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The Recipe for Being a Good Military Wife: How Military Wives Managed OIF/OEF Deployment

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Abstract

Interviews with 25 military wives to elicit their lived experience of OIF/OEF deployment found two main themes: the recipe for being a good military wife and managing split loyalties. Military wives' experience reflected a disenfranchised existence. Their stress was exacerbated by the reality of the composition of their marital relationship -- a couple-military threesome -- that they bore in silence. Their marginalization did not deter them from supporting their husbands the best they could, reflecting their inherent strength and resilience. The wives had a recipe that helped them manage the stresses inherent in deployment. Research and clinical implications are discussed.

Keywords: Military wives, OIF/OEF deployment, combat deployment, qualitative research, feminist epistemology

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Military wives comprise of a somewhat forgotten group within the contexts of the military and research associated with military families. The research has been slow to examine the impact of military life and deployment during Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and/or Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) on military family members, specifically the experience of wives of service members, as well as wives' relationship with military deployment. Only recently has the wives' voices been given more attention in the research literature that has helped capture their lived experience (e.g., Davis, Ward, & Storm, 2011).

Military wives overwhelmingly note that the foreign deployment of their husbands is their single greatest stressor (Dimiceli, Steinhardt, & Smith, 2010). Their experience during deployment is marked by being solely responsible for handling life stressors and experiencing personal highs and lows, where too often they represent a marginalized voice within the military context (e.g., Wheeler & Torres Stone, 2010). Other research has shown that being separated from their husbands during times of deployment and peacemaking efforts results in military wives experiencing high levels of boundary ambiguity, loneliness, a lack of emotional support, poorer personal well-being, and lower marital satisfaction (e.g., Faber, Willerton, Clymer, MacDermid, & Weiss, 2008; Frankel, Snowden, & Nelson, 1992; Schumm, Bell, & Gade, 2000). The impact of deployment separation and fear for their husbands' safety during separations were found to be negatively associated with psychological and physical well-being, army life satisfaction, and marital satisfaction for military wives (Burrell, Adams, Durand, & Castro, 2006).

Despite these findings, military marriages are resilient to suffering. Most military marriages remain stable and can endure the multiple separations and stressors that are associated with military life as reflected in the recent reports in the leveling of divorce rates (Bushatz, 2010). As such, there is much to learn from military couples and wives that can inform the work of mental health practitioners and other community support networks that serve the military families. It is not enough to depend on the annotated, partial stories of military wives. The voices of military wives need to be brought to center stage. The opportunity to share their experiences of living on the home front where they are left to care for themselves and their children with relatively few social and emotional support systems can help clarify their experience. Using a feminist epistemology that stresses the centrality of situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988) this study honors the stories of 25 military wives by highlighting their experiences during OIF/OEF deployment.

Military Wives and Deployment

During times of deployment, military wives experience a wide range of emotions and experiences. They not only assume the responsibility for managing the stressors of raising children alone, they have to manage a wide range of physical and emotional complications (Wheeler & Torres Stone, 2010). The metaphor of a roller coaster

was used to describe military wives' somewhat tumultuous experience of both personal highs and lows while their husbands were deployed (Davis et al., 2011). Specifically, wives' experience were shaped by feelings of powerlessness, emotional pain (Davis et al., 2011) and difficulties raising children (Wheeler & Stone Torres, 2010), yet also increased self-confidence, self-discovery, and marital improvement (Davis et al., 2011) and coming to a greater awareness related to sociopolitical issues that helped put things into greater perspective (Wheeler & Torres Stone, 2010). Military wives further experience various forms of being silenced, most notably through having been the forgotten spouse, the lack of support from familial and social network, and feeling compelled to present themselves only positively (Davis et al., 2011).

Military wives often use "protective buffering," meaning they choose to not disclose information that could be perceived as negative or distressing to others as a means of protecting others (Hagedoorn, Kuijer, Buunk, DeJong, & Wobbles, 2000). Protective buffering limits wives' ability to openly disclose important and personal information with their significant other. This restrains their ability to express themselves freely and openly, promoting further silencing. It can eventually lead to negative health symptoms as well as negatively affecting marital satisfaction (Joseph & Afifi, 2010).

