

NECESSARY CONFLICT ON THE HOMEFRONT: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF
MARRIAGE AND RELATIONSHIP EDUCATION RESOURCES USED BY MILITARY
COUPLES

by

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Abstract

As we pass the decade mark of the Global War on Terrorism, the hidden causalities, such as the long-term impact of multiple deployments on marriages, become more apparent. Military couples experiencing repeated combat-related deployments are at an increased risk for marital distress, especially relationships that exhibit negative interaction patterns. Marriage and relationship education programs have the potential to equip military couples with conflict management skills, such as positive reframing and open communication, to increase marital satisfaction. This content analysis examined three relevant marriage and relationship education resources – *PREP for Strong Bonds*, *ScreamFree Marriage*, and *Marriage LINKS* - presently utilized by military couples. Each marriage and relationship education program reviewed utilized similar themes found in the research literature. Results of the analysis indicate a combination of their skill sets, accompanied by a concentration on specific challenges unique to military marriages, would be more effective in improving marital satisfaction than the models as they currently stand.

Keywords: military, marriage, conflict, reframing, open communication, Interim HomeFront Manager

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Dedication

Dedicate to our armed service members who fight for our freedom and to their families who make the ultimate sacrifice. May we never forget.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

March 2013 marked the tenth anniversary of the United States Armed Forces deploying troops to Iraq and Afghanistan in response to the Global War on Terrorism efforts. This date also signifies a decade-long hardship for military couples who have undergone multiple, lengthy periods of separation from their service member that must defend their country. As a result of enduring these war-related deployments, military couples experience changes in their relationships as well as in each other. These changes can create a breeding ground for interpersonal conflict.

One particular area of relationship conflict that military couples may face during a deployment is the difficulty with communicating or expressing their concerns and opinions to their partner while being separated for continuous periods of twelve to fifteen months. The following scenario is based on a true story of a service member who has recently been deployed overseas for the first time and reluctantly left his new bride at home to maintain the home front. Their story highlights some of the challenges military couples endure while separated from their loved ones who are fighting a different kind of war at home.

For Wayne, a specialist in the Army, deployment was creating many new areas of conflict in his marriage. This was the first time he had been separated from his wife of two years, Helen. Leaving her for fifteen months made him anxious about whether or not their new relationship could outlast this type of trial. They had lived in their current military installation for only six months and were not able to completely settle in and build a support network before he deployed.

Since the day he left for Iraq, Helen, carried her cell phone everywhere – the shower, meetings at work, even the bathroom – it was her lifeline to staying connected to her husband during the deployment. Helen never knew when he might be able to call and did not want to risk missing the opportunity to hear his voice. She had also attended her first Family Readiness Group (FRG) spouses meeting since the deployment. There Helen was able to meet a few other wives whose husbands were deployed with Wayne's unit. Helen and her new friends decided to meet for dinner every week while their husbands were deployed to offer each other social

support, vent about the week's stressors, and excuse them from the trouble of cooking a meal only meant for one.

During one evening out with her military friends, Helen received several phone calls from her husband. The calls were full of static and would disconnect after only a minute. This was not Wayne's usual call time since he had been deployed, in fact, he was usually sleeping at this time of the day, given the time zone difference. Even though Helen was having a hard time hearing her husband through the bad connection, Wayne was able to hear the girlfriends laughing and restaurant music playing in the background. He became extremely jealous after hearing that Helen was out at a local pub with her girlfriends. He began interrogating her about who she was with, the integrity of her newfound friends, whether she had been drinking, and how she could even think about having fun while he was in the middle of a combat zone. Wayne became so frustrated with his wife that he hung up on her.

Helen did not hear from him for six days; a stark difference from their prior daily interactions through email and instant messaging. She felt flooded with emotions. She was worried about her husband's safety, hurt over his lack of trust, and angry at his expectations of her to sit at home every evening and wait for the phone call that may or may not ever come. And now, she was beginning to resent Wayne for avoiding communication with her as a punishment for going out with a couple of friends. Helen felt that even though her husband was fighting a war overseas, she too, was fighting her own war at home – fighting to give unconditional support and maintain a genuine connection with her husband.

In addition to communication challenges, military couples have identified the deployment's reintegration phase as the most challenging experience of conflict their relationship has faced. As one spouse describes in her blog, *Wife on the Roller Coaster* (2010):

While he was gone, I had to do everything myself, but I had the luxury of doing everything my own way. When he came back, I had to relearn the art of teamwork. I had to share my bed and my bathroom. I had to share my alone time and the television remote control. I had to share household chores and parenting responsibilities. I thought I'd be relieved to relinquish some of those duties to my husband, but I wasn't. I found myself growing impatient with him for not knowing where we kept the trash bags or for not following the discipline plan I had established for the kids out of single-parenting necessity. The routines I had grown accustomed to were turned upside down, and I felt

his presence was forcing me to abandon the independence I had gained while he was gone.

This seasoned military spouse attributes these high-conflict areas of relationship change to the deployment and its negative impact on interpersonal communication, “For months, we had limited communication through letters, emails and brief, infrequent phone calls. We no longer knew how to have a face-to-face conversation...we had to learn how to talk to each other” (*Wife on the Roller Coaster*, 2010).

These two scenarios are examples of the types of conflictual interactions that can take place in today’s military couples who have most likely endured at least one, if not more, deployments. Although their relationship conflict may be similar to non-military couples, military spouses are simultaneously experiencing it with the additional stressors brought on by a deployment of one partner. So, just how many military couples in today’s military force have experienced a deployment?.

Today’s Military Force

According to the 2011 summary report for Department of Defense services (the Army, the Air Force, the Marine Corps, and the Navy), today’s military force is comprised of 2.26 million services, including both active and reserve components with over half (53.2%) of this population being married (Department of Defense [DoD], 2012). A reported 73% of the active duty component of soldiers has been deployed during this current war (Baiocchi, 2013). Of this group, 293,369 individuals have spent a cumulative time of 13-24 months deployed to Iraq and/or Afghanistan, 130,135 individuals have spent a cumulative time of 25-36 months deployed, 42,132 individuals have spent a cumulative time of 37-48 months deployed, and 7,517 individuals have been deployed for 49 months or more (Baiocchi, 2013). Consequently, these lengthy and multiple deployments of married service members will most likely increase or intensify the experience of interpersonal conflict resulting from specific deployment-induced challenges as well as everyday relationship conflict that is compounded by communication barriers. Couple functioning, such as emotional connectivity, negotiating family roles, and learning to manage strong emotions in a productive manner significantly impacts a couple’s experience of a deployment (Sherman & Bowling, 2011). The actual physical separation of a

deployment alone can interfere with intimacy, social activities, and types of relational communication (Allen et al., 2010).

Estimated percentages of divorce were reported to be higher now compared to pre-war percentages, with the Army branch of service exhibiting the greatest increase (DoD, 2012). In 2000, before the terrorist attacks on the United States, the divorce percentage for active duty service members was 1.4% and 2.9% for officers and enlisted personnel respectively. The most current records from 2011 report 2.1% and 4.1% divorce percentages for active duty service members. These continuous increases in divorces among today's military force indicate the negative impact this war's deployment tempo has on military marriages. The deployments create and intensify relationship distress due to long periods of separation and consequent interpersonal conflict.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to examine how well marriage and relationship education programs for military couples are built on the existing research literature with regard to couple conflict. With our country still at war in the Middle East and possible international threats from other countries looming, it is important to investigate the resources that are available to the families who are directly involved and impacted in defending our country and analyze what techniques they are emphasizing to help military couples endure and thrive during deployments. What are the common areas of conflict for couples experiencing a deployment? What helps military couples resolve relationship conflict when faced with the communication barriers created by deployments? How do back-to-back deployments further impact couple conflict?

This study addresses how military couples resolve conflict within the context of a deployment. Literature is examined about military couple conflict that creates relationship challenges. Three programs for military couples are *PREP for Strong Bonds*, *ScreamFree Marriage*, and *Marriage LINKS*. Developers of couple education programs that are created for the military will find suggestions for creating effective resources for today's military couples who have experienced or will experience the various challenges of deployment.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Within intimate relationships, where two individuals are spending an increased amount of time together while facing life's challenges, conflict is bound to surface. Each partner's selfish interests cannot simultaneously be met without some type of negotiation between the two demands. Merriam-Webster defines conflict as a mental struggle resulting from incompatible or opposing needs, drives, wishes, or external or internal demands. This negotiation or adaptive process that couples engage in can include spousal interaction, communication, problem-solving, and providing support and understanding to each other (Karney & Crown, 2007). How a couple responds to their clash can have a subsequent impact on the status of their relationship. This chapter will review the findings from research literature on couple relationships, marital satisfaction, including threats to achieving it (e.g. conflict); as well as take a closer examination of the main causes and patterns of conflict found within couple interaction. Conflict's ability to dually serve as a positive influence for couples will also be discussed.

Couple Relationships and Marital Satisfaction

In couple relationship literature, marriage has been commonly labeled an interdependent relationship where each partner influences the other partner's positive and negative outcomes derived from the relationship (Kenny, Kashey, & Cook, 2006; Kurdek, 1994). Based on Alfred Adler's marriage concepts and interdependence theory constructs, marriage was described as an "interpersonal social system in which input from each partner either (a) improves the relationship or (b) stimulates dissonance and conflict, both representing a style of interaction" (Dinkmeyer & Carlson, 1993, p. 185). Satisfaction within these couple relationships is measured in terms of marital satisfaction: a continuum that is dependent upon the climate within the relationship. Marital satisfaction was found to reflect the level of positive or negative feelings a married individual has with regard to the couple's communication level, how well conflicts are resolved and how problems are navigated (Mitchell & Boster, 1998). Trajectories of relationship satisfaction have been proposed to follow one of five patterns over the first 4 years of marriage: stable-high; minimal decline-moderately high satisfaction; minimal decline-moderate satisfaction; substantial decline-moderate satisfaction and; substantial decline-low satisfaction

(Lavner & Bradbury, 2010). Variables such as, “traits that spouses bring to their marriage, the recurring strains that they report 6 months into marriage, and the emotional quality of their problem-solving conversations as newlyweds all play a role in distinguishing spouses who vary in their experiences of relationship quality and longevity” (Lavner & Bradbury, 2010, p. 12).

Threats to Couple Satisfaction

Relationship research has experienced several shifts from its original focus on personality variables, to one of spousal interactions and communications within dyad, specifically those occurring during conflict-laden situations (Schneewind & Gerhard, 2002).

Chronic and acute stress. In his book, *Stress and Coping in Couples*, Bodenmann (2000) found that chronic external stress minimized the time partners spent together, therefore “reducing opportunities for common experiences, mutual emotional self-disclosure, tenderness, satisfying sexuality and lowering the feeling of we-ness in the couple” (Bodenmann, 2005, p. 44). Not only chronic stress, but acute stress and the combination of these two were also found to be relevant to predicting marital outcomes (Karney et al., 2005). Chronic stress, commonly described as background stressors, was defined as aspects of context that are stable and long lasting (e.g., socioeconomic status, having diabetes) that put constant drains on the relationship’s resources (Karney et al., 2005). Couples experiencing chronic stress are hindered in their efforts at relationship maintenance. For example, they may have less time to devote to romantic and exciting activities, due to the depletion of relationship resources for medical expenses (Karney et al., 2005). Aspects of the context that were immediate, temporary, time-limited, and specific in terms of onset and offset, were defined as acute stress (e.g., legal dispute, transition between places of employment) (Karney et al., 2005). Therefore, when couples experienced an acute stressor, the level of present chronic stressors should aggravate or moderate the level of resources available to respond to that acute challenge. For example, couples already experiencing high levels of chronic stress have fewer coping resources available to allocate to the additional challenge of an acute stressor, thus they have a harder time coping, which further affects the marriage negatively (Karney et al., 2005). This process predicts that marital quality will fluctuate downward as acute stressful life events compromise a couple’s adaptive processes, especially when coupled with already existing high levels of chronic stress (Karney et al., 2005).

Role strain. Another specific source of dyadic stress mentioned in the literature is role strain, a form of chronic stress that results from role occupancy such as parental or occupational roles (Wheaton, 1997). In one study, newly married couples' overall level of role strain, a specific example of chronic stressor, was associated with lower levels of marital satisfaction that quickly deteriorated over time compared to couples with low levels of role strain (Karney et al., 2005). With regards to mediating factors, wives were more likely to experience a high of marital satisfaction if they were receiving more adequate support from their husbands in response to greater escalation in role strain (Brock & Lawrence, 2008). In contrast, escalation in husbands' role strain was associated with a less low marital satisfaction for husbands themselves regardless of whether or not they perceived adequate support from their wives (Brock & Lawrence, 2008). A possible explanation for this gender difference in men is that, "without adequate communication between spouses, wives may not act in a way that is consistent with their husbands' new coping strategies, and consequently husbands may become dissatisfied with their marriages" (Brock & Lawrence, 2008, p. 18). In addition, additional relational processes, such as poor conflict management skills, might explain the negative effects of escalating stress on husbands' marital satisfaction (Brock & Lawrence, 2008). As for wives, the researchers speculated that perhaps they, "recognize and appreciate that their husbands are providing them with more adequate support in times of need (i.e., when wives are adjusting to changes in their own role strain), and therefore wives are more satisfied with their marriages" (Brock & Lawrence, 2008, p. 18).

The negative impact of stress was also evident in a cross-cultural study that surveyed three European countries. General stress and lack of interpersonal competencies (e.g., communication, problem-solving, and coping skills) were ranked among the top three reasons for divorce (Bodenmann, Charvoz, & Bradbury, 2007). Participants perceived the role of stress to be more of a divorce trigger than a reason for divorce. Bodenmann et al. (2007) compared its gradual, continual erosion on marital quality to that of rust on an automobile (p. 725). Research findings are consistent with their conclusions of the eroding effect of stress on spousal interactions and its association with declines in marital satisfaction and stability (Bodenmann, 2000; Bodenmann et al., 2007). "The more effectively each partner copes with his or her own stress, the more he or she can reduce the likelihood of spillover, and thereby protect the relationship from the negative effects of stress" (Bodenmann, 2005, p. 45).

Conflict. Like stress and role strain, conflict too has been found to impact marital satisfaction. Marital conflict was defined as the product of intimacy in marital relationships combined with differences in viewpoint that were generated by both spouses' sex roles and background characteristics (Argyle, Henderson, & Furnham, 1985). A couples' method of adapting or responding to these differences are known as dyadic coping. Utilizing dyadic coping resources can affect how couples interact and handle conflict which has been consistently tied to the ultimate success or failure of marriages (Hanzal & Segrin, 2009; Markman, & Hahlweg, 1993). Each partner's behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes influence their decision to engage in cooperation, a positive interaction style, or conflict, a negative interaction style (Carlson & Dinkmeyer, 1987). For partners that decide to use negative interaction styles during conflict situations, lower relationship satisfaction and higher rates of divorce or break-up have been associated outcomes (Gottman & Notarius, 2000; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Markman & Hahlweg, 1993). Specific to gender differences, negative interaction styles were strongly linked to males' divorce potential (thinking and talking about divorce) and strongly linked to females' lower positive connection to their spouses (Stanley et al., 2002). For both females and males, negative interaction styles were found to be negatively correlated with satisfaction, commitment, friendship, and confidence (Stanley et al., 2002). Furthermore, repeated use of unsuccessful methods towards managing anger and resolving conflict, such as negative interaction styles, was found to be a leading risk factor for marital distress in couples (Clements, Stanley & Markman, 2004).

