there when I need them. _____

(15) I am nervous when anyone gets too close. _____

(16) I find it difficult to trust others completely. _____

(17) Often, partners want me to be closer than I feel comfortable being. _____

(18) I am not sure that I can always depend on others to be there when I need them. _____

Scoring Instructions for the *Original* Adult Attachment Scale

The scale contains three subscales, each composed of six items. The three subscales are CLOSE, DEPEND, and ANXIETY. The CLOSE scale measures the extent to which a person is comfortable with closeness and intimacy. The DEPEND scale measures the extent to which a person feels he/she can depend on others to be available when needed. The ANXIETY subscale measures the extent to which a person is worried about being abandoned or unloved.

Original Scoring:

Average the ratings for the six items that compose each subscale as indicated below.

Scale	Items					
CLOSE	1	7	9^*	13	15^*	17^*
DEPEND	3^*	6	8^*	14	16^*	18^*
ANXIETY	2^*	4	5	10	11	12

* Items with an <u>asterisk</u> should be <u>reverse scored</u> before computing the subscale mean.

Alternative Scoring:

If you would like to compute only *two* attachment dimensions – attachment *anxiety* (model of self) and attachment *avoidance* (model of other) – you can use the following scoring procedure:

Scale	Items										
ANXIETY	2^*	4	5	10	11	12					
AVOID	1*	3	6*	7*	8	9	13*	14*	15	16	17	18

* Items with an <u>asterisk</u> should be <u>reverse scored</u> before computing the subscale mean.

Note: Items 1, 3, 4, 12, 14, 16, and 17 must be reversed-keyed prior to constructing each scale. The Avoidance scale is comprised of items 1-3 and 5-9. Higher scores on this dimension reflect greater avoidance. The Anxiety scale is comprised of items 4 and 10-17. Higher scores on this dimension reflect greater anxiety. Greater attachment security is defined by lower scores on both scales. When referencing the AAQ, please cite the following paper:

Simpson, J. A., Rholes, S. W., & Phillips, D. (1996). Conflict in close relationships: An attachment perspective**.** *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 71, 899–914. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.71.5.899

Appendix I

Interview Protocol

Interview Opening Question – 5 minutes.

1. Can you tell me how you met and how long you have been married?

The question focuses on IWM and adult attachment styles (10 minutes).

2. How would you describe the interactions with your spouse during your most recent post-deployment reintegration?

The questions focus on the conceptualization of married couples romantic love based on their IWM and adult attachment styles (10 minutes).

3. With romantic love being defined as the emotional connection that transcends friendship, how would you describe romantic love within your relationship?

The questions focus on the married couple's relationship satisfaction (30 minutes).

4. With relationship satisfaction being defined as a couple's level of mutual satisfaction and fulfillment in their relationship. How would you describe relationship satisfaction within your marriage?
   - Follow-up question: Are there any specific strategies that either of you can think of that assist the both of you with maintaining satisfaction within your relationship during the post-deployment reintegration phases?
   - Follow-up question: From all the strategies that you shared, what would you consider to be the most instrumental in helping to maintain a long-term, strong relationship?

The questions focused on military married couple strategies (15 minutes).

5. Can you explain how these significant strategies give you the ability to overcome marital challenges?
   - Follow-up question: Can you provide a specific example of how you used the strategy(s) to interact with your spouse during the post-deployment reintegration phase?

Appendix J

Reflective Journal

The participants will be provided time after the Zoom interview to complete the reflective journal prompts. The participants will be asked to upload the digital copy and forward it to the researcher's email provided.

The reflective journal activity is a document analysis instrument that will include participants responding to writing prompts that will generate cognitive representations of their reintegration experiences. The reflective journal exercise will be allotted approximately *25 minutes* for the participants to complete and will assist the researcher with identifying how long-term married couples explain IWM and adult attachment styles.

This reflective journal exercise will begin after the interview and consist of each spouse reflecting on their early attachment experiences. The reflective journal will be an independent journal-writing exercise.

Please describe any influential experiences using the journal prompts below that may have shaped your relationship beliefs based on the following prompts.

Reflective Journal Prompts

1. Please describe significant childhood moments
2. Please describe significant childhood relationships
3. Please describe significant life events
4. Please describe any other influential experiences.

Appendix K

Focus Group Protocol

Focus Group Icebreaker – The focus group will open with an ice breaker for 20 minutes.

A short icebreaker activity will open the focus group. This activity is designed to create a comfortable environment and encourage participation. It will be an introduction and warm-up before the focus group discussion begins.

Focus Group Questions

1. How have you maintained a sense of connection and intimacy in your marriage despite the demands of post-deployment reintegration uncertainties?
2. How would you describe your relationship dynamics that contributed to your ability to overcome post-deployment re-integration relationship challenges?