Still, military wives must confront other challenges as a result of their husbands' foreign deployment that further contribute to their hardships, such as secondary traumatization when their husbands return from duty exhibiting symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (Dirkzwager, Bramsen, Adèr, & van der Ploeg, 2005). Wives are then more likely to have more somatic problems, sleep disturbances, more negative social support, and rate their marital relationship less favorably. Military wives often combat feelings of ambiguous absence and ambiguous presence during their husbands' deployment, which often lead to greater boundary ambiguity (Faber et al., 2008). This ambiguity makes the redistribution of roles and responsibilities within the family a challenge both upon deployment and reintegration of the husband post-deployment.

The experience of military wives clearly covers a wide spectrum of feelings and mental states. As with other women, their voices are silenced. Applying feminist epistemology that serves to liberate the silenced and take advantage of wives' privileged access to the truth, we embarked on uncovering the stories of deployment from the standpoint of military wives. Honoring the standpoint of military wives allows us to "go beneath the surface of appearances and reveal the real but concealed social relations" (Hartsock, 2003). This process can facilitate uncovering the truth as known only to military wives, such as "Who is the military wife married to?" (Enloe, 2000, p. 127). Not only is it important to elicit the standpoint of military wives who offer a privileged vantage point of knowledge but to acknowledge the multiple realities that these wives inhabit. Thus, the purpose is not to reduce military wives' experiences to one truth but to accommodate differences and preserve multiple viewpoints.

As civilians providing services to military families we need to listen to the lived experience of military wives and bring their voice to the forefront for all to hear and from which to learn. This study contributes to the slowly emerging voices of military wives in the literature. These wives have experienced separation from their husbands during OIF/OEF. Drawing from feminist theory and guided by the following research questions, we elicit the uncensored stories of military wives: 1) How did military wives experience OIE/OEF deployment?, 2) What were military wives' relationships with the military and deployment?, and 3) How did the OIE/OEF deployment shape the spousal relationship for military wives?

Method

Phenomenology

The experience of military wives during times of OIF/OEF deployment is a phenomenon known only to these wives. Thus to understand wives' experience during deployment, the phenomenological method was used to guide this study. Phenomenologists seek to provide a holistic description of the lived experience by eliciting in-depth accounts of the lives of a small number of subjects in relation to the phenomenon studied (Moustakas, 1994). This process of gathering in-depth accounts of participants' lives facilitates understanding the world from their unique viewpoint and allows the essence of their experience to emerge. The goal then is to gather participants' stories until they become repetitive and any new information does not necessarily add more to the overall story; known as the point of saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). It is thus customary for interviews to be few but lengthy.

Design and Procedure

This study was part of a larger study of 50 male service members and their wives. For the purpose of this study, only wives' data was used. For the larger study, couples were interviewed in person separately to avoid possible dyadic influence. Researchers conducted interviews with wives to elicit uncensored stories of how deployment affected military marriages and to understand how the wives made meaning of their deployment experience.

The sampling method was purposeful and convenient. To elicit the stories of couples that were resilient and remained intact post-deployment, the inclusion criteria for participation included recent OIF/OEF deployment,

voluntary participation, age 18 years or older, and in their current relationship for at least one year. Participants were recruited from two small cities in the Midwest that neighbor two Army posts. Recruitment was via publicly posted flyers and newspaper announcements, referral from Army Family Readiness Groups, chaplains, and other local military sources. Fifty wives were interviewed and each received \$25 for her participation. There were no lesbian partners at the time of the interview. Wives of military men were interviewed by the fifth author and a team of doctoral students at a nearby university. Each interview took 45 to 90 minutes to complete. Questions focused on the wives' deployment experience and how they perceived it affecting their marital relationships. These questions are presented in Appendix A. Interviews were transcribed and verified for accuracy by a research team led by the fifth author.