Main Causes of Conflict

Beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s, researchers primarily focused on examining the influence of the conflict's subject matter and frequency on marital satisfaction. Couples typically reported conflict topics that fell into one of these categories – marital (intimacy, communication, commitment, habits, personality, power), social (relatives, use of leisure time, friends, household chores), and child/work (finances, work) (Jones & Gallois, 1989; Kurdek, 1994; Papp, Kouros, & Cummings, 2009; Storaasli & Markman, 1990). Topics of finance, household tasks, and uses of leisure time were reported as top conflict issues for couples (Jones & Gallois, 1989). Conflict issue or problem area was also found to impact the relationship between intensity of conflict and marital adjustment (Storaasli & Markman, 1990). For instance,

both husbands' and wives' marital adjustment was most strongly negatively associated with the intensity of conflict over communication and sex, the wives had two additional problem areas involving relatives and jealousy that husbands did not. In another study, conflict topics involving power and intimacy were ranked the highest in frequency with social issues, e.g. in-laws, politics, and time spent with friends, being ranked second (Kurdek, 1994). Furthermore, in the same study, the frequency of conflict in the specific content area of power was linked to both low concurrent relationship satisfaction as well as to a decrease in relationship satisfaction over time. Money was also found to be the most frequently reported issue that couples argued about in a separate study (Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002; Storaasli & Markman, 1990).

In addition to identifying the common conflict topics that influenced marital satisfaction, researchers also investigated the content's influence on how couples handled or responded to conflicts (Stanley et al., 2002). For example, people who reported money as the number one argument starter also reported more negative interactions within their relationship compared to couples who reported children as the number one issue. Couples who did not report a specific issue when asked to "Name the one thing that you and your partner argue about most" also scored lower on negative interactions and reported greater marital satisfaction than those who reported a specific issue (Stanley et al., 2002). These findings suggest that couples who have a specific issue that continuously triggers arguments and negative interaction, such as money, will exhibit lower marital satisfaction than couples who do not have a specific hot topic issue that continuously leads to an argument. A specific issue that predicts a negative interaction pattern between partners may be a conflict issue that is never fully negotiated or resolved.

The Conflict Process

Some researchers assert that *how* couples argue or manage conflict appears to be more significant than *what* they argue about or *how often* (Gottman, 1994; Jones & Gallois, 1989; Leggett, Roberts-Pittman, Byczek, & Morse, 2012; Stanley et al., 2002). Conflict management behaviors were the only relevant predictors of the spouses' degree of marital satisfaction (Karney & Bradbury, 1997). Stanley et al. (2002) also found supporting evidence for the significant impact of conflict management styles on marital outcomes. The researchers discovered problem type (money, children, and other) was found to not be associated at all with divorce potential (thinking or not thinking about it), while negative interaction patterns were quite strongly

associated. Yet, couples who reported money as the number one conflict issue also reported more negative interaction than those who reported children as the number one conflict issue. While the spousal interaction behaviors in response to conflict may be the greatest influence, it is not to say that content has lost its influence. Researchers since have confirmed that processes set in motion early in a relationship regarding problem-solving behaviors predicted marital satisfaction over time (Leggett et al., 2012). According to Schneewind and Gerhard (2002), conflict management styles were found to form during the first year of marriage and then become established thereafter. After the first year, a couples' conflict resolution style became increasingly influential that it was almost the sole determinant when predicting marital satisfaction (Karney & Bradbury, 1997; Schneewind & Gerhard, 2002).

Destructive Conflict Patterns

Several researchers have attempted to sort out common methods couples utilize to respond to conflict. One of the first conflict resolution researchers, Deutsch (1969), categorized how couples respond to conflict into two different types: Destructive and constructive conflict. He argued destructive conflict tends to escalate away from the initial issue and constructive conflict is characterized by cooperation, flexibility, and an ability to solve the problem. Destructive conflict resolution strategies were found to also explain variations in marital satisfaction (Kurdek, 1997). Negative or destructive conflict interaction patterns may hinder resolution of problems and expression of support while increasing partners' anger and other negative emotions, thereby keeping partners engaged in a reciprocal cycle of relationship dysfunction and individual distress (Papp et al., 2009). When couples are stuck in this cycle of relationship dysfunction and ineffective conflict management, they experience distress (Koerner & Jacobson, 1994). One partner's dysfunctional interaction behaviors essentially wear down the other partner's ability to contend with the stress associated with the use of these strategies, therefore decreasing marital quality (Kurdek, 1997).

One of the negative patterns of couple interaction is *negative escalation*. This pattern has been described as smaller arguments that increase with intensity to bigger, dysregulated quarrels to include accusations, criticisms, contempt, name-calling, bringing up past hurts, or shouting matches (Gottman & Levenson, 1992; Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002). An example of negative escalation is when a couple's conflict starts with a disagreement about whose turn it is

to clean the dishes. Their disagreement begins to escalate into a fight after one partner accuses the other of being lazy and always avoiding household chores. This dysfunctional adaptation to marital issues, commonly characterized by negativity and volatility, has been associated with a short marriage length (Gottman & Levenson, 2002).

Invalidation, another negative pattern of couple interaction, occurs when one partner criticizes, belittles, or disrespects the other partner's opinions, feelings, or desires; ignores the good work or behavior and points out a problem instead (Stanley et al., 2002). A couple might be experiencing this negative pattern when a partner responds to the other's disclosure of feeling jealous by responding with, "You're only saying that because your father was unfaithful to your mom." This pattern is particularly damaging as it may create what feels like an unsafe environment for the partner who was put down, therefore preventing the relationship from becoming happy, trusting, and supportive (Allen, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2010).

Also mentioned in the literature on negative interaction were *negative interpretations*. This pattern occurs when one partner assumes or views his/her partner's words or actions more negatively than they were intended; believes the worst instead of the best in order to confirm the bad thing s/he thinks is true; a belief that those words or actions were meant to hurt (Stanley et al., 2002). An example of negative interpretation is when one partner questions whether the couple can afford a trip to visit the other partner's out-of-state family member, the other partner assumes the real reason s/he is questioning is that s/he does not want to make the visit because s/he does not like the family member.

Another pattern is the *competitive* or winner/loser mentality: a forcing behavior where partners are more concerned with the idea of winning the argument or conflict rather than working together as a team to resolve the conflict (Greeff & Bruyne, 2000; Stanley et al., 2002). For example, one partner refuses to admit she is sorry for not calling about being late for dinner because she does not want her partner to feel like he has "won" the argument.

The most frequently examined negative interaction pattern, *demand/withdrawal*, involves one partner, "the demander," who desires change in the other and engages in behaviors, such as criticizing, nagging, and making demands, designed to bring about change in the partner on the receiving end, "the withdrawer." This person has the burden of change, prefers the status quo and prevents change by withdrawing from efforts to produce change such as avoiding the topic, becoming silent or physically leaving the conflict (Stanley et al., 2002; Eldridge, Sevier, Jones,

& Atkins, 2007; Papp et al., 2009). A couple might be exhibiting this pattern when discussing one partner's complaint about the lack of sex in their relationship and the other partner attempts to change the subject to avoid talking about it. This withdrawal reaction can show up during interactions in two different ways – pulling back and avoidance – sometimes creating a polarization (Greeff & Bruyne, 2000). This is most common among men, especially when the burden of change is placed on them (Greeff & Bruyne, 2000; Stanley et al., 2002; Eldridge et al., 2007). Specifically, the more common scenario of woman demand-man withdraw pattern was found to predict demand-withdraw patterns (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Papp et al., 2009; Stanley et al., 2002).

Couples who reported demand-withdraw laden conflicts, regardless of who initiated the conflict, exhibited fewer positive emotions and tactics, lower levels of conflict resolution, and a greater likelihood of negative emotions and tactics than couples who do not express the demand-withdraw pattern during conflict. Therefore, couples who express demand-withdraw during conflict are at a heightened risk for experiencing a cycle of increasingly hostile and unresolved conflicts (Papp et al., 2009). In more distressed couples, the desire for change is naturally higher than non-distressed couples, raising the probability of couples exhibiting the demanding and thus withdrawing pattern (Eldridge et al., 2007; Papp et al., 2009). This pattern ranks among the most destructive, least effective, and most significant patterns of communication in the marital interaction literature (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Papp et al., 2009; Stanley et al., 2002).

Co-occurring Influences on Negative Interaction Patterns

An overview of negative couple interaction also warrants a brief discussion on influential co-occurring facets, such as communication and stress. Communication, whether verbal or nonverbal, is one of the basic interpersonal processes. Within every interaction, one partner is communicating with the other partner even when one is remaining silent, yelling, or only utilizing body language by crossing his or her arms and avoiding eye contact. Compromised conflict skills, such as those related to poor support communication, lead to a greater risk of marital deterioration (Pasch & Bradbury, 1998). Communication plays a leading role in contributing to the conflict process as illustrated by Hanzal and Segrin's (2009) definition of dysfunctional conflict styles: "a communicative expression of negative affectivity" (p. 164). In

their research study, husbands and wives who scored high in negative affectivity (experienced emotions such as fear, hostility, and shame) simultaneously reported more negative interaction patterns (e.g. conflict engagement, compliance, and withdrawal) and less positive problem solving (e.g. focusing on the problem at hand, trying to find mutually beneficial solutions) than those who scored low on this personality trait. Therefore, Hanzal and Segrin predicted, partners who are naturally inclined to display negative affectivity in their daily interactions would most likely not process conflict interactions in the most effective manner. Just as communication influences spousal conflict interaction, so too does conflict conversation play a significant role in subsequent spousal communication. Conflict conversations were also found to generate significantly more negative and less positive affect when compared to pleasant topics during dyadic communication (Gottman & Levenson, 1999).

Similar to communication, stress also serves as a co-occurring factor that influences spousal interactions. The interaction between a variety of variables external to the couple and their responses to these may often cause stress in the dyad and consequently increase the probability of conflicts and poor marital outcomes (Bodenmann, Ledermann, & Bradbury, 2007; Karney, Story, & Bradbury, 2005; Neff & Broady, 2011). Distressed couples have been found to typically engage in destructive conflict such as defensiveness or personal insult, by losing focus on the topic at hand and instead blaming one another (Gottman, Markman, & Notarius, 1977). Husbands who were emotionally distressed were less likely to engage in effective problem solving with their wives and more likely to engage in negatively toned conflict styles and therefore have less satisfaction in their marriage (Hanzal & Segrin, 2009). In one study, under conditions of stress, the quality of marital communication declined by as much as 40%, thereby supporting stress's influence the conflict process (Bodenmann, 1995). One particular source of stress that has been found to negatively impact spousal interaction is occupational stress. In one study conducted by Story and Repetti (2006), husbands' and wives' self-reported marital anger and withdrawal behaviors increased in response to heavier workloads, underscoring the negative impact of stressful events on spousal interaction. Their findings were consistent with the negative mood spillover hypothesis that indicates:

Daily stressors generate negative emotions in the employed individual which contribute to an atmosphere of conflict and irritability when directly carried into the home. The process of coping with a stressful workday may also affect marital interaction through

increased withdrawal and self-focus, as individuals attempt to regulate their negative arousal following a stressful day. (p. 698)

On days of high job stress, husbands and wives reported being more self-absorbed, less responsive, and having less desire for social interaction, as well as being more likely to be critical, less patient, and tense; which ultimately led to more marital conflict on these days of high job stress (Story & Repetti, 2006). Not only was occupational stress found to create a conflictual family environment, but a home environment characterized by high conflict was found to exacerbate mood spillover and social withdrawal response to stress experienced on the job (Story & Repetti, 2006, p. 697). Partners' coping responses to occupational stress also were worsened when they had pre-existing high-conflict on the home front. Similar to the carry over of a unpleasant mood predicted in the negative mood spillover hypothesis, Fincham, Beach, and Davila (2004) found that the same holds true for unresolved conflict that spills over into future conflicts – it poses a risk to couples by leading them towards downward cycles of negative interaction.

Ratio of Positive to Negative Interaction Patterns

Negative interactions and behaviors were argued to have a more powerful effect on intimate relationship health than the positive interactions and behaviors (Gottman, 1994; Markman, Rhoades, Stanley, Ragan, & Whitton, 2010). The consequences of irrational behavior or negative interaction patterns in conflict situations, may be more negative as they may prevent resolution of the conflict (Jones and Gallois, 1989), which could result in a spillover effect to future conflicts (Fincham et al., 2004). In order to compensate for one partner's negativity (e.g. high levels of complaining, criticizing, defensiveness, contempt, and disgust), Gottman (1993) developed a formula that required five times the amount of positivity in order to counterbalance its ill effects on couples. For every negative interaction a couple experiences, five instances of positive interaction will be required to offset the potential damaging effects of the negative ones. When positive partner interactions were present, the intensity of everyday conflict interaction was no longer the sole predictor of marital satisfaction (Janicki, Karmarck, Shiffman, & Gwaltney, 2006). Although not unattainable, this balancing method supports the strength of negative interactions compared to positive ones. The higher the ratio of positive to negative interaction events, the increased likelihood of marital satisfaction (Gottman, 1994).

Constructive Conflict Patterns

This shift from a focus on the impact of negative interaction to one of a focus on positive interaction has been examined over the last decade (Fincham & Beach, 2010b). Early in research, the concept of constructive conflict or positive interaction patterns was characterized by cooperation, flexibility, and an ability to solve the problem (Deutsch, 1969). Successful or constructive conflict management was found to be crucial to marital satisfaction (Gottman, 1979). Unlike negative interaction patterns, universal grouping for positive patterns of interaction was harder to establish upon review of research-based studies. One of the earliest examples of positive interaction patterns was *alternative generation*; a phase or step in problem solving that entails thinking up possible or alternative responses to the conflict, a method tested in marital problem solving by Warmbrod (1982). Based on Watzlawick, Weakland, and Fisch's (1974) conclusion that it was the attempted solution that was the root of a person's distress, especially repeated use of an ineffective solution, Warmbrod focused her attention on the significance of the problem solver's ability and skill to generate alternative solutions. To avoid entering a fruitless cycle of applying the same solution to every conflict, it would appear to be more beneficial to the problem solver to imagine additional solutions for addressing each separate conflict as it arises. When couples share their ideas and realize that, "there are alternatives which they had not originally entertained, it sometimes changes (reframes) their perspective on the situation" (Warmbrod, 1982, p. 509). *Positive reframing* of a conflict is another example of a positive conflict resolution style. Couples could view conflict and stress as an opportunity for fostering healing and relationship growth rather than being inherently negative in nature (Fincham & Beach, 2010a).

Cooperation, sometimes used interchangeably with collaboration, is a conflict management style that entails a team approach to confronting disagreements and problem solving in order to find solutions (Greeff & Bruyne, 2000). Some examples of cooperative activities include spending time together, completing household tasks, giving social support to each other, and creating a greater sense of interdependence through consideration of other's feelings (Sanderson & Cantor, 2001). Cooperative behaviors have been found to predict marital satisfaction, therefore considered an essential and effective problem-solving strategy (Harrison, 1993; Tallman & Hsiao, 2004). Even after controlling for conflict content, such as money, sex, education, and age, Leggett et al. (2012) still found a significant positive relationship between

the level of cooperation and marital happiness, which further supports the concept that cooperation will increase marital happiness when used as a problem-solving strategy. Cooperation was one of the basic elements of common dyadic coping skills that prevented divorce (Bodenmann, 1997).