Participants

A total of 25 transcripts were analyzed before saturation was reached, the procedure of which is described in the following section. The 25 participants' data included in this analysis had a mean length of relationship of 7.28 years ($SD = 7.49$, Range = 1 to 23 years). Their ages ranged from 19 to 48 ($M = 32.36$, $SD = 8.06$). Participants included 19 Whites, one Mexican American, four American Indians/Alaska Natives, and one who identified as "Other." Service members had been deployed for an average of 9.78 months (first deployment) and 3.12 months (second deployment). Twenty three of the service members were deployed during OIF and two during OEF on their first deployments. Four service members had experienced a second deployment; three during OIF and one during OEF.

Data Analysis

The aim of this analysis was to uncover the layered nature of military wives' expressed experience and to obtain a deeper understanding of their inner world (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, & Bertsch, 2003). This was achieved by utilizing the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) method whereby how events and objects are experienced and given meaning requires interpretative activity on the part of the participants as well as the researchers (Smith & Osborn, 2003). This process is known as "double hermeneutic" in which "the participants are trying to make sense of their world and the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world" (Smith & Osborn 2003, p. 51).

Gilligan et al.'s (2003) "Listening Guide" was utilized to make the epistemological shift from "reading" to "listening" during the analysis, sparking a more active process for the researcher-analyst. The process values the multiple voices present in the data and the many interpretations of it by recognizing the role the researcher-analyst has on interpreting the data. The listening guide consists of four steps, which includes listening for the plot, writing "I-poems," listening for contrapuntal voices, and composing an analysis.

Data analysis was conducted by the first four authors hereafter referred to as the analysis team. Investigator triangulation using multiple investigators helped ensure credibility and validity of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This process allowed us to study the data from multiple standpoints giving a more balanced view of the participants' experience as well as provided a means to cross-check our findings.

The analysis team first met on four different occasions to discuss the coding scheme and to become versed in the Listening Guide. After each meeting, each member worked independently and analyzed a set of common transcripts. Team members were also provided with the audio files of the interview transcripts that helped provide the affective context to the data. The purpose of these meetings was not to come to a consensus but rather to listen to the multiple voices that were elicited from a common transcript. This process lends credibility to the study as it shows that "the data is representative of the multiple constructions there are about the phenomenon" (Charlés, 2007, p.53). The process further helped the team to tune in to and be sensitized to the multiple perspectives that can be represented around a similar experience. Doing so facilitated the process of honoring the multiple and divergent views of wives about their deployment experience. After the fourth meeting and when members were comfortable with the analytical method, the team worked in pairs. Each pair analyzed a different set of transcripts, meeting regularly to share findings and identify themes that emerged from the data. Data analysis was guided by the research questions, feminist theory and Listening Guide. Data was analyzed sequentially. After analyzing 11 and 12 transcripts, the pairs reached a saturation point where no new themes emerged from the data. This was verified with each pair analyzing an additional transcript. No additional themes emerged from this additional transcript. At this point, the pairs merged their findings from the 25 transcripts and identified common themes that cut across the data. The initial merger of themes produced four themes that through the process of further investigator triangulation were subsequently reduced to the two themes described in the results below. We illustrate these themes and their sub-themes using I-poems and the contrapuntal voices of the military wives to increase the trustworthiness of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Researchers' Stances

None of the authors were personally connected with the military. The analysis team comprised of the first four authors, of which consisted of three women (all non-White and foreign born) who had lived in the U.S. between three to twenty years, and one U.S. born White male. The fifth author, who conducted and oversaw the data collection process, is a U.S. born White female. The first author has taught several courses that focus on family diversity and recognizes the frequent marginalization of women and other minority groups. In his teaching, research, and clinical practices he strives to give voice to these persons. Both of his grandfathers served the U.S. military during World War II. The second author has lived in the U.S. for 15 years, and identifies as a feminist. Both she and the fifth author were familiar with the larger data set of this study. Due to their familiarity with the data, they had to ensure that they did not insert material from other parts of the larger data set into the current study. Making such information known to the analysis team helped prevent data contamination. The third author has lived in the U.S. for 20 years and strives to maintain an anti-oppression stance in her clinical work and research. The fourth author has lived in the U.S. for three years and has experience working with women in group settings and recognizes the importance of giving voice to those who are socially marginalized. Sometimes, in qualitative research, one works to make the familiar unfamiliar. Authors' unfamiliarity with military life served to keep the listening process relatively clear.