Positive communication also plays an influential role in positive interactions among couples. Boyd and Roach (1977) asserted early on that certain communication behaviors separated more satisfied couples from less satisfied couples such as active listening, sending clear and direct messages, and verbal expressions of respect or esteem from the spouse. A few years later, Noller (1984) expanded the list of behaviors associated with positive communication behaviors to include being sensitive to each other's feelings, listening and responding, expressing respect and esteem, and confirmation. Canary and Cupach (1988) further supported the importance of using these positive communication skills due to their association with couples having a satisfying relationship. Each of these findings formulated a thriving interaction pattern labeled *open communication* that begins with communication that is positive in nature (expresses positive affect), which leads to an increased understanding between partners that ultimately paves the way to more positive exchanges, a greater likelihood of conflict resolution and higher levels of intimacy and satisfaction with one's partner and the overall relationship (Hanzal & Segrin, 2009). Communication characterized by openness and honesty during interaction has proven to lead to positive interaction within a relationship (Pasch & Bradbury, 1998). Dating partners who utilized constructive communication strategies such as open discussion, showing concern for their partner's feelings, and compromise, were less likely to avoid conflict and to exhibit relationship satisfaction than partners who used deconstructive conflict resolution methods (Sanderson & Karetzky, 2002). Open and positive communication also functioned as a mitigating influence on conflict. Positive conversation following a conflict-laden conversation generated far more positive affect than negative when compared to the affect induced by conflict conversations (Gottman & Levenson, 1999). With the help of positive conversation, couples were able to rebound from negativity in marital conflict.

A willingness to *compromise*, also referred to as *negotiation* in marriage literature, was argued to be the key to effectively resolving conflict in a positive manner (Gottman, 1999; Markman, Stanley, & Blumber, 1994). Gottman (1999) described compromise as a search through one's partner's request for something they can relinquish, find middle ground on, or

“yield to win” so work can then begin with attention on the problem together (p.114-115). He asserted the prerequisite of compromising is, “a willingness to share power and to respect the other person’s view” (p. 127). Becoming more proficient at accepting one’s spouse’s influence will help them cope far better with marital conflict than resisting their spouse’s help. In order for compromise to occur, partners have to be honestly open and genuinely consider their partner’s position. Alternatively, in a relationship where couples did not compromise, Gottman predicts the marriage would suffer from feelings of inequity and unfairness (Gottman, 1999).

Influences on Positive Interaction Patterns

Where and how the conflict interaction starts. Some researchers argue that it is where and how the conflict issue is first approached that impacts the outcome. One of the basic elements for a healthy marriage is that it is built on a foundation that provides partners with a sense of safety and security in the stability and future of the relationship (Stanley et al., 2002). A secure and safe environment for managing conflict builds that foundation by creating a safe space for couples to voice their opinions, resolve conflict, and express emotions or concerns without negative consequences (Allen, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2010).

Gottman (1999) developed the “Gentle Start Up” concept that reflects the importance of communication by placing emphasis on the initiation of constructive conflict – bringing up concerns with one’s partner directly and gently. Gottman asserted that how a couple starts talking about an issue determines how the talk will go. Similar to Gottman’s strategy, Jones and Gallois (1989) created a list of five rules to help effectively manage behavior during the conflictual interaction to ensure constructive methods are utilized: consideration (how you treat one another during conflict), rationality (behavior during conflict), specific self-expression (how messages should be conveyed and the content of messages), conflict resolution (how to handle and resolve conflict so it does not reoccur), and positivity (making the interaction positive and maintain intimacy). In their study, Jones and Gallois reported that rationality was the conflict management rule rated most significant in order to manage the strong emotions of operating through a couple’s conflict. They concluded that the consequences of irrational behavior or negative interaction patterns in conflict situations may be more negative than in other situations because they may prevent resolution of the conflict. Therefore, it is imperative that each partner remains reasonable and rational during conflict to ensure progress towards reaching an

understanding and an eventual solution. These findings replicate research by Gottman (1979) who also concluded that rational couples (those who remained calm or rational during a conflict) were less likely to engage in exchanges of insults and recriminations than irrational couples, and more likely to resolve the conflict effectively.

The positive side of stress. Contrary to the negative influence stress has on conflict management styles explained earlier, it can also function as a positive influence on spousal conflict interaction. For couples with low chronic stress and ample access to coping resources, the experience of a negative event external to the relationship can be positive for spouses and can produce an opportunity to foster feelings of closeness (Karney et al., 2005). By surmounting the challenge together and coping successfully, these stressful events may leave couples feeling closer than they were before; their success was dependent on adapting to the stressful event together. Contrary to what one would intuitively expect, there is some evidence that supports higher levels of stress sometimes correspond with better marital functioning. Bodenmann (2005) found that couples high in marital satisfaction at the 5-year follow-up of one study, displayed more positive supportive dyadic coping skills (like problem- and emotion-focused supportive coping) and common dyadic coping skills (such as sharing of feelings, mutual commitment, and relaxing together) at earlier times than did couples who were separated or divorced (Bodenmann, 2005, p. 44). This finding supports the need to begin implementing these positive coping skills early on in the marriage or even prior to marriage so couples are equipped to handle life's stressful events whenever they arise. Bodenmann (2005) argues that, "engaging in positive dyadic coping by jointly discussing the stress experience, reframing the situation, or helping each other to relax increases a sense of solidarity or we-ness and is likely to reduce stress, and in so doing, promote marital happiness and cohesion" (p. 45). Friendship strength or how partners interact with one another when they are not entangled in conflict was also found to be a positive influence for couples attempting to manage spousal interactions (Gottman, 1999).

Summary

Not all conflict is dysfunctional as long as it is counterbalanced with positivity (Gottman, 1993). How couples argue, their negative and positive conflict management patterns, have been consistently shown to form early in the relationship and have a significant influence on marital satisfaction. Although content does hold some bearing on conflict resolution pattern, underlying

issues (e.g., power and intimacy) that are commonly found at the root of these negative interactions need to be considered during intervention efforts. Conflict resolution styles, coupled with communication skills and stress management skills, are vital components to improve marital satisfaction and stability. Couples most at risk for a downward spiral of unresolved conflict and marital dissatisfaction are couples characterized by beyond the newlywed phase, a demand-withdrawal response to conflict, experiencing acute stress simultaneously with pre-existing chronic stress, and low dyadic coping resources. On the other hand, couples who show the most resiliency and marital satisfaction when faced with conflict-laden situations those described as couples who established positive interaction patterns early in their relationship, have early on experienced early on stressful life events and successfully navigated through them, utilize the cooperative pattern when responding to conflict, and maintain a strong friendship. Research emphasized intervention methods aimed at minimizing negative interaction patterns and increasing positive ones.

Military Couple Conflict

The literature in couple conflict suggest that how couples manage their problems can have a significant impact on marital satisfaction. Here, we will continue to examine interpersonal conflict but will narrow our investigation to conflict within a particular dyad – military couples. According to the 2011 summary report for Department of Defense services (the Army, the Air Force, the Marine Corps, and the Navy) the total number of active and reserve components combined for all services totaled 2.26 million service members (Department of Defense [DoD], 2012). Because over half of these service members (53.2%) are married (DoD, 2012), research relevant to this population in the military is critical for the United States Armed Services. Not only does this research relate to over half of the military force currently serving, but marriage has also been shown to be beneficial for the individual service member and the institution they serve. Married service members reportedly perform better and become promoted faster than unmarried service members, according to the National Healthy Marriage Research Center (Gambardella, 2008). Marriage status of service members was also associated with increased retention for males in the military (Schumm, Bruce Bell, Rice, & Schuman, 1996). With respect to the correlation between the soldier, family, and the institution, the military promotes the idea that mission readiness entails soldier readiness *and* family readiness.

Military Culture

Family affair. Although they share similar characterizations, patterns, and challenges as civilian married couples, military couples also have many differences that are unique to the military subculture. One of the signature qualities of a military spouse is the ability to put duty to the military first; everything else, including marriage, kids, and employment comes after the military (Burton, 2012). Military spouses are expected to sacrifice their own needs and desires in the interest of their service member's commitment to serve the country. This prescriptive model of the military family, putting duty first, arose from the Armed Forces need to retain and recruit more skill personnel who were married (Kohen, 1984). As a result, the military presumed the civilian spouse would and could adapt family needs around the demands of their service member spouse's military career. This dependence on one spouse to maintain family functioning so their service member spouse could fulfill their work obligation, led to an increase in each partner's interdependence of each other. The wife's commitment was shown to have the greatest effect on her soldier's commitment towards the military institution when compared to other variables such as unit leader support, Army-level policy support, and work-family conflict (Bourg & Segal, 1999). Compared to civilian couples, military couples may be at an increased risk for distress due to stressors related exclusively to the culture of military life, i.e. frequent moves, loss of social support, finances, training and deployment cycles, and long or unpredictable separations (Kotrla & Dyer, 2008; *National Healthy Marriage Resource Center*[NHMRC], 2011). Military culture-specific experiences such as these, can both directly and indirectly affect a couple's adaptive processes, by way of emergent traits that result from the experience (Karney & Crown, 2007).

Frequent relocations. Permanent change of station orders or relocation directives have a direct impact on military marriages. The service member's family is expected to pack up their belongings, out-process from their current community environment, and relocate to a different location, most times involving an out-of-state or out-of-country move at a short moment's notice. Alison Perkins, an active duty Army spouse comments on this constant strain on military marriages:

Ever try moving 4,000 miles with three kids, a very pregnant wife and a large dog with only six weeks' notice?...That alone could make or break you as a couple. Now, try

doing it half a dozen times or more over the course of a marriage. You either learn to work together or you break apart trying. (Burton, 2012)

Not only are the logistics of a move itself stressful for military couples, but the adjustment to a new environment accompanied by the needs to secure housing, spouse employment, a new social network of friends, neighbors, and community contacts also take their toll.

Negative interaction patterns. In a military environment, soldiers are conditioned to adapt to a threat or underlying concern by avoiding expression of any soft emotion; instead, soldiers are trained to suppress it and respond to the threat with hard emotion, such as anger, power, or control (Sayers, 2010). When their superiors demand change in the work place, soldiers are trained to comply with their orders and avoid. Since listening, mutuality, and compromising, general guidelines for effective problem-solving, are not values associated with communicating in the conformity climate of the military, Sayers (2010) predicts that this subculture might steer the service member spouse towards a more undesirable conflict interaction style. However, very few studies have examined the various conflict interaction patterns exhibited by military couples. Because we know that soldiers are conditioned to avoid expression of feelings that make them vulnerable in their work environment, one could logically assume that this reaction of avoidance or pulling back would become their default response to conflict interactions within their at-home environment. Based on the literature review of negative interaction patterns found in civilian couples, the avoidance and pulling back behaviors are most similar to the demand-withdraw pattern utilized in conflict-laden marital communication; the withdraw response being most common among the male spouse (Eldridge et al., 2007; Greeff & Bruyne, 2000; Papp et al., 2009; Stanley et al., 2002). Therefore, it is logical that couples in which the male partner is actively serving in the military would be more likely to engage in the demand-withdraw response to interpersonal conflict when compared to civilian spouses.

Military couples often experience stressful life events, like frequent relocations and long separations, and for some couples this experience happens multiple times during their spouse's career. Given that stressful circumstances to one's marriage have been associated with a negative affect on the dyadic process between spouses, one could logically assume that the stressful life events inherent in military subculture are also likely to be associated with negative

affect between spouses (Story & Repetti, 2006). Expected negativity in couple communication could therefore be presumed therefore increasing the likelihood for mismanagement of conflict-laden conversation as seen in civilian couples. Inversely, marital discord was shown to have a negative influence on work-related stressors, such as distracting the service member spouse and his/her supervisor (Dolan & Ender, 2008).

Positive interaction patterns. Marriage literature surrounding military couples repeatedly reported open communication and reframing as influential interaction patterns that produced resiliency in their relationship. Karney and Crown (2007) suggested adaptive processes of the couple, such as positive conflict interaction patterns, help to mediate the impacts of military experience on marital satisfaction. For example, a service member's spouse can be viewed as mediator or a source of positive social support for the couple. Military couples who exhibited positive interaction skills, specifically open marital communication, reported lower levels of stress compared to service members who perceived their spouses as a source of stress (Dolan & Ender, 2008).

Couples have also reported utilization of positive reframing their stressful life event, such as a long period of separation caused by a military deployment (Bashram, 2008). These couples reframed their stressful experience of the deployment to a positive experience with focus on the homecoming of their beloved service member; describing feelings of pride and a sense of accomplishment that they survived the event. Their ability to take those experiences of high levels of conflict or stress and positive reframe or transform them to represent an opportunity for fostering healing and relationship growth (rather than being inherently negative in nature) would presumably reap similar benefits as civilian couples who engage in positive reframing (Fincham & Beach, 2010a). From a positive reframing perspective, military couples could attempt to view the time of separation during a deployment as an opportunity to improve their communication skills and creativity of expressing feelings. Upon successful post-deployment reintegration, the couple could draw from this stressful life event as a reference of relationship endurance and strength. Fincham, Stanley, and Beach (2007) described this couple experience, as positive transformation change: couples who successfully navigate through a relationship challenge and come out more secure in their relationship and more mutually trusting of each other than they were before.

It would seem that military couples would most likely benefit from use of reframing in their couple interactions. A positive reframing of the lengthy deployment experience would help to counteract any negative impacts stressful event had on relationship functioning. After enduring such an event, their relationship dynamics will have undoubtedly changed so that the partners are functioning differently than before the deployment. Engaging in positive reframing could guide the changes to represent a positive transformation change.

Deployments. Couples also can be indirectly affected by stressful life events related to military culture, such as long periods of absence or unplanned absences (NHMRC, 2011). Military training and deployments result in long periods of separation that result in not only physical separation for the couple, but also lead to less frequent meaningful conversations, which may undermine the couple's communication interactions. The movement of military forces to a combat zone, commonly referred to as deployments, can intensify problems being experienced by military couples, as well as create additional hardships and stressors on them (Kotrla & Dyer, 2008; Sayers, 2010; Sherman & Bowling, 2011). A deployment involves the temporary relocation of the service member's unit abroad where they will perform their military duties in relation to a particular mission. The service member is physically separated from his/her family for a period of time with limited communication if any, typically 6-12 months depending upon the branch of service and the mission. Couple functioning, such as emotional connectivity, negotiating family roles, and learning to manage strong emotions in a productive manner, was found to be significantly impacted by a couple's experience of a deployment (Sherman & Bowling, 2011). The actual physical separation of a deployment alone can interfere with intimacy, social activities, and types of relational communication (Allen et al., 2010). These potential damaging effects of combat-related deployments have earned themselves the name, "hidden casualties of war" (Robeson, 2012).

Deployments impact on marital communication. According to a National Military Family Association's 2005 survey, 17% of respondents reported that communication with their service member was the top challenge during deployment (Committee on the Initial Assessment of Readjustment Needs of Military Personnel, Veterans, and their Families, 2010). Challenges communicating with service members are heightened during deployment due to several factors: time zone differences, less established telephone connections abroad, service member's remote location, financial costs involved in purchasing phone cards, clarity of phone connection,

restricted content, and interrupted communication as a result of combat attacks. Couples with poor levels of communication have been found to experience greater distress of the separation during times of deployment compared to couples characterized as having satisfactory levels of communication (Blount, Curry, & Lubin, 1992). Because communication can be irregular or time and content restricted, it would seem most likely that for couples with pre-existing communication barriers, deployments would only exacerbate their inability to effectively interact. The deployment separation can also “undermine opportunities for positive connections and require significant adaptations in the communication processes of the couple” (Allen et al., 2010).