Results

This study elicited the lived experience of military wives during OIF/OEF deployment. More specifically, this study gives voice to a population that has been silenced by their role as ancillary to U.S. service members. Using data collected from personal interviews with military wives, and guided by Gilligan et al.'s (2003) Listening Guide, feminist theory, and our research questions, the following themes that represent the lived experience of military wives during OIF/OEF deployment emerged: 1) The recipe for being a good military wife, and 2) Managing split loyalties.

The Recipe for Being a Good Military Wife

The stories shared by the military wives came together to form a recipe for how to be a good military wife. The wives prided themselves with the multiple demands and roles that they shouldered mostly single-handedly while their husbands were sent to serve our country. The following ingredients were used in this recipe:

Managing groundlessness alone. Military wives described their life as teetering or lacking a firm footing, contributed by the uncertainties that accompanied deployment. The uncertainty was centered upon whether their husbands would return from deployment intact. This was often synonymous with feeling powerless and reflected the unpredictability of war that they experienced. Fears of being visited by a chaplain bearing tragic news of their husband was part of the lived experience that left some wives walking on uneven ground. The existential reality of the seemingly endless waiting was evident in this one narrative, "Waiting to know what was going to happen" before they left "...at the end, waiting to know when he was ever going to come back, and feeling like it was never going to happen, even though it was like three days away. It felt like it would never happen."

Despite their intimate experiences of worry and fear, the wives trudged along, endured the long and often painful, lonely journey, putting up a good front. One wife described her aloneness:

It does affect us and we may look nice and happy on the outside, but it's just really hard and you know, people forget it if they don't have that constant reminder like a relative...that someone is in deployment and they'll just forget to ask, ...check on you. You kinda learn to not rely on that or expect that from people...

Assuming androgynous roles. Military wives were left behind to assume life as a single parent and head of the household. Being the person responsible for all the chores and tasks at home meant assuming non-traditional roles as one wife recounted:

I'm responsible for everything from paying the bills on time to getting the kids out of bed to getting the kids home and everything in between. The grocery store, everything. Every pipe in our backyard had to be dug up in the middle of winter and I had our new pipes replaced while he was in Iraq...That was fun, yeah I'm responsible for all of those things. I've kinda been a carpenter while he's been gone. I don't know crap about carpentering (laughter). Things went wrong I didn't like how it looked. I've painted the house while he was gone. I do all kinds of things.

Besides taking charge of the larger jobs, wives spoke of how they were attuned to their husbands' needs, attending to the details such as "making sure he knew where his keys were" so that he may succeed in doing "those important things." For one wife, her husband "jokes that she lets him borrow the pants," making reference to her dominance in their relationship. However, there appears to be a covert agreement where even though roles were reversed, the status quo of the husband being "the man" was maintained.

Emotional caregiving. Military wives spoke of how they often felt emotionally and physically drained. Hopes of having her husband as a support were futile. As one military wife relented in the following I-poem:

I'm just tired
 I'm just tired
 I just had another illness
 I get really tired
 I feel drained
 I'm the one raising 3 kids
 But I want to
 It's not like I'm complaining
 I was thinking that there would be this other person
 Which was stupid of me
 Because he's military
 That's the way it is

Many wives were further left to their own devices to manage their needs and they did this by reaching out to other military wives who they felt could understand. It appeared as if the strength that they gained here was channeled towards helping their husbands manage their emotional pain by listening, by attending, and by giving them space. One wife's description captures her role as listener:

I unfold everything that he has locked away
 all of the horrors that he has, you know, shown to me
 all of the things the TV does not display.
 I have to put on a good face
 because he needs somebody to express these feelings
 express, you know, having to put people in body bags
 good friends in body bags over there
 and having to move on. But
 I can put it in a better place
 I feel better that it makes it easier knowing that he can walk away feeling...better.
 He has told me every single day that I am the reason he is not insane.
 So, for me to be there for him to express it-
 the only person to express it-
 makes me feel very important.
 Makes it worthwhile.

...at first, he did not want to express anything because he never wanted to see me cry.
 ...he had to shoot a child.
 ...that brought a tear to my eye and
 that closed him off for a month

After that learning not to cry, like not to show emotion, just to kind of take yourself out as more of a, you know, therapist position just seeing his point, not trying to get emotion into it of your own he's been emotional. He is a soldier telling his story.

Unbeknownst to the spousal unit, military wives' listening role constitutes an important service for the military, especially since some husbands do not seek counseling. Wives function to help husbands transition back to the base and enhance their readiness for potential redeployment, thereby making wives an unacknowledged service provider for the military establishment.

Listening did not come naturally as one wife described:

It's just a lot to take in, It's like you don't know what to say. You don't know what to do. You don't know to hug them, cry, lay down and go to sleep. Start all over again you know, you just don't know. Now he was fine but now he's here. I see his face. He's talking to me. He's telling me what he seen, what happened to him. It's really hard.
 It is...It's really hard...

The use of the second person pronoun, 'you,' heightens this wife's disconnection from the experience, demonstrating how hard, in fact, the experience of deployment was for both her and her husband, while also taking in and processing the fact that the person who has returned is different. We are struck by her phrase, "a lot to take in," suggesting deployment to be unpleasant food, potentially indigestible. Yet another participant saw her husband's silence about the deployment experience as him being protective of her.

Re-learning the dance. Deployment was an event before which and after which existed two different realities. The husband came back changed, and sometimes, the wife changed in response to the deployment. What came through in these stories of change was that the wives bore witness to the changes in their husbands and they

responded to the changes. They were left with having to make sense of an unknown experience that was visible to the husbands but invisible to the wives. Their husband may not be back all the way or may have changed during the deployment, and what we notice is that upon their return, it is a new dance they are engaged in as a couple, the steps of which were as yet unknown. The old dance had been altered.

Sometimes, the change made the relationship smoother, and sometimes, it altered the relational dance irrevocably and challenged the couple to rework the steps in ways that called for an adjustment or led to an impasse. A wife described the change she saw in her husband:

I think they [military] put him in a different state of mind cause he's not himself, he's not who he used to be. I can still see it in him but he's not exactly who he used to be...cause he spaces out sometimes...you try to reach him and he's just so far and when he's like that, that makes me distant. He's probably, you know, got something on his mind and it's probably bothering him, which bothers me... You have to get to know each other all over again. It's like you're walking up to this person in an airport and you're like, "Hi, I'm ____, and you are?" Before he left, he would dance, and you know, just have a good time and everything when he came back he was quiet...always pacing...weighing more than he used to... I think that really hurt him.

Another wife shared how her husband found her new found self-confidence off-putting:

The self-confidence—sometimes my husband doesn't find that good 'cause he thinks that I'm still trying to take his role away from him. Things have changed. There were moments where he thought I was more aggressive than I should have been. He sometimes thought I was, uh, downright impolite towards people. He remembered me as a different person nine months ago.

Recognizing the strength. Military wives consistently shared their discovery of their inherent strength that increased their self-confidence. Therefore, while certainly difficult, deployment provided an opportunity for wives to step out of the confines of their more rigid roles and develop and discover new skills, both domestic and professional. Reflecting on her first deployment experience, one military wife noted poignantly:

I think I've shown myself that I am stronger than I thought because the day he left I, I said there's no way I will be able to do this. Eight months! I never thought we'd make it, but I did and it sucked. It was really hard and there were days when I wanted to quit. I thought it would be easier to be single and not have [husband] in my life. But, you know I'm not as scared about this one (next deployment) coming up because I know I can do it. It won't be easy or fun, but I know it's possible.