Due to technology advances over the years, soldiers who have been deployed during the the last two decades have been able to use personal computers to access the internet from the privacy of their rooms or use public telephones and computers available at most military’s Morale, Welfare, and Recreation (MWR) centers in order to communicate with their family members back home. This opportunity for live interaction with loved ones stationed abroad, although beneficial for maintaining a positive connection to family, it can ironically, also pose communication challenges for both the soldier and spouse. Use of written communication, such as instant messaging, leaves out the ability to gauge tone or mood of the sender and receiver and could easily result in frustrations and misunderstandings. Soldiers who use live methods of communication, such as video chat or telephone, may face similar communication misinterpretations.

One explanation for potential miscommunication is the effect of service members utilizing public areas to interact with their at-home spouse. During one research study, couples reported a shift in their primary concern when experiencing interpersonal conflict in public – couples who initially responded with a concern for dealing with the conflict at hand, shifted their concern and became more concerned about self-presentation, appearing calm and rational (Jones & Gallois, 1989). Couples experienced this sudden shift when the location of where the conflict took place changed from private to public. Their concerns were no longer about conflict resolution; instead they became more worried about how they appeared to manage the conflict in public. Therefore, it is logical to assume that the same shift could occur when the deployed service member is confronted with interpersonal conflict in public places; such as the instance of a deployed spouse engaging in a conflict-laden phone call conversation with his spouse at the

MWR facility. The deployed soldier may be more concerned with appearing cool and hard in front of his battle buddies at the MWR while on the phone or computer with his spouse, instead of focusing on conflict resolution or exhibiting positive interaction skills, e.g. apologizing or pillow talk. The at-home spouse may be unaware of these influential external factors and become distressed over her partner's lack of engagement and as a result, becomes suspicious and frustrated, possibly evoking a negative response ultimately leading to unresolved conflict.

Present War Climate

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the military culture (and consequently, military marriages) have undergone transformations. The current global conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have been associated with longer and more frequent deployments, compared to any other conflict since the Vietnam War (Sayers, 2010). Beginning in 2002, the deployment pace for combat troops has increased significantly (Belasco, 2009). Of the more than 2,000,000 service members that have deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan in the decade following the September 11 terrorist attacks, nearly half or 977,542 of them have been deployed more than once (Martinez & Bingham, 2011). With regards to multiple deployment numbers, the RAND (2010) report provides some estimates for active duty soldiers in the Army:

Approximately 373,000 of the soldiers in the Army as of December 2008 had served in Operation Iraqi Freedom or Operation Enduring Freedom. Over 121,000 have deployed for their first year, 173,000 for their second year, and 79,000 for their third year or longer. Of this last group, over 9,000 are deploying for their fourth year... These soldiers have more deployed time than their counterparts from the other services. (Bonds, Baiocchi, & McDonald, p. x)

In 2007, the military experienced even more pressure to deploy all available troops in an effort to increase the U.S.'s presence in the Middle East. During these surge years 2007 and 2008, the average troop strength grew by 16,500, reaching a peak of 157,800 deployed troops in Iraq alone (Bonds et al., 2010). As a result of this particular U.S. troop surge, the Combat Stress Clinic at Camp Liberty, Iraq "noted a trend in marital stress as a chief complaint of soldiers seeking outpatient counseling services as well as in those seeking restoration services" (Gottman, Gottman, & Atkins, 2011, p. 54). In a study conducted by the Department of Defense Mental Health Advisory Team (2007), 27% of married service members deployed to Iraq reported

experiencing some form of marital problems during their deployment and an even higher percentage was reported among service members deployed six months or longer.

These reports support an association between the increase in combat deployment frequency and/or length and an increase in marital stress within military marriages.

Multiple deployments. Continuous deployment cycles, a characteristic of the current war, present specific challenges to couple conflict. Compared to former outlines for the emotional cycles of deployment that allowed for a period of 18 months to 2 years, military families experiencing deployments during this particular military conflict, the Global War on Terrorism, are facing back-to-back deployments of the service member and are given shorter times at home, sometimes only 9-12 months in between deployments (Deployment Health and Family Readiness Library, 2006). This limited amount of time between deployments does not leave much room for couples to reach a level of stabilization, resolve lingering conflict, and enjoy a period of normal stress. As seen in civilian marriage research, couples carrying unresolved conflict are at risk for negative downward spirals of interaction in the future. If military couples do not effectively resolve conflict that arises out of each deployment, it can be expected they too, would be at risk for spillover of unattended transgressions carried over from previous deployments (Fincham et al., 2004).

Emotional cycles of deployment. Stressors associated with lengthy deployments have been found to interfere with couples' efforts to maintain their relationships (Karney & Crown, 2007). Military couples are at risk for also experiencing "co-occurring difficulties" during a deployment, issues that occur as a direct result from being in a combat environment on top of the indirect marital discord issues that may be present resulting from long periods of separation, such as posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, or infidelity (Sayers, 2010). These common conflict-areas for military couples experiencing a deployment have been further exacerbated by the back-to-back deployments, a distinctive characteristic of this current Global War on Terror. To illustrate the potential problem areas faced by military couples experiencing a deployment, the Deployment Health and Family Readiness Library (2006), a product of the collaboration efforts between the DoD, military services, and military service and family member support organizational partners, outlined and described seven stages of the emotional cycles of deployment.

The first stage, titled anticipation of departure, begins when military spouses are first alerted to a possible deployment. The stay-at home spouse may begin to anticipate the loss of their service member spouse or be in a state of denial of the upcoming deployment. “As reality sinks in, tempers may flare as couples attempt to take care of all the items on a family pre-deployment checklist, while striving to make time for “memorable” moments prior to separation” (p. 1). With respect to the deployment tempo of this current war, this “first” stage may blend in with a short reintegration stage stemming from the last deployment. As a result, couples start another cycle of deployment without having time to renegotiate a shared vision of who they are from the last deployment.

Next, stage two, detachment and withdrawal, creates emotional distance within the marriage as each partner attempts to protect themselves from getting too attached. Partners typically experience sadness and anger as the departure time draws near. During this stage, the service member begins to bond more with his coworkers and less with his spouse. Due to the multiple deployments, spouses experiencing this stage multiple times may begin to build permanent walls to avoid exposing their vulnerable feelings. This avoidance of sharing feelings and lack of emotional connection can lead to difficulties in marriage.

Emotional disorganization, the third stage, occurs after the service member has deployed and the at-home spouse is left alone to navigate through daily life. This stage involves the at-home spouse adjusting to new roles and household responsibilities. In the case of back-to-back deployments, the at-home spouse may begin to experience “burn-out” due to the reoccurrence of this stage and its increased responsibilities that occur with each deployment.

Stage four is recovery and stabilization. This stage is a major turning point for the at-home spouse. Their success or failure in this stage depends on whether or not they have adequate support and resources. For example spouses who exhibit sufficient resources will become resilient and capable of successfully coping during the remainder of this stressful life event. On the other hand, spouses who do not exhibit adequate coping resources may experience burn-out or depression. Next, anticipation of return, stage five, involves the at-home spouse making arrangements and preparing for their service member’s return home from deployment.

After the service member has returned home from deployment, the sixth stage, return adjustment and renegotiation, begins. “Couples...must reset their expectations and renegotiate their roles during this stage. The key to successful adjustment and renegotiation is open

communication” (p.1-2). Failed attempts to renegotiate their roles may lead to increasing marital discord. Effects of combat-related stress on the service member may also be present during this stage, e.g. irritableness, guardedness, and the desire to be along.

Lastly, stage seven: reintegration and stabilization. This stage in the cycle can take up to 6 months for the couple to reach stabilization in their relationships. Co-occurring factors contributing to the delay in successfully navigating through this stage are the presence of combat stress spillover, orders for a permanent change of duty station (relocate), or knowledge of another upcoming deployment that propels couples to begin stage one of this cycle all over again, with or without ever reaching stabilization.

Reintegration phase of deployment. As mentioned in the seven emotional cycles of deployment, couples encounter challenges during the reintegration stage when they attempt to adapt to the service member’s return home. These challenges include, but are not limited to, renegotiating and reestablishing household chores and routines (Drummet, Coleman, & Cable, 2003; Faber, Willerton, Clymer, MacDermid, & Weiss, 2008), reestablishing and/or strengthening joint problem-solving and decision-making abilities (Drummet et al., 2003), reestablishing support networks inside and outside nuclear family, accepting changes that have occurred in the marriage and in each other during deployment, and resolving lingering marital issues remaining from the pre-deployment period (Sayers, 2010). Basham (2008) described in more detail some of these challenges presented during reintegration of the soldier after deployment:

When a warrior returns home, he or she returns as a changed individual. They also have gained a whole new set of skills and strengths that alter the way they relate to other people and the world in general. These skills helped them survive in a combat zone, but do not necessarily serve them well in coping with day-to-day stressors of life back home. Soldiers learn to control fears and suppress emotions, to master the art of deception while cunningly devising ways to survive, and to parse information while restricting communication. (p. 87)

Post-deployment communication. In one study, a common adjustment strain found during post deployment was the change from a closed communication system to an open communication system (Faber et al., 2008). The researchers noted that during the deployment, communication from the left-behind spouse to the service member was lessened due to the

service member's physical absence; they were not present to discuss daily activities or clarify family member's schedules. They also noted that the service member's communication was guarded and limited when discussing topics about his/her daily activities due to heightened security measures taken by the military. Upon the service member's return home, the researchers discovered that couples had to redefine the boundary around them - from individual back to couple - and begin consideration of their spouse's needs, preferences, and start engaging in joint-decision making. They found that couples inability or trouble with transitioning from a closed communication to an open communication system, held up their progress on another reintegration task, redistribution of roles and responsibilities.

Post-deployment role negotiation. Typically in military couples, the partner who has remained at home during a deployment has assumed primary responsibility for all management of the household. When the service member comes home from a deployment involving combat trauma and desires a shift in family roles and balancing of power in decision making to return to pre-deployment status, it could create a potential point of conflict during reintegration (Basham, 2008). Some couples reported feeling hesitant about asking the service member to resume certain roles, uncertain whether s/he was ready to take them back or if s/he needed a longer adjustment time (Faber et al., 2008). Military spouses also report experiencing a loss of autonomy after having adapted to the service member's absence and successfully managing the household responsibilities on his or her own (Drummet et al., 2003; Faber et al., 2008). Sgt. First Class Kent Phyfe described how integrating back into family life is one of the hardest parts about being a military couple:

While I was away 'doing Army things,' my wife had to be the wife/husband/mother/father all rolled into one and handled all of the other daily chores. When I came home, I wanted to jump in and take back those roles that I felt were mine...My wife did not want to go through the process of releasing those duties only to be thrust back into them again at a moment's notice. This strain of that coming and going is amplified in a military family. (Burton, 2012)

Barriers to successful reintegration. Couples with preexisting vulnerabilities (problem areas present prior to deployment) can be expected to have the most difficulty during the reintegration phase (Peebles-Kleiger & Kleiger, 1994). New sources of relationship conflict resulting from deployment, such as marital discord and infidelity, might decelerate the

reintegration phase (Peebles-Kleiger & Kleiger, 2004). For any non-military couple under normal circumstances, learning to cooperate and share in problem solving is a test of the relationship strength. For military couples, interpersonal interactions were reported to be even more challenging due to some of the co-occurring difficulties with deployment-related stressors, such as financial problems, problems with negotiating family roles, physical injury and rehabilitation, posttraumatic stress disorder, and relocation (Peebles-Kleiger & Kleiger, 2004). In one 2007 study, 14% of active duty service members and 21% of reserve/guard service members reported interpersonal conflict as an area of concern 3-6 months after coming home from a deployment (Milliken, Ionie, & Hoge, 2007). Other common reintegration issues besides interpersonal communication, role negotiation, and marital conflict, include whether to start school and/or new career and financial stressors that may have become more acute as a result of the deployment (Sayers 2010).

Mission Readiness = Soldier Readiness + Family Readiness. When compared to civilians and military members who had been neither mobilized nor deployed, marital satisfaction was found to be lower for service members who were either currently deployed, anticipating an upcoming deployment, or recovering from a recent deployment (McLeland et al., 2008). These findings support the overall negative impact recent combat-related deployments are having on the marriage unit. With respect to the Armed Forces declaration that soldier readiness and family readiness are what creates mission readiness, then these findings would prove significant in terms of effecting mission readiness. Research findings that affirm marriage's positive impact on a soldier's performance and retention, and in turn, their military service to this country would further support the importance of a closer examination of how to minimize or offset the negative effects multiple deployments have on marriages. A Department of Defense spokeswoman, Commander Leslie Hull-Ryde, confirmed this significance by stating that, "the health and well-being of servicemembers and their families is a priority... Strong relationships are important to our readiness" (Bushatz, 2013).

By providing adequate support resources that allows its employees to satisfactorily fulfill multiple commitments (family and work roles), the military is likely to increase individual commitment to its institution by decreasing the stress and conflict (Bourg & Segal, 1999). Researchers, Bourg and Segal (1999) reported that by exhausting resources in convincing

soldiers that the Army cares for their family, the soldiers' commitment increased. They predicted:

When soldiers must choose between military and family obligations, more committed soldiers will be more likely to fully commit to fulfilling their military obligations, since they are also more likely to trust that the military has already supported them in fulfilling their family obligations and will continue to do so. (p. 649)

Bourg and Segal further concluded that, "perceptions of the degree to which the military is supportive of families affects adaptation to and satisfaction with military life in general and with specific demands of the military lifestyle, such as deployment separation" (p. 636). In response to the goal of being mission readiness, all branches of the military have started to offer family education programming designed to help increase soldier readiness and family readiness, targeting strengthening of their intimate relationships (Kotrla & Dyer 2008). Based on recent statistics from the Pentagon, the military divorce rate went down slightly from 3.7 percent in 2011 to 3.5 percent in 2012, with enlisted female soldiers experiencing a higher rate of divorce compared to men (Bushatz, 2013). In this news article, well-known military marriage researcher, Karney, suggested that the recent lessening of two key stressors for military marriages, including the length and frequency of separations, as a result of a slower deployment pace towards the conclusion of the current war climate, could be linked to the slight divorce rate decrease (Bushatz, 2013).

Military officials suggested that the success of marriage support and emotional health programs, such as Army's Strong Bonds retreats and private counseling, may also be a contributing factor (Bushratz, 2013). Military couples who felt good about their marriage prior to a deployment reported a better adjustment to separation and lower divorce rates compared to couples who were less secure about the status of their marriage, suggesting possible ways to minimize these potential negative impacts of deployments through strengthening of marriages (Rosen & Durand, 1995; Schumm et al., 2000). The key to turning a stressful circumstance, such as a deployment, into an opportunity for greater intimacy as a couple is to equip them with the right resources to manage stress effectively (McLeland et al., 2008).

Chapter 3 - Theory

Within this chapter I review several different theories to help examine how each approach explains conflict within the military dyad. As described earlier, military couples have unique characteristics and different experiences when compared to their civilian counterparts. As Laura DiSilverio, retired Air Force and dual military spouse suggested:

People assume that deployments, weird work schedules and frequent moves put too much stress on marriages... Those things do stress marriages, but military couples seem to have coping mechanisms or realistic expectations or something that enable them to weather the separations and anxiety. (Burton, 2012)

I will be reviewing Social Exchange Theory, Role-Exit Theory, and the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation model and their ability to explain and address conflict in military couples.

Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory was first developed by Homans (1958) and later expanded by Thibaut and Kelly (1959). It has been explicitly used throughout the research literature in this area. The basis of social exchange theory is best explained by Homans (1958) early theory formations:

Social behavior is an exchange of goods, material goods but also non-material ones, such as the symbols of approval or prestige... For a person engaged in exchange, what he gives may be a cost to him, just as what he gets may be a reward, and his behavior changes less as profit, that is, reward less cost, tends to a maximum. (p. 606)

This simple cost-benefit analysis consists of weighing the maximum amount of rewards against the minimum amount of costs to determine profitability, or in a relational context, assessing whether the relationship is worth maintaining or if it should be dissolved. Homans (1961) defined rewards as potential benefits or exchanged resources that bring happiness, while costs were viewed in a more negative light and seen as exchanged resources that represent a loss or punishment.

Levinger (1965) was among the first to apply the economics-based theory of social exchange to a romantic relationship, such as marriage. Using the same concepts as those utilized for understanding group cohesiveness, he introduced a framework for “integrating the

determinants of marital durability and divorce” (p. 27). This proposed linkage is based on three components: attractions toward or repulsions from a relationship, barriers against its dissolution, and the presence of attractive alternatives outside the marriage. Examples of attractions are esteem for spouse, desire for companionship, sex, spouse’s income or occupation, home ownership, and similarities in age, religion, or education. Barriers against dissolution might come from other sources such as feelings of obligation to children or marital vows, moral commitments such as those related to attending church and external to the marriage are pressures such as those stemming from the community or other associational memberships. Sources of alternate attraction, such as a preferred alternate sex partner or financial reward, also appear to have a disruptive effect, Levinger referred to a “full shell” marriage to describe a relationship where the attractions and boundaries are both strong and therefore there is warm emotional interchange. By contrast, he borrowed the term “empty shell” from Goode (1961) to describe a marriage where communication is minimal and there is no discussion of problems or experiences with each other, and arguments focus on small issues, not large ones. In an empty shell marriage, using Levinger’s terms, there are low attractions as seen by the absence of positive feelings, and the barriers to dissolve the relationship are high. These individuals are trapped in an unsatisfying marriage by the strength of barriers such as religious conviction that divorce is morally wrong or to spare their children the stigma of having divorced parents. Levinger further argued that, “the very severity often found in cases of marital conflict may derive from the high restraints society places against breaking up a marriage” (p. 28).

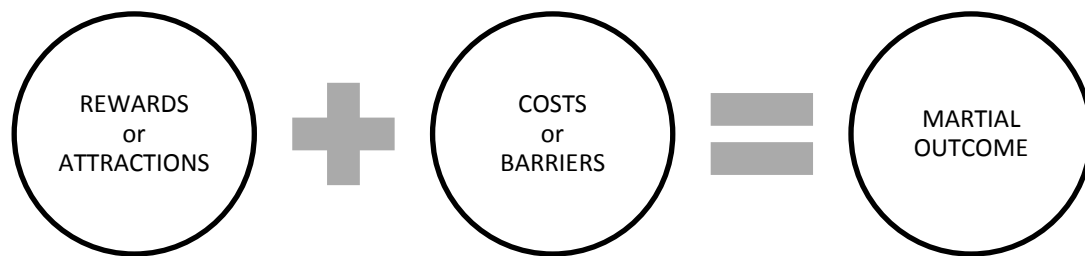
Applying these concepts, Levinger (1965) hoped his framework could begin to assess research questions regarding the influences of the durability of marriage. For example, he posited that in order to increase the durability of marriage, one can increase its attractiveness. “Increase of marital attractions would renew the partners’ interest in and affection for one another. It would further the spouses’ turning toward each other for their gratification, and would promote the mutual consummation of the marital bond” (p. 28). Levinger also suggested that:

One could increase the strength of the barriers against a break-up in order to increase the durability of marriage. Increase of barriers is the least likely means of making a lasting increase in marital cohesiveness. Without an increase of internal attraction, barrier maintenance does not heighten the satisfactions that partners gain from their marriage. In

the absence of adequate marital satisfaction, high barriers are likely to lead to high interpersonal conflict and tension. (p. 28)

Levinger's linkage laid the groundwork for social exchange theory to generate hypotheses that predict how attraction and barrier forces play a role in the course of relationships.

Figure 3.1 Social Exchange Theory



Social Exchange Theory applied to couple conflict. In regards to couple conflict, the social exchange theory allows researchers to analyze the negotiation skills used in the rewards and barriers framework when engaged in conflict. Early research perceived conflict as a characteristic of an unsatisfied marriage, a marital outcome. Over time, researchers began to discover that not all conflict is bad. For example, Argyle and Furnham (1983) found that satisfaction and conflict are compatible with each other; the more satisfying relationships tended to produce more conflict compared to the unsatisfying ones. This positive correlation provides support that conflict is not necessarily a negative feature of relationships. Engaging in and working through conflict may bring two partners closer by revealing deeper feelings that may lead to higher rewards and increased satisfaction in the marriage. Within the social exchange theory context, conflict could indeed be categorized as a reward with positive impacts on marital satisfaction (Argyle & Furnham, 1983; Jones & Gallios, 1989).

Conflict also was perceived as a result of “interdependent parties who share outcomes and depend on each other’s actions to achieve valued resources” (Canary, Cupach, & Messman, 1995, p. 15). Based on this perspective, conflict is viewed as a product of relationships lacking in personal rewards. Canary and colleagues noted a trend among conflict researchers utilizing social exchange theory to explain microlevel behaviors from a rewards/costs perspective; hence,

“praise, compliments, and the like represent rewards, whereas oppositions, teasing, and the like constitute costs, which suggests that the ratios of relational rewards and costs should also include communicative processes, including how partners manage their conflicts” (p. 15).

Strengths and weaknesses. One of the strengths of social exchange theory is that many variables can be incorporated into its framework and combined to explain marital outcomes (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Applying the positive correlations between conflict and marital satisfactions identified by Argyle and Furnham, Kurdek (1994) further explained conflict’s role in marital satisfaction by positioning it within the social exchange theory formula as a “cost” to being in a relationship. Using Kurdek’s perspective, the use of destructive conflict management styles could be categorized as the cost variable and the use of constructive or positive styles could be represented by the attractions of a relationship.

Another strength of social exchange theory is its ability to explain a variety of marital outcomes, such as why couples who use destructive conflict management styles stay married or why couples who utilize collaborative conflict management styles still choose to break up (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Karney and Crown (2007) concluded that a common idea among social exchange theory perspectives is that relationships and marriages can endure or dissolve for reasons that have little to do with whether or not the relationship is personally satisfying to the partners.

One of social exchange theory’s weaknesses is its assumption that a conflict-laden situation between partners is a rational process. This theory fails to take into account the variety of emotions present during couples’ conflict that could lead to irrational behavior, such as anger, jealousy, resentment, betrayal or pride. For example, in the case of an individual admitting to his or her partner that an extramarital affair took place. Couples who normally engage in effective conflict management may find themselves utilizing other forms of conflict management deemed ineffective, e.g., withdrawal, escalation, or violence, due to their high level of raw emotion felt at the onset of the conflict. The social exchange theory also fails to explain how or when changes take place in the marriage. It does not address how an initially stable marriage might become unstable over time (Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

Application to military couple conflict. When applied to military couples experiencing interpersonal conflict, the social exchange theory has some strength, but ultimately falls short of explaining these interactions within a military context. The social exchange theory can be

beneficial with its ability to identify conflict-related variables that are found in satisfied military marriages, such as constructive conflict management styles, or conversely, which styles are associated with unsatisfied marriages. It also assists in identifying benefits and costs that, when coupled with conflict as the second variable, might help explain military couple outcomes. For example, benefits or attractions for military couples to remain in the relationship, such as increased pay compensation, retirement and health benefits, or social network within military community, combined with conflict, viewed as the “cost” variable, could predict marital outcomes such as divorce. Conflict may also serve as a “reward” variable in the Social Exchange Theory if it leads to positive growth, either personal or relational. When costs to staying in a military relationship, such as frequent relocations, multiple separations from spouse due to deployments, or low compensation for housing allowance, are combined with positive conflict interactions, such as reframing the time of separation as an opportunity to experience relationship growth, conflict, favorable marital outcomes such as marriage satisfaction may be predicted.

However, this theory does not explain how military couples who enter marriage satisfied with the attractions within the relationship become more or less satisfied with those attractions over time. Social exchange theory fails to acknowledge how the positive and negative changes resulting from military service (multiple deployments, education and job training, combat-related mental health disorders) may alter the costs and rewards of marriage and divorce. The theory is limited to only describing a military marriage that should be stable or unstable. Another shortcoming of this theory is its lack of explanation of how couples negotiate the costs, such as areas of conflict, in order to adapt to marriage in the military and its consequent stressors. Also, this theory overlooks the buffer effects of institutional support programs, such as resources provided within the military or by the community, that are available for strengthening marriages.

Summary. Although Social Exchange Theory is useful when identifying conflict-related variables, such as positive and negative types of conflict interaction, that are associated with satisfied and unsatisfied marriages, it does not account for emotions or expectations that may influence which conflict management style one partner uses. This theory also fails to explain how changes in marital satisfaction in response to a stressful event, such as a military couple experiencing a deployment. In the next section, I will review Role-Exit Theory and its applicability to military couple conflict.

Role-Exit Theory

In addition to social exchange theory, Ebaugh's role exit theory (1988) also leads to a better understanding of intimate relationship conflict. It has been used to examine a unique source of conflict relevant to today's military couple facing lengthy multiple deployments of their service member partner – negotiation of roles and responsibilities that takes place during post-deployment reintegration. During times of war, military marriages are at an increased risk of distress during and following extended periods of separations and uncertainty. “When one partner is deployed, such as the in the instance of the war in Iraq, the spouse who is left behind experiences a loss of emotional support, increased responsibilities, and a major need to adjust role accountability” (Gambardella, 2008, p. 170). The remaining spouse is left behind to assume all of the day-to-day household responsibilities and navigate life's challenges alone. The spouse left behind must adapt to the new role and responsibilities as Interim HomeFront Manager (a self-created term hence forth used throughout this paper to refer to the left-behind spouse's role), in order to preserve family, meet the demands of everyday life, and serve our country by supporting his/her soldier spouse. Military spouses, some whom are experiencing this amount of autonomy for the first time, may or may not want to relinquish all the responsibilities of this new role once the service member spouse returns home. “This separation can create re-entry problems for the marital couple when the spouse returns expecting to resume the relationship that existed prior to deployment; the return to a changed environment and relationship can affect marital status and life balance” (Gambardella, 2008, p. 169).

As we enter the second decade of the Global War on Terrorism, a growing amount of research has been focused on the consequent impact of multiple deployments on military families. With regards to the transition that takes place between military couples during reintegration, there has been very limited research on this specific stage of the deployment cycle. Although Ebaugh does not include military couples undergoing post-deployment reintegration in her research sample, the patterns of behavior described in her role exit theory are similar to those experiences of military spouses' role transitions during deployments. Ebaugh (1988) postulated, “while the types of roles being exited vary greatly, the process itself is identifiable and generalizable across roles” (p. 23). This ability to generalize role exit theory across various roles has led other researchers to apply Ebaugh's theory to role transitions found in modern day

society, e.g. professional athletes, community college faculty, and most recently the left-behind military spouse (Drahota & Eitzen, 1998; Gambardella, 2008; Harris & Prentice, 2004).

History of the term “role exit.” Ebaugh (1988) credited Blau (1973) with introducing the term “role exit” and its initial description of a process that takes places, “whenever any stable pattern of interaction and shared activities between two or more persons ceases” (Blau, 1973, p. 210). Although Blau was the first to propose a role exit theory, she applied the term to role exits only in the context of old age (e.g., retirement and widowhood); however, she did speak to its applicability to earlier stages of life reasoning, “there are very few statuses that people normally retain over an entire lifetime” (Blau, 1973, p. 222). Ebaugh used Blau’s work and new term when she began to conceptualize a theory of role exit that can be classified as a basic and generic social process. Her original research originally surveyed ex-nuns, and was then expanded to include other “exes,” such as individuals exiting familial roles (divorcees, widows, mothers without custody), occupational roles (doctors, teachers, police officers), stigmatized roles (prostitutes, convicts, alcoholics), ideological roles (religious and political), and transsexuals. Whereas Blau (1973) focused on transitions to old age, Ebaugh expanded role exits to mid-life transitions and suggested a framework for understanding the stages that role exiters experience.

She defined role exit as “the process of disengagement from a role that is central to one’s self-identity and the reestablishment of an identity in a new role that takes into account one’s ex-role” (Ebaugh, 1988, p.1). Ebaugh warned of the probability of internal conflict as the role exiter struggles to incorporate past identities into present conceptions of self. Throughout Ebaugh’s theory characterization, she placed great emphasis on the concept that role exit involves not just the individual making adjustments and adaptations, but also the significant others associated with the person. She also noted the importance of disengagement from old roles and their values, norms, social supports, expectations, and ways of thinking associated with that group in order to facilitate adaption to a new role. The role exit process varies in terms of length, some reestablishing identity quickly while others may take years, as “elements of the new or previous role have to be negotiated and reintegrated into one’s self concept before stabilizing and security can be reestablished” (Ebaugh, 1988, p. 22).

Four stages to successful role-exit. After observing a pattern among the individuals leaving roles or “exes” as she calls them, Ebaugh (1988) proposed a framework of four stages one must undergo to have complete transformation from one role to a new role. The first

moment or stage in the role exit process, labeled first doubts, is characterized by doubts or second guessing of the individual's current role commitment. Conditions that influence an individual to enter stage one and begin doubting were organizational change, job burnout, disappointments and changes in relationships, and major life events. The reaction of an individual's significant other can have a positive or negative influence on questioning whether or not to exit a role. Ebaugh's findings show that lone doubters are subjected to a longer initial process of doubting compared to individuals who are experiencing the process with others. This finding was not dependent on whether the doubters were aware of each other or communicated during the process, but due to the simple knowledge of others going through a similar doubting process seemed to provide social support thereby reducing time spent in this stage.

When individuals reach the point where they are dissatisfied and no longer have the drive to meet their current role expectations, they cross into the second stage – seeking alternatives (Ebaugh, 1988). Ebaugh explained this stage as a more “deliberate exploration of the costs and rewards of alternatives” that includes identifying possible alternatives and itemizing the pros and cons of each alternative role (p. 87-88). The duration of the exit process was found to be a critical factor. Exit processes that were shorter were more difficult for individuals due to the mixed feelings experienced when making a hasty decision. In contrast, individuals who experienced a longer and more deliberate exit process reported an easier transition.

In stage three, which Ebaugh (1988) labeled turning points, the individual decides that the benefits of entering into an alternative role outweigh the dissatisfaction and costs of staying in the current role; therefore, a firm decision to exit is made. This decision is typically accompanied by some type of external expression or event to indicate that decision. Having at least one close friend or family member support them unconditionally was a primary influence for interviewees during the adjustment process when attempting to get reestablished. On the contrary, interviewees who reported having the most difficulty adjusting reported a lack of social support.

Creating the ex-role, the final stage of role exit theory, entails incorporating the previous role with the new role. Ebaugh (1988) described this stage as one in which, “the individual going through the exit process is trying to shake off and deemphasize the previous identity” (p. 150). A critical sign that the role exit process was successful is when the individual's significant others begin to define him or her by roles that are not related to the left behind role. One major

precaution in this stage is residual or leftover roles from a previous identity that remain with the individual even after exiting. During this last stage, exiters felt successful in having made a complete adjustment to their ex-status when they were able to find successful solution to challenges, such as social reactions, shifting friendship networks, and residual roles.