After becoming aware of their strength, "having survived deployment, I can survive anything," some wives showed concerns about their husband's return, as this would possibly imply in another change for them. As stated by one woman,

I feel more self confident which I felt that was good for me, that when he left because I, I know that I can take care of myself and I can take care of things at home, but at the same time I think the most difficult thing was that when he came home I still wanted to keep that role to myself.

Many wives developed a renewed appreciation for their husbands and their marriages as they awoke to the realization of the preciousness of life and the freedom in the U.S. The separation from the husband drew the spousal unit closer as they found that they had only each other to bond to and rely on to make it through deployment.

Managing Split Loyalties

In many ways, military wives not only espouse their husbands but also the military and its mission. The three make up the marriage. It is a proverbial threesome, which makes managing the marriage somewhat more challenging. Wives' stories reflected the integral role they played during deployment, how they sometimes felt pulled apart by their loyalties to their husbands and the military as well as knowing that there will be a part of their husbands that is known by the military that they may never know fully.

Walking the walk. Wives' stories of preparing their husbands for deployment spoke of how they accompanied their husbands on their deployment. This one wife recounted how she "walked the walk" referring to being there with her husband through the entire deployment experience:

I packed that ruck
I loaded those bags
I, you know
I walked the walk
I shed the tears
I think at the end
I said, you just come home to me
I met him on that soldier level
I wasn't the pitiful wife

Having accompanied their husbands, many wives had an insiders' perspective of the war and the military. A few chose to shield themselves from the details for fear of a re-deployment. Nevertheless, many wives were intimately familiar with details of the deployment experience. It appeared as if wives had to get on the program of the military to be a part of the relationship that husbands had with the military. They had to get onboard. It was no longer a wife-husband dyad but a wife-husband-military triad.

Split loyalties. Wives spoke of being torn between their loyalties to their husbands and their marriage, yet also needing to be supportive of his function in the military and being loyal to the military. Deployment makes this split tangible. Wanting to avoid being a "fair-weather friend" to the military, this military wife's voice captures her sense of hesitation, and perhaps even anxiety about her supportiveness that represents her split loyalty:

I believe if you're a military family you can't say that I'm gonna collect my pay all the time it's good. I'll take what the military is gonna give me when it's good, but when its bad it's time for me to desert. That's not, that's not what you do. I guess I'm supportive of that —that is his job. That is his role. And he supports me in my job and my role.

Several wives gave voice to their discontent with the military and this discontent created a division of loyalties to their service member, the military, and to themselves. Some wives saw military service as preventing their marriages from succeeding and creating internal conflict and guilt for not being the wife that the military demanded. They described deployment as a detriment and a set-back to their marriages, disconnecting them from their husbands and leaving little time for being a couple. This wife expresses her dissatisfaction with deployment especially due to short periods of time that they could communicate and how negatively it could affect their marriage: "when you're trying to have a marriage on once a week for ten minutes is very, very difficult."

Listening from the sidelines. There were times that wives felt left out when husbands formed a stronger relationship with their military comrades. The wife's knowledge of her husband was gained through military sources and was mostly fragmented. One wife shared that her knowledge of her husband was limited and gained from eavesdropping on his conversation with his comrades:

It was kind of hearsay...and a lot of times not necessarily from other people, but when he's with other people from his unit or we're having a bunch of them over for dinner and they are talking, that's when I will hear a lot of stories. That's when they are sharing stuff...they've been there, done that, and so he has somebody.

Her words painted a picture of their spousal relationship as not having much room for sharing pain or difficult experiences, whereas the military extended family had that room and she was a privileged visitor. However, the very metaphor of the military as a family seems misguided if the wife does not feel part of it.