Role-exit applied to military couple conflict. Many characteristics and variables of the role exit process outlined by Ebaugh are highly relevant and similar to the role transitions that the Interim HomeFront Manager spouse (left-behind military spouse) experiences during a deployment cycle. Gambardella's (2008) explicitly used Ebaugh's role exit theory as an intervention tool to assist ten distressed couples regain a sense of balance, cohesion, and comfort in their relationships. After assessment, it was determined by the therapist, "that the presence of role issues as a major factor in the marital discord appeared to have developed as a result of the deployment" (p. 171). During the intervention phase, couples in Gambardella's study were asked to self-describe their roles prior to deployment, during deployment, and post-deployment. They also were asked to identify and specifically define the roles they wished to maintain following deployment. Their role descriptions were then shared with each other to determine areas of conflict. Next, the identified areas of conflict were negotiated until both partners stated they were comfortable with the resolution. Lastly, after successful negotiation of the role behaviors, discussion of the implementation of the new or resumed roles for each partner was utilized using exercises to test application of the new role. Gambardella summarized her findings:

Successful re-socialization through exercise application and ability to sustain the new or resumed roles in everyday living situations with the resolution of marital discord issues related to role as determined by the participants was considered a successful transition to creating the 'ex' role. (p. 172)

Sixty percent of the couples in Gambardella's (2008) study self-reported improvement in the marital relationship post intervention counseling. Using a role-exit theory framework approach, these six couples were able to maintain the relationship and to make necessary adjustments in role behaviors following the spouse's deployment. Three of the remaining four couples that reported no improvement in their relationship shared a common characteristic of a lengthier deployment time and multiple deployments. Spouses for these three couples reportedly experienced, "the most difficult personal ability to return to the former marital role or to make

significant negotiated attempts for an acceptable, mutually satisfying adjusted role” (p. 173). Some spouse comments reported by Gambardella included, “I’m used to doing everything by myself without asking another person’s opinion,” and, “I like who I am now; it feels good to make decisions based on my needs and feelings” (p.173).

Using research-based findings from the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center (NHMC; 2006), Gambardella examined factors associated with affecting marital satisfaction following deployment, such as strength of marital status pre-deployment, communication during deployment, religious beliefs, and ability of the spouse left behind to develop new skills and achieve a sense of independence. Although no one factor was identified that contributed to the success or failure of this approach, the ability of the Interim HomeFront Manager spouse to learn new skills and achieve a sense of independence seemed to have the greatest influence on each of the couples’ role adjustment. This very factor that gave spouses a comfort level of survival during the deployment of the service member spouse was the same factor that now created obstacles for the Interim HomeFront Manager spouse trying to abandon the new skill or realign the sense of independence achieved. Gambardella pointed out:

This factor alone made the transition to the ex-role and the negotiation of roles more challenging for all 10 of the couples because the left-behind spouse achieved a sense of achievement that boosted self-esteem and a sense of empowerment and pride in the ability to maintain the family while the spouse was deployed. (p. 173)

Gambardella noted the sensitivity required to not destroy this sense of self and empowerment experienced by the Interim HomeFront Manager spouse while assisting them in the transition to an ex-role. “It appeared in three couples out of the four who were unsuccessful in the treatment process that this factor was the difference in their not achieving success in overcoming the marital discord” (p. 173).

Parallel to civilian couples’ conflict, Gambardella may have shed light on a shared underlying concern at the root of the role exit process for military couples – power (Kurdek, 1994). The returning service member is hoping to reintegrate with his or her family and resume previous responsibilities (power), reaffirming s/he is still needed within this relationship. The left-behind spouse wants to retain his or her new role and responsibilities (power) as Interim HomeFront Manager, due to the sense of achievement and empowerment s/he has experienced.

Neither partner is readily willing to relinquish or negotiate roles that represent some level of power in the relationship.

Strengths and weaknesses. With minor modifications, Ebaugh's (1988) role-exit theory is applicable to the role exit of the Interim HomeFront Manager spouse. Beginning with a closer assessment of Ebaugh's sample using various exes, she selected these interviewees based on two major variables - voluntariness and centrality of the role being exited. Most of the exits she studied included varying degrees of voluntariness and how central and all-encompassing the previous role had been. The role-exit transition that military couples experience during a deployment cycle meets Ebaugh's two mandatory parameter variables (varying degree of voluntariness and centrality), even though their role scenario was not specifically included in her study's sample. With regard to the variable of voluntariness, or the degree of choice an individual has in making an exit, it can be assumed military spouses would have varying degrees of voluntariness in accepting the new role of "left-behind spouse" when their spouse is deployed (Ebaugh, 1988, p. 35). In some instances, their new role may initially consist of voluntarily taking on additional family and household responsibilities, e.g. paying the bills, home and car maintenance, etc. in an effort to keep things running smoothly while their spouse is deployed. Other spouses may have felt that the choice to accept this new role of left-behind spouse was more involuntary as there was no other choice or option since the spouse who originally took care of these responsibilities is relocating to a war zone. At the other end of the cycle of deployment during the reintegration phase, military spouses may also differ in the degree of voluntariness they feel upon the return of their service member post-deployment. The left-behind spouse may feel that s/he has to involuntarily relinquish his or her new role of Interim HomeFront Manager since his or her spouse received orders to return home at a specified time. Even if the left-behind spouse voluntarily relinquishes his or her new role, s/he may still have some regrets about leaving it because s/he misses the sense of confidence, independence, and pride that came from performing the family management tasks.

Another variable Ebaugh (1988) touched on is centrality of the role and its degree of significance to each individual. For some individuals, the loss of an extremely significant role could be devastating and cause possible feelings of worthlessness. In contrast, others may be able to leave a role with little to no trauma. In the case of left-behind military spouses, the role of being Interim HomeFront Manager may be extremely important to one's self-identity;

therefore, relinquishing that role could destroy their self-image and self-esteem. Other left-behind military spouses may be more than happy to resign as Interim HomeFront Manager citing the overwhelming burden of taking on all the accountability and extra responsibilities. As Ebaugh noted, most exits she studied had elements of both dimensions. This supports the inclusion of left-behind military spouses as a role that fits Ebaugh's role-exit model.

Influences on the role-exit process. In stage one of Ebaugh's (1988) role-exit model, first doubts, she mentions several conditions that can influence an individual to begin doubting, specifically burnout. Left-behind military spouses may be more likely to fall victim to burnout due to their lack of realistic knowledge of the new role and subsequent responsibilities they will take on while their spouse is deployed. They may have idealistic expectations of accomplishing neglected family management tasks during the lengthy deployment, e.g. cleaning out the garage, creating a budget in order to save more money, buying a car, but become too overwhelmed by the paperwork or organization skills involved so they begin feeling frustration, failure, and regrets (Ebaugh, 1988, p. 59). Heeding Ebaugh's emphasis on the importance of a significant other's reactions to the individual's first doubts concerning feeling overwhelmed by or disinterested in managing the day-to-day family responsibilities, the service member spouse needs to be mindful of his or her response during discussions with the left-behind spouse. How the service member responds to her or his spouse's doubts about this new role commitment, whether the spouse is entering or exiting the new role of Interim HomeFront Manager, could play a significant role in the success or failure of reintegration post deployment.

Seeking alternatives, stage two of Ebaugh's (1988) role-exit theory, also can be applied to the role exit of the Interim HomeFront Manager. Similar to the exes in Ebaugh's sample, it can be assumed that the left-behind military spouse makes calculated decisions to suffer the costs (giving up autonomy, decision-making authority, pride, etc.) because of greater rewards they see in alternative roles (reestablishing balance and intimacy within marital relationship when service member spouse returns home). By comparing one's present situation with both past experiences (how the relationship functioned before deployment) and possible alternatives (how relationship will function if spouse maintains current role, negotiates current role, or creates a whole new role), the individual makes judgments about the costs and rewards of each role (Ebaugh, 1988). Applying Ebaugh's belief of the importance of positive communication and social support with significant others, military couples should be encouraged to use negotiation techniques in order

to reach an agreement on role alternatives such as sharing in the family management or dividing household tasks instead of only utilizing the all or nothing ultimatum.

Another influential factor described by Ebaugh in stage two is the duration of the exit process. In the instance of the left-behind military spouse, the exit process timeframe is sometimes dictated by the service member's branch headquarters. One could speculate that the role exit process for the left-behind spouse is typically a shorter one due to the possible perception that there is a degree of involuntariness present - their service member spouse is returning home on a certain date whether or not they are ready to accept them. According to Ebaugh, more guilt and regret were associated with a shorter exit process, creating a potential for mixed feelings and unresolved conflict between couples. If the exit process was longer or more deliberate, for example, the military couple could agree to maintain status quo upon the initial return of the service member and revisit the need to negotiate and reestablish new roles at a later date (timeframe could be 2 weeks or 1 month). This should lead to more success with reintegration. "This anticipatory behavior, seeking alternatives, helps individuals imagine their fit in a new role and readies them emotionally for a turning point event which leads to a final decision to exit" (Ebaugh, 1988, p. 121). This acknowledgement and tabling of the need to negotiate and redefine roles at a later time gives both partners an opportunity to consider alternatives to their current role and ready themselves emotionally to relinquish some or all of previous role.

The left-behind military spouse most likely enters stage three of the role exit theory, turning points, when the service member spouse receives orders to return home from deployment and communicates the departure date to her or his spouse. Other possible turning points could include when the service member spouse returns home from deployment and gives an either/or ultimatum scenario in response to exiting her or his role, or when conflict within the marital relationship becomes too frequent or intense that it effects the left-behind spouse's well being. To help prevent the potential for a distressing turning point, Ebaugh (1988) found that relying on a steady social support network and building bridges helped alleviate the exit process for individuals. These mitigating factors could explain why the left-behind military spouse might struggle throughout this stage. The inherent nature of military culture lends itself to decreased social support for spouses due to frequent moves and distance from family members (NHMRC, 2006). Left-behind military spouses also might \ experience a loss of social bridges built during

the deployment that may have dissolved once the service member spouse returned home. Some military spouses feel the urge to hunker down during reintegration by limiting social activities with outside members in order to facilitate nesting and becoming reacquainted with each another. Without the support from spouses, friends, and family members, military couples may undergo an extended period time of internal and relationship conflict during this stage possibly causing an increase in marital distress.

The final stage, creating the ex-role, could prove to be a double-edged sword for the left-behind spouse attempting to find a balance between leaving behind a previous identity and incorporating a new role. Left-behind spouses may feel a sense of pride of the accomplishments they achieved during their spouse's deployment, but in an attempt to avoid hurting their spouse's feelings or creating insecurities, they might feel the need to deemphasize or downplay their ability to survive and thrive in the absence of the service member spouse. For some left-behind spouses, it may prove difficult to let go of the superhero image they were accredited with by others in awe of their steadfastness; taking on a new role that does not appear as extraordinary. During this last stage, similar to the interviewees in Ebaugh's (1988) study, left-behind military spouses experience a shift in friends as they have less social time now that their spouse has returned home from deployment. Instead of socializing with single friends or job-related friends, left-behind military spouses may gravitate towards socializing with other military couples who also just recently experienced a deployment.

Another similarity left-behind spouses share in this last stage of role exit theory is role residual, or leftover aspects or behaviors from the previous role that still remain. It may take time for the left-behind spouse to make a complete role exit from thinking and responding in the role of Interim Family Commander. For instance, the left-behind spouse may initially experience challenges with continuing to make decisions that may impact the family without first consulting with their service member spouse. Other left-behind spouses may have leftover attitudes of independence or the desire to comment on their own survival of the deployment. The left-behind military spouse must find a successful solution to incorporate this role residual into their current ideas of self, so as not to downplay their accomplishments, but let it become a characteristic of a previous role.

In the case of professional athletes role exit, interviewees recommended looking at the previous role as, "an experience in life and hopefully take that experience and apply it to other

ways to utilize your energies that you once used for that. Do something that is rewarding” (Drahota & Eitzen, 1998, p. 267). Similar to the professional athletes, left-behind military spouses could use the skills they acquired from their experience as Interim HomeFront Manager as a tool for entering a new role such as a job, professional development, or even to help out another military spouse who is beginning to enter the new role of left-behind spouse. “To be successful in incorporating the new role, the individual must merge aspects of the past identity with those of the new” (Drahota & Eitzen, 1998, p.267).

Summary. When applied to the scenario of the left-behind military spouse during deployment, Ebaugh’s (1988) proposed role exit theory concepts are effective and offer a good understanding of how this experience could lead to a potential source of relationship conflict within military marriages. Military couples with poor disengagement and negotiation skills may not be able to successfully exit their role as Interim HomeFront Manager, therefore resulting in an unsuccessful reintegration filled with unresolved conflict causing them to feel insecure and unstable within the marital relationship. One major difference in the role exit of the left-behind spouse not accounted for in Ebaugh’s model is the unique characteristic of this Global War on Terrorism and the consequent effects on military families, most namely the back-to-back deployments. According to Pincus, House, Christenson, and Adler (2007), back-to-back deployments create distress as families reintegrate and reach stabilization only to begin the emotional cycle of deployment all over again as the next deployment approaches. With this scenario highly likely for today’s military, the left-behind spouse faces an additional role exit challenge of engaging and disengaging in their role as Interim HomeFront Manager multiple times, with some couples experiencing as many as five deployments within a ten-year period.

Blau (1973) recognized and addressed this. She indicated that a “role repetitions” phenomenon was observed during relinquishment of the role (p. 233). Blau described this process of multiple entrances and exits as not being identical to the former role, but similar with respect to the rights and responsibilities. Depending on whether the role was perceived as satisfying, a person will seek to replicate the former set of role responsibilities. Blau argued that the inclination to repeat a role, rather than find a new and different one, was very common, especially among institutional roles.

It could be predicted that this pattern of repeating a role would also be common among the left-behind spouse within the military institution. Due to the obligatory nature of this

institutional role, “such roles come to be considered the most important achievements in life” (Blau, 1973, p. 234). Here, Blau is referring to the individual’s ability to look back at the role exit process s/he experienced and attach positive meaning or value to the successful metamorphosis, a process similar to the earlier mentioned concept of reframing. In their commitment to placing their service member’s role in the military as top priority, military spouses may respond to this transformation with an obligatory attitude of their institutional role as a military spouse. Doing their part to serve their country by supporting their service member spouse during times of war is the epitome of a military spouse’s role. The scenario of a military spouse viewing her or his role as Interim HomeFront Manager during the service member’s deployment as one of personal achievement or patriotism supports Blau’s speculation on the likelihood of institutional role exiters to positively reframe his/her transformation as one of the most important achievements in life.

Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation Model

The last section in this chapter will summarize one of the theoretical models proposed in marriage research and apply its constructs to explain military couple conflict. The vulnerability-stress-adaptation (VSA) model, designed by Karney and Bradbury (1995) posits that satisfaction within a marital relationship is the direct result of the way spouses adapt to, interact with, and understand each other. This integrative framework was designed to “incorporate the strengths of previous theories of marriage, account for the reliable findings of longitudinal research of marriage, and suggest hypotheses for future research on how [the quality and stability of] marriages change” (Karney & Bradbury, 1995, p. 26). They used meta-analytic techniques to summarize the data collected from 115 longitudinal studies of marriage from the past 50 years, representing over 45,000 marriages.

First, Karney and Bradbury (1995) reviewed four existing theoretical perspectives on marriage – social exchange theory, behavior theory, attachment theory, and crisis theory. Karney and Bradbury found social exchange theory to be the most commonly cited theory among marriage and close relationships literature. (Because it was described in detail earlier, it will not be explained here.) Behavior theory focuses on an interpersonal exchange of specific behaviors or responses, e.g. problem-solving discussions, which affect marriage through their influence on subsequent interaction behaviors. Attachment theory, another popular theory in

marriage research developed by Bowlby (1969) and later applied to close relationships by Hazan and Shaver (1987), was summarized by Karney and Bradbury as, “marital success or failure will be affected by enduring aspect’s of each partner’s relationship history of family of origin” (p. 6). Lastly, Karney and Bradbury assessed crisis theory as derived from Hill’s (1949) ABCX model. It attempts to explain how a family adapts to a stressful event with emphasis on vulnerabilities and resources that exist before the crisis takes place. McCubbin and Patterson (1982) expanded Hill’s model to include premises that responses develop over time and might have implications on how individuals respond to a future event. Karney and Bradbury noted that crisis theory was the only theory they reviewed that directly took into account the influence of external events on the course of marriage which lends itself to offer “the possibility of predicting when in the course of marriage initially vulnerable couples may experience changes in their satisfaction and how such couples may yet endure” (p. 7).

VSA applied to couple conflict. Nearly 200 variables and 900 different findings collected from Karney and Bradbury’s (1995) longitudinal research on marriage were analyzed. Their review of these findings demonstrated many reliable predictors of marital stability and satisfaction. For example, one of the main themes was effects of behavior. In order to evaluate this main theme, Karney and Bradbury grouped common marital interaction patterns into broad categories found in the literature – positive behavior, negative behavior, avoidance, positive reciprocity, and negative reciprocity – and assembled them across studies to assess the overall effect that each category demonstrated within this research. The evidence suggested that, “the overall effects of negative interaction behaviors on marriage are not positive” (p. 22). When the dependent variable was marital stability, they concluded that more negative behaviors in husbands and wives predicted less stable marriages over time. Similarly, but not as absolute, when the dependent variable was marital satisfaction, the overall effect was that negative behavior of husbands and wives predicted lower satisfaction over time. Other main themes Karney and Bradbury examined were effects of stress, personality, age and time, premarital cohabitation, and income.

Karney and Bradbury (1995) took these findings and identified broad empirical themes that supported basic concepts derived from the different theories of marriage in order to produce a complete and comprehensive theoretical model of marital development. With regard to attachment theory and the assertion that each spouse brings to the relationship individual

histories and enduring traits, Karney and Bradbury used its basic concepts to address the effect of enduring vulnerabilities on marital development. Crisis theory, the declaration that the external circumstances of a couple will have an effect on a marriage, was used in their model to address stressful events or the “developmental transitions, situations, incidents, and chronic or acute circumstances that spouses and couples encounter” (p. 22). They also utilized behavior theory’s premise that, “the ways individuals and couples contend with differences of opinion and individual or marital difficulties and transitions...[serves as the] engine of marital development,” and reflected its critical role in their proposed model (p. 22).

Figure 3.2 Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation Model

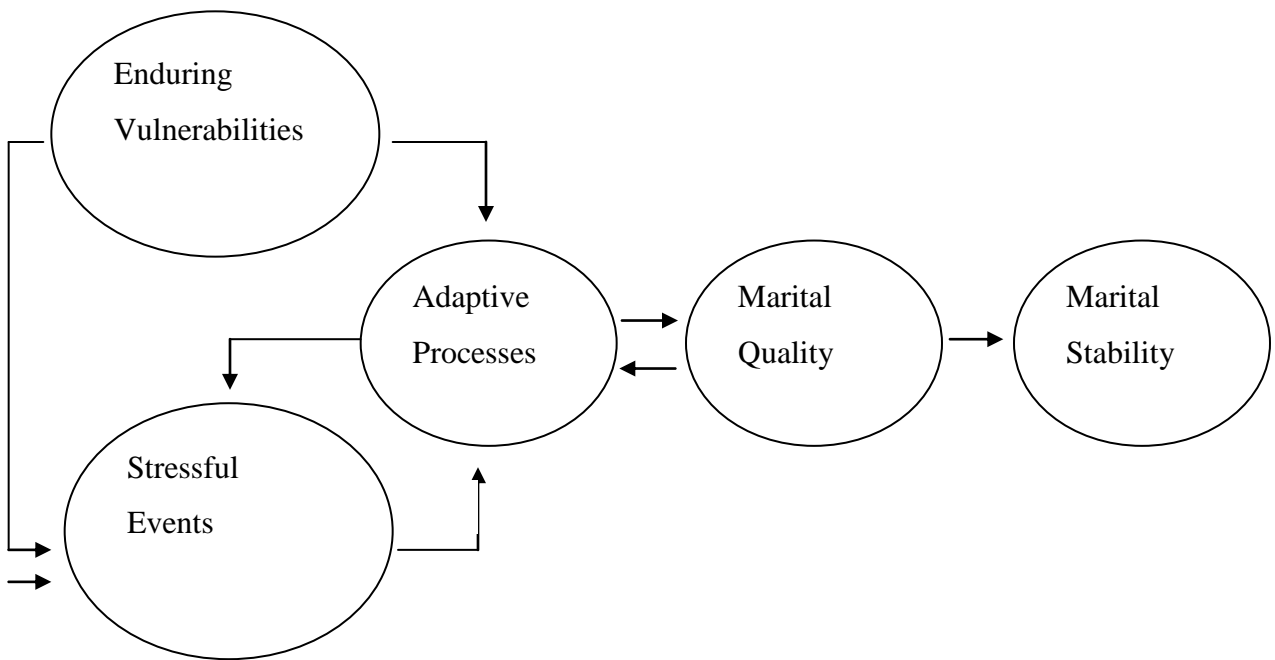


Figure 1.2 shows how Karney and Bradbury’s proposed VSA framework accounts for variations in marital quality and stability over time. They integrated these high order constructs (enduring vulnerabilities, adaptive processes, and stressful events) into a model of marital development. The researchers argued that it is their “joint consideration in a single framework that is likely to yield the greatest explanatory power and provide the most information about how marriages change over time” (p. 23). Karney and Bradbury describe the paths exhibited in the VSA model to demonstrate how these constructs might combine to account for variations in

marital quality and stability over time” (p. 23). The higher order hypotheses outlined from Karney and Bradbury’s (1995) integrative model suggests that:

Couples with effective adaptive processes who encounter relatively few stressful events and have few enduring vulnerabilities will experience a satisfying and stable marriage, whereas couples with ineffective adaptive processes who must cope with many stressful events and have many enduring vulnerabilities will experience declining marital quality, separation, or divorce (p. 25)

Application of the VSA model to military couple conflict. According to the VSA model, a military couple who might otherwise endure stably despite their many enduring vulnerabilities, will experience a negative change in their marital satisfaction and ultimately marital quality when faced with a stressful event requiring adaptation, such as a deployment cycle. This model suggests that by strengthening the couple’s adaptive processes, such as conflict management skills, the couple may be able to mediate these potential damaging effects of combat deployment. Using this model’s constructs, one could also conclude that a stable military marriage with few enduring traits (e.g., family history, personality), might experience a decline in marital quality when their level of stress during a deployment cycle increases beyond their ability to adapt.

Inversely, when using the same framework, a military couple characterized by many enduring vulnerabilities would be projected to endure stably in the presence of stressful events requiring adaptation as long as the stress level is low enough that it does not tax their capacity to adapt (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Acute stress had either no effect on spouses’ marital satisfaction or a positive effect, suggesting couples with the resources to manage stress effectively may actually be brought closer together by stressful circumstances (Karney, Story, & Bradbury, 2005). This demonstration of the mediating effect of a supportive environment could be translated to a military couple experiencing a more favorable marital outcome as a result of an increase in supportive adaptation processes when facing deployment challenges. The increase in support could bring about a sense of bonding within a marriage; a shared connection from surviving such a stressful time of separation from one’s partner; feeling that after surviving a deployment together, the relationship could overcome and even possibly thrive during any future stressful life event they might encounter. Karney, Story, and Bradbury (2005) found that marital satisfaction covaried with fluctuations in acute stress over time, e.g. when a couple experienced

high levels of acute stress, their marital satisfaction was found to be low. The degree of association depended on the level of chronic stress as a moderating factor. For example fewer resources were available to couples who were coping with the onset of an acute stressor while simultaneously struggling with pre-existing high levels of chronic stress.

Summary. In sum, the analyses of the 115 longitudinal studies of marriage revealed that, “positively valued variables tend to predict positive outcomes and negatively valued variables tend to predict negative outcomes” (Karney & Bradbury, 1995, p. 26). In response to the need for a theory to guide future research on how marriages change, Karney and Bradbury developed the VSA model of marital development that posits each partner brings to the marriage certain enduring vulnerabilities and stressful circumstances which can have either a negative or positive influence on how a couple adapts to stressful life events that ultimately determines marital satisfaction. When considering the VSA model’s application to specific scenarios of marital interaction, one of its strengths would be that it can account for change in marital satisfaction and predict when those changes are most likely to occur (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). To address these variations in marital outcomes, the VSA model focuses on the interaction between stress and vulnerability and their effect on adaptive processes. In other words, the impact of negative events on couples will likely depend on strengths that they possess that help to buffer the impact.

Even though Karney and Bradbury’s VSA model can account for change in marital satisfaction over time, unlike Social Exchange Theory, it is not applicable to military couple conflict in that it does not address the issue of multiple and repeated stressful life events or the possibility for gender differences in adaptation. Sayers (2010) came to a similar conclusion that, “no one framework exists that encompasses the developmental reintegration issues, relationship changes induced by a combat separation, as well as other factors known to have an impact on marital functioning [in the military]” (p. 110).

Marriage Education

One method of improving or enriching a couple’s current relationship is through their participation in marriage and relationship education (MRE) programs. Most MRE programs emphasize enhancing communication and problem-solving skills, typically in a group format, without attention to specific couple problems (Gottman & Silver, 1999; Fincham & Beach, 2010b). These educational programs are designed to, “teach couples skills, principles, and

strategies that increase chances for a stable and happy relationship” (Stanley, Allen, Markman, Rhoades, & Prentice, 2010). Some MRE programs focus on preventing relationship distress by assessing different aspects of the couple’s conflict interaction, teaching conflict management skills, and coaching couples on how to resolve conflicts and power struggles more effectively (Kopp, 2007; Sanford, 2010). Other programs focus on communication and interpretation of stressful event, where partners may view the same event very differently, which could lead to a lack of cooperation when combined with poor communication (Dinkmeyer, 2007). However, over the past decade MRE programs have decreased their concentration of only targeting the reduction of negativity and instead, have incorporated the concept of developing and enhancing the couple’s friendship in an effort to increase positive bonding (Gottman, Ryan, Carrere, & Erley, 2002). The rising trend of taking into account the impact of positive interaction supports the preventative purpose of MRE programs (Kotrla & Dyer, 2008). Sometimes mistaken for marriage therapy, the objective of MRE programs is to provide couples with knowledge and skills to build a better marriage and avoid marriage breakdown; not to rehabilitate failing marriages (Kotrla & Dyer, 2008).

Basic interpersonal skills in MRE. As mentioned herein, research has established that improving upon certain basic relationship skills (e.g., conflict resolution) has beneficial effects for the development and maintenance of a couple’s relationship quality over time (Schneewind & Gerhard, 2002), especially for couples who are at high risk or already experiencing difficulties (Halford, Markman, & Stanley, 2008). As a result of their close examination of and subsequent findings on marriage interactions, several researchers have made suggestions for building curriculum used in MRE programs. For example, Russell-Chapin, Chapin, and Sattler (2001) suggested a few strategies that were shown to be helpful when working with couples: teaching active listening skills and how to understand and appreciate differing styles of conflict resolution. Although understanding the partner’s preference for a particular conflict resolution style was not found to be essential to marital satisfaction, it was still an important skill that helped counteract the mismatch of styles by prompting compromise by one or both partners. If couples became skilled at appropriate communication (e.g., active listening and clarification) discussions over finances, child rearing, and any other subject could be handled in an environment and manner where there is a greater potential for conflict resolution. However, communication training was not shown to improve couples skill level for ability to generate alternative solutions to their

conflict (Warmbrod, 1982). This finding suggests that problem-solving skills are independent of communication skills, therefore MRE programs should contain curriculum addressing both types of skills separately.

Underlying concerns in MRE. Sanford (2010) also strongly suggested that the best approach to conflict resolution was to uncover the underlying concerns within the couple's interaction and effectively communicate these concerns to each other. Based on his prior research, this strategy might also be an essential task to include in the core curriculum of MRE programs. This necessary skill would assist partners in identifying the underlying issues when they can only identify a specific event as the point of distress. Another fundamental skill to teach in marriage education is the impact of designating a regular appointment time and place where couples can discuss their grievances and issues, as described by Johnson et al. (2005) illustration of couples who, "approach discussions with partner as a pleasant time to catch up, work on the relationship together, and plan for future, then their actions will proceed differently than if discussions are viewed as a time when they need to defend themselves from the partner's unreasonable demands influence the partner, or avoid uncomfortable sources of tension in the relationship," (p. 26). Just as the program itself should provide couples with a safe environment to participate in during instruction, the curriculum should also stress the importance of creating a safe place where issues can be discussed openly at home (Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002).

Balance of positive and negative factors in MRE. One of the common critiques of current marriage education programs is their major focus on the effects of stress on couples with the goal of problem solving, when instead, there should be a more balanced presentation of negative factors and positive factors (e.g., programs, institutions) that influence marital interaction (Sayers, 2010). This finding reflects the trend in marriage literature of research attention shifting towards a closer examination of positive variables and their effect on marital satisfaction alone, as well as their impact when paired with negative variables (Fincham & Beach, 2010b; Fincham, Stanley, & Beach, 2007). According to Johnson et al.'s (2005) findings, MRE programs that have a core curriculum which emphasis both "modification of interaction patterns as a strategy for strengthening marriages, and they underscore the value of focusing on problem solving and potential conflicts as domains in which to target behavioral change," will produce a higher level of change in marital satisfaction compared to a MRE with a more narrow scope that only addresses one of these components (p. 26). Their "identification of

positive skills, positive affects, and their interactions as possible contributors to changes in satisfaction draws attention to the likely value of those interventions that facilitate recognition and use of prosocial processes, in conjunction with the containment of negative skills and the management of strong negative affects, such as anger and contempt” (Johnson et al., 2005, p. 26). One objective for a more balanced MRE curriculum is to help couples increase cooperation, a positive strategy for problem solving, that has proven results of increasing marital satisfaction and reducing conflict (Leggett, Roberts-Pittman, Byczek, & Morse, 2012).

MRE effectiveness. Specific research evaluating the effectiveness of MRE programs has been overall consistently positive. The results of a meta-analytic study conducted on 117 independent studies by Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin, and Fawcett (2008), validated MRE’s significant, but modest efficacy on relationship quality and communication skills with little evidence of diminishing effects during follow-up assessments. Contrary to popular belief that men are less enthusiastic about participating in MRE programs, no evidence was found to support gender differences in terms of effectiveness (Hawkins et al., 2008). MRE programs with a “moderate dosage” instruction time ranging from nine hours to twenty hours produced significantly stronger effects when compared to programs with less instructional time (Hawkins et al., 2008, p.729).

Just as in MRE programs, participation in premarital education was also associated with higher levels of marital satisfaction, lower levels of destructive conflicts, and higher levels of interpersonal commitment to spouses (Stanley, Amato, Johnson, & Markman, 2006). One of the largest random phone surveys conducted by Stanley et al. (2006) comprised of 3,000 adults who lived in the Midwest who were interviewed, provided further support of the association between the outcome of lower conflict with programs that include strong conflict management and communication components. Marital satisfaction was reported to have increased gradually as premarital education increased from one hour to twenty hours, only changing little after this point (Stanley et al., 2006). In contrast, marital conflict was found to decline continuously as premarital education increased from one hour to ten hours, but only had slight gains thereafter (Stanley et al. 2006). In addition to corroborating past research findings on the association between premarital education programs and its positive effects on marital satisfaction and reducing conflict, this large sample also expanded premarital education benefits to a wide range of couples. Unlike many research studies examining the effectiveness of premarital education on

samples of mostly white, middle-class couples, Stanley et al.'s (2006) sample was more representative of the general population and included a wide range of subgroups. There was no evidence found that supported a differential benefit for those individuals from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds or those categorized as economically disadvantaged (Stanley et al. 2006). Their findings demonstrate that the benefits of premarital education programs are consistent among couples from diverse backgrounds, a common characteristic of the military population.