Discussion

The experience of OIF/OEF deployment by military wives in this sample reflected a disenfranchised existence. Their stress was exacerbated by the reality of the composition of their marital relationship as a couple-military threesome that they bore in silence. The marginalization they experienced, however, did not deter them from supporting their service members as best as they could, reflecting their inherent strength and resiliency. The following discussion reflects the essence of how military wives experienced OIF/OEF deployment.

Disenfranchised Deployment

It is largely assumed within U.S. culture that military deployment can only be experienced by the military service member. While we make no efforts to diminish or make light of the deployment experience of military service members, it is important to note that this study sheds light on the fact that during times of foreign conflict military wives are in many ways deployed, as well. The military wives in this study spoke about their deployment experiences in ways in which it has gone unrecognized. It was echoed throughout the interviews that the wives were not "able" or not "allowed" to show their emotion, dependence, vulnerability, fright, and worry, but instead were compelled to be stoic, strong, independent and have it all together, whether it be for the sake of their children, their husband, the military, or their country. The overarching theme of "the recipe for being a good wife" captured this experience for these women. Therefore, their experience related to deployment in many ways has gone unrecognized and has not been publicly acknowledged.

We relate this finding to the writing of Brave Heart and DeBruyn (1998) who are often credited for conceptualizing historical trauma in the American Indian population. Citing Doka (1989), they define disenfranchised grief as "grief that persons experience when a loss cannot be openly acknowledged or publicly mourned" (p. 62). Here, we recognize that military wives' experience with deployment has been disenfranchised, because it has not been openly or publicly acknowledged that deployment can, in fact, be an experience unique to military wives. This, too, appears to be a uniquely gendered phenomenon in that it is assumed deployment is only experienced by men, and therefore women who are left to maintain the home are unable to fully experience or comprehend deployment. Our analysis of military wives' experience of deployment offers insight as to how

traditional conceptualizations of deployment need to be questioned, reconsidered, and redefined within military, clinical, and academic settings.

Disenfranchised Resilience

The research has been slow to demonstrate the resiliency of military wives during foreign deployment. The military wives in this study showed their resiliency in being able to not only survive, but in some ways thrive, during times of deployment. Given the fact that deployment creates added difficulties and personal and interpersonal stressors for military wives, the women in this study showed their ability to overcome these difficulties and discover many personal strengths. Consistent with a previous study that military wives gain self-confidence and self-discovery during deployment (Davis et al., 2011), military wives in the current study exhibited signs of personal growth and increased self-confidence. Some of this was related through assuming androgynous and nontraditional gender roles. While the male service member was deployed, many women had to employ a nontraditional gender role and their success at doing so yielded increased self-confidence. For many military wives, their successes experienced during their first deployment made future deployments, or the thought thereof, more manageable.

The military wives were also able to assume the role of caretaker for their children and husband, while also being responsible for upholding their own personal well-being. For instance, the military wife needed to be an emotional caregiver for her husband, while at the same time managing her own emotional rollercoaster and feelings of groundlessness. Some women spoke of needing to serve in the role of a therapist for their husbands despite the need to care for their own personal and emotional well-being.

Living as a Threesome

The theme of “managing split loyalties” demonstrates the ways in which the military is in fact an integral part of the couple’s relationship and how the military wife is responsible for managing this “threesome.” In many ways, the military wife is at the least married equally to the military and her husband, and it appears as though her first duty is to uphold military protocol and standards, in keeping with Enloe’s (2000) observations. Some military wives agreed that they considered themselves an “insider” on their husbands’ deployment experiences, however, many felt as though they were an “outsider” in this experience. It appears from this that the male service member’s first loyalty is also to the military. Therefore, the military wife is often moved to the “sidelines,” yet is also responsible for managing this threesome.

Military wives who embrace this threesome are better able to manage the multiple layers of stressors that come with deployment but it comes with a price of non-recognition. Resisting the military intensifies the already stressful nature of the deployment experience. Military wives are in a bind. Either way, they have to manage this threesome. Living as a threesome is what military couples signed up for whether they knew it or not.

Limitations

While this study provides a unique and important contribution to the existing literature on military families, it is important to note a few limitations. The sample included in this study might not represent military wives that live on a military base where more support might be available, wives who experience marital distress and racially diverse groups. It is unclear if and how the rank of the military service member might influence how wives experience deployment. It is also unknown if the experiences of wives’ in this sample might be compounded or buffered by any existing health issues or extended support systems. Future studies might want to consider these factors to clarify and validate our findings.

Clinical Implications

First, the clinician should recognize deployment as being a phenomenon that is experienced by both the military service member and the spouse. Validating the deployment experience of the spouse by openly and publicly acknowledging the notion that the spouse is also deployed will be important for eliciting further conversations as to how deployment affects military couples.

Second, the clinician should acknowledge the role that deployment plays on affecting the couple relationship, which could be centered on assuming androgynous and nontraditional gender roles. Some male service members may have difficulty adjusting or accepting the fact that their female spouse can perform many of the same duties he was used to performing before or after deployment. Greater exploration around gender roles within the couple’s relationship will be important for creating gender equality within military couple relationships.

Third, the clinician should be sensitive to the power dynamic that exists in therapy. Given the fact that the military wife is often subject to following military orders and being in a suppressed role within the context of the military, the clinician may inadvertently assume a hierarchical role in relation to the military spouse. The clinician should be mindful of these potential isomorphic processes that could occur in therapy and should work to create a more egalitarian relationship with the military spouse.

Fourth, it is important that the clinician not readily assume a deficit-based approach to working with military couples or military wives, specifically. The women of this study showed their resiliency and adversity in the

face of distress, and it will be important for the clinician to identify strengths and aspects of resourcefulness in military wives. Recognizing these qualities can serve as a starting point for identifying inherent strengths that can be used to work through presenting problems in therapy.

Lastly, the deployment experience can have long-term consequences on military marriages. In addition to the mental health issues, the impact of deployment on the couples' relationship that is silenced can manifest as relational problems that are presented in therapy. As such, it would be important to explore the impact of deployment regardless of the lapse of time since deployment.

Research Implications

Undoubtedly, more research is needed that gives voice to the deployment experiences of military wives. Research that validates the military wife as being deployed and that openly and publicly acknowledges the notion that she, too, is deployed is needed. Research that helps to further capture military wives' deployment will be important for moving their experience away from one that is disenfranchised to one that is openly and publicly acknowledged. Research on military couples and wives needs to shift from deficit-based to strength- and resiliency-based studies. This shift can serve to empower military couples as a whole. Such research would also help to inform clinicians as to how military couples and wives, in particular, are able to persevere during times of deployment and inform clinical work.

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Appendix A

Interview questions

1. How would you describe your communication with your partner?
2. How would you describe your "role" or "position" in the relationship?
Pertaining to recent deployment to Iraq/Afghanistan:
3. How has your partner's recent deployment most affected you personally?
4. Do you consider that deployment to be traumatic? Elaborate.
5. When has that deployment had the most negative effect on you? Elaborate.
6. Have there been any positive outcomes or anything positive that you gained from that deployment? Elaborate.
7. How would you rate your ability to talk to your partner about the deployment? Elaborate.
8. How would you rate your partner's ability to listen when you talk about the deployment? Elaborate.
9. How did your partner support you during his deployment?
10. Do you identify yourself as an insider or outsider to your partner's deployment? Elaborate.
11. Does your partner view you as being a part of his deployment? Elaborate.
12. Does your partner identify himself as an insider or outsider to what you experienced during deployment? Elaborate.
13. Do you see your partner as an insider or outside to what you experienced during deployment? Elaborate.
14. How do you feel about the deployment itself?
15. How is your relationship most affected by the deployment?
16. How do issues related to the deployment arise in your relationship? How often does that occur?
17. When has the deployment had the most negative effect on your relationship? Explain
18. Have there been any positive effects from the deployment on your relationship? Explain
19. How does the deployment affect your relationship? Ask specifically for impact pre- and post-deployment.
20. What has been beneficial in coping with the deployment?
21. Is there anything else that you feel is important for us to know?