(Summary of marriage education used in the military and its effectiveness)

The goal of working with military couples on combat deployment-related issues is to help them complete developmental relationship tasks such as enhancing their communication in order to help understanding and appreciation of each other's experience during the deployment, renegotiating spousal roles, reestablishing intimacy, and reestablishing family routines (Sayers, 2010). Based on research that demonstrates working on such tasks will increase marital satisfaction in civilian couples, it is hypothesized that target of these tasks will also increase marital satisfaction in military couples.

Chapter 4 - Methods

This qualitative study examined three highly recommended couple education resources suggested for military families experiencing high levels of interpersonal conflict and distress in their marriage. The main concentration of this study was whether these marriage education programs were based on evidence from existing research. The focal point of this study was each program's attention to relationship conflict within military couples, in particular, during a deployment cycle. Three marriage and relationship education resources were chosen for analysis in order to assess their inclusion of existing research literature and integration of couple conflict resolution strategies for military couples.

Qualitative Content Analysis

I chose to use a qualitative content analysis approach due to its definition as a “qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings” (Patton, 2002, p. 453). This method simplifies large amounts of data or content into smaller, organized segments (Silverman, 2012). Content analysis also has been described as an “accepted method of textual investigation” therefore making it a good fit for my assessment of couple education curricula (Silverman, 2012, p. 66). I followed the steps for a successful content analysis put forth by Marvasti (2004): First, I defined the research question. Second, I chose the sample of marriage education programs endorsed by the military. Next, I identified the categories or components from the marriage literature for use in analyses. Fourth, I assessed each of the programs for the presence and strength of the pre-established components.

Research Questions

As evident in the literature review, little research has examined couple conflict interaction in military couples. In contrast to nonmilitary couples, relationships that involve one partner serving in one of the branches of the United States Armed Forces will face military culture-specific stressors, such as a deployment cycle. Easing potential areas of conflict during a deployment, like the role transitions, will create a positive effect on not only the level of marital satisfaction, but also on the service member's commitment to and progression within the military institution. This link between conflict within military couples and a service member's allegiance

to his or her duty is vital to national security. The overarching research question in this study was: How well are popular marriage and relationship education resources for military couples built on the existing research literature with regard to couple conflict? The following more specific research questions address particular couple dynamics, such as military culture and deployments' influence on interpersonal conflict:

1. How well are common areas of conflict for couples highlighted in the research literature?
2. Specific to military, how well do they address couple conflict interaction within military culture and issues?
3. How well is deployment, a high-conflict area for military couples, represented in the marriage education resources?
4. Are these couple education resources theoretically based?

To address these questions, I emphasized analyzing the content of each program (as opposed to their program methods or quality). I examined whether important components were present and gauged the strength of their application to the context of military couples and deployments.

Sample

Criteria for inclusion. In order to be included in the study, each program had to meet the criteria: 1) They must represent a marriage education or enrichment program as opposed to marriage therapy or one-on-one marriage counseling; 2) the resources are to be by a trained lay person as opposed to a professional or expert in the field of marriage functioning; 3) they were accessible to all couples in the military without any pre-qualifications with regard to level of marital distress.

Process of selection. The most popular couple education program, *PREP for Strong Bonds*, was selected due to its repeated mention in the research literature. This program was the only resource for which evaluation research was conducted. To compare this heavily utilized program in the Army to another group format program used within a different branch of service, I attempted to gain access to the Air Force's *MarriageCare* program. Several attempts to access the *MarriageCare* curriculum were denied due to a concern of publishing rights. I was emailed a "talking paper" from one of the program instructor trainers that provided miscellaneous statistics,

summary of program content and a sample schedule of the program. However, this was not enough information for a content analysis. Therefore, I selected another group format marriage education program found to be utilized by the Air Force and accessible to any military couple – *Marriage LINKS*. For the third program, I was searching for a contrasting resource; one that was not created for a group or retreat-like format. While contacting several Air Force bases located in Texas, Massachusetts, and South Dakota, to attempt to gain access to their *MarriageCare* program materials, I also inquired about other couple education resources that were in the form of a self-help or internet-based format, and came highly recommended by their family advocacy office to address interpersonal conflict. The most commonly mentioned self-help resource for couple conflict was *ScreamFree Marriage*.

Description of each program sampled.

PREP for Strong Bonds. In 1997, the U.S. Army Chaplain Corps introduced the program *Strong Bonds*, originally known as *Building Strong and Ready Families*, to increase soldier and family readiness through relationship education and skills training (Stanley, Allen, Markman, Rhoades, & Prentice, 2005; Strong Bonds, 2010). One of the training programs for couples utilized within the *Strong Bonds* initiative is *Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program* (PREP), a research-based program originally developed for civilian couples (Markman, Stanley, Blumber, Jenkins, & Whiteley, 2004). The following program description was taken from the PREP, Inc. (2013) website:

PREP for Strong Bonds is a military-based curriculum designed to facilitate partners through the issues that all romantic couples face (like communication, stress, and support) in addition to issues that are specific to military families (such as deployment and re-integration)...*Strong Bonds* includes the same invaluable relationship education that all our curricula offer, but, in addition, helps military families maintain a focused communication of expectations, even as roles shift in long absences.

In light of the ongoing Global War on Terrorism and its consequent effects of, “increased stress, high operational tempos, and lengthy deployments [that] affect Army families, the U.S. Army Chaplain Corps began ramping up a number of their services aimed at supporting these families” (Stanley et al., 2005). In 2004, the financial backing for the chaplain-led PREP program was changed to command funded which allowed soldiers and their families to attend at

no cost Strong Bonds, 2010). “During Fiscal Year 2009 more than 160,000 Soldiers and Family members participated in over 2,600 Strong Bonds events” (Strong Bonds, 2010).

The program’s authors impress upon the participants that in order to handle marriage’s issues and choices relevant in today’s society, partners have to negotiate with each other. The way couples handle conflict and differences has a significant impact on the status of their marriage and survival of their happiness. “Because conflict is inevitable, you have to figure out how to manage disagreements and solve problems in a way that protects and preserves your love” (Markman et al., 2004, p. 4). The *PREP* foundation teaches couples how to change their interactions now for the better and also help couples build a strong relationship for the long term. Within the *PREP* curriculum, the four main factors for marriage success are handling conflict, making positive connections, forgiving, and making a long-term commitment. Markman et al. outline the four common hallmarks of a great marriage: 1. Sharing friendship and love; 2. Treating each other respectfully when dealing with conflict; 3. Commitment to keeping your marriage top priority; and 4. Both partners do their own part in working to identify and decrease negative behaviors and increase positive ones.

Within the *PREP for Strong Bonds* curriculum, Markman et al. (2004) also laid out a positive approach to dealing with conflict that entailed six ground rules – take time-outs, practice the speaker-listener technique, problem talk before problem solve, table discussion for later if now is not a good time, schedule weekly couple meetings, and make time for the great things in marriage (fun, friendship, and sensuality). The authors contend that by effectively working through their [the participants’) problems and increasing the amount of positive connections, a couple can strengthen their relationship and deepen their love for one another. The authors have taken their research-based principles for strengthening marriages and applied them to making military marriages stronger with the Army’s implementation of the *PREP for Strong Bonds* program. With regards to this programs effectiveness, research conducted by Stanley et al. (2010) reported that after one year post-intervention couples who attended the *PREP for Strong Bonds* workshop had one-third the rate of divorce of the controlled group (couples who did not attend the workshop). These findings suggested that the *PREP for Strong Bonds* program had a positive impact on marital stability by reducing the risk of divorce for Army marriages, at least through one year (Stanley et al. 2010).

ScreamFree Marriage. The next marriage and relationship educational resource reviewed for this analysis was a self-help book written by Runkel (2011) titled, *ScreamFree Marriage: Calming Down, Growing up, and Getting Closer*. In his book, Runkel asserts that the existing method for handling inherent differences between partners, screaming, is not effective in reaching a mutually satisfying relationship. He instead proposes a new ScreamFree method – calm down, grow up, get closer, and repeat – to end these negative patterns of conflict and create new, positive ones. Spouses must change their old patterns and embrace natural conflicts of marriage as an opportunity to grown closer through them. The purpose in marriage, according to Runkel, is to get to know one’s spouse, to share oneself with someone who wants to share him/herself, and to reach an ultimate goal of deeper connection. Because there is no escaping the inevitable conflict in marriage, Runkel suggests that it is important to allow it to teach married couples all it can about themselves.

Screaming is defined by Runkel as emotional reactivity or letting anxious emotions override clear thinking. He further describes this screaming as:

Allowing our worst fears or worries to drive our choices, instead of our highest principles. When conflict is combined with emotional reactivity (screaming), it produces an undesirable outcome. And whenever we allow ourselves to be driven by our anxiety, we usually create the very outcome we were hoping to avoid in the first place. (p. 12)

The reader will presumably come to the conclusion that these forms of screaming in marriage prevent couples from productive interactions.

For partners searching for guidance on the first step to implementing his screamfree marriage model, Runkel suggests apologizing for not being the best possible spouse and ask for forgiveness. This action must be the result of wanting to reveal oneself without alternative motives or hidden agenda. This action, Runkel predicts, will introduce a lasting change and establish a new positive pattern of calming down, growing up enough to stop the previous negative patterns, and getting closer.

Runkel (2011) contends that by becoming more self-centered, through knowing and representing true feelings and desires, individuals can work on improving themselves for their partner’s benefit; and hence, become a stronger spouse. This self-improvement approach to marital discord maintains that one spouse, while not being able to control his or her spouse’s behavior, can control his or her own behavior. Using this assumption as a premise, Runkel

proposes a new model for marriage with a goal of changing oneself, not one's spouse. Reaching an agreement on high conflict subjects is not the end goal. Runkel emphasizes that the end goal of a screamfree marriage is to let relationship conflict become the path to calmer, warmer deeper connection.

Marriage LINKS. The third and final marriage and relationship education resource I reviewed was a program created by Dr. John Vann Epp (1997-2011), titled Marriage Lasting Intimacy through Nurturing Knowledge and Skills (LINKS). The instructor manual and workbook provided by the author was a modified version, tailored to address the specific needs of military marriages. The course material is most commonly presented in a group format and delivered by a certified instructor. The curriculum is divided into five sessions that correspond with the five love links – knowledge, trust, reliance, commitment, and sexual touch – that lay the foundation for Vann Epp's model of intimacy, Relationship Attachment Model (RAM). This model illustrates how to “achieve and keep intimacy by gaining a better understanding and knowledge, learning about the importance of nurturing and sharpening skills of communication and conflict resolution” (Vann Epp, 1997-2011, p. 10). Each of these bonding dynamics or links is interrelated; when one link is improved upon in the relationship, it positively influences the other links to move up. Vann Epp posits the RAM love links can aid couples in balancing their relationship as it moves through life's challenges. The goal of this Marriage LINKS program is to help couples gain a clear picture of where they are now and what areas they would like to improve on in order to keep their relationship growing over the course of a lifetime.

The specific curriculum reviewed for this paper was customized to address unique challenges military marriages might encounter resulting from a recent pre-deployment or post-deployment experience. Two major principles behind this program are that it is normal for marriages to become imbalanced and it is essential to regularly address these imbalances. The curriculum instructs participants to utilize huddles where partners routinely meet to communicate about these imbalances. It is recommended that these huddles include four steps: 1. Know (evaluate and discuss couples' talk time status); 2. Trust (discuss how couples' attitude of appreciation, trust, and forgiveness is); 3. Rely (discuss the couples' togetherness and evaluate if partners are meeting each other's needs and working together in our roles); and 4. Commit (discuss how to plan ahead in order to balance or improve upon a struggling relationship area). Military couples, or any couple facing life deployments, can move through a relationship conflict

by operating under the Relationship Attachment Model principles. A couple's mastering of one of life's deployments can equip them for future challenges.

Analyses

To answer the overarching research question (how well are popular marriage and relationship education resources recommended for military couples built on the existing research literature with regard to couple conflict?), a list of components was established based on the literature and theory discussed earlier to assess the content of each program. Within each component, I looked for its explicit and implicit presence in each program's content, as well as the strength of its inclusion in the programs' content.

Components Used for the Assessment

1. In general, how well are common areas of conflict for couples highlighted in the literature?

Within this research question, of the following evidence would support the strength of this component:

- Identification and description of negative conflict interaction patterns;
- Explanation of the negative impact these destructive patterns have on couples reaching successful conflict resolution;
- Identification of high conflict topics, as well as possible hidden or underlying issues and an explanation of their influence on conflict interaction;
- Identification of co-occurring factors that influence negative interaction patterns;
- Identification and description of positive conflict interaction styles;
- Explanation of the positive impact constructive conflict interaction patterns have on predicting successful conflict resolution;
- Inclusion of alternative views of conflict, positive reframing, as an opportunity for relationship growth; and
- Identification of co-occurring factors that influence positive interaction patterns.

2. Specific to military, how well do these programs address couple conflict interaction within military culture and issues? The following elements were identified to reflect the strength of each program's inclusion of this component:
 - Specific attention to the demand-withdraw pattern predicted for military couples;
 - Specific attention to positive reframing of or positive reinterpretation skills for daily challenges unique to military culture; and
 - Identification of potential barriers to successful positive interaction within military culture.

3. How well is deployment, a high-conflict area for military couples, represented? Possible indicators I considered for establishing the strength of this component were:
 - Explanation of how military deployments, especially multiple military deployments, can negatively impact couple interaction and marital satisfaction;
 - Description of the 7 Emotional Cycles of Deployment with specific attention to the reintegration phase;
 - Specific application of positive reframing of to the couple's experience of combat deployment;
 - Identification of how couple interaction is impacted by barriers created during deployment; specifically addressing the population of military couples experiencing multiple deployments as being high-risk for destructive conflict interaction patterns;
 - Addressing the population of military couples experiencing the reintegration cycle of deployment as being high-risk for destructive conflict interaction patterns;
 - Target areas of developmental relationship tasks that are likely to be most impacted by a deployment, such as enhancing their communication in order to help understanding and appreciation of each other's experience

during the deployment, renegotiating spousal roles, reestablishing intimacy, and reestablishing family routines; and

- Emphasis on an early proactive intervention approach, such as targeting couples in pre-deployment cycle or first deployment cycle since enlistment.

4. Is the program theoretically based? The kind of subcomponents I am looking for to determine the strength of the use of theory are:

- Incorporation of Social Exchange theory concepts when viewing relationship conflict's influence on marital satisfaction, from a cost and reward perspective;
- Incorporation of Role-Exit Theory concepts for military couples entering the reintegration phase of deployment; and
- Incorporation of the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptability Model to explain how couples adapt to, interact with, and understand each other has an impact on marital satisfaction.

Description of Analyses Process

For both of the group-format programs, *PREP for Strong Bonds and Marriage LINKS*, I obtained the program curricula, instructor materials, and the corresponding participant workbooks. I was personally able to attend one *Marriage LINKS* retreat and one *PREP for Strong Bonds* retreat. I also read and studied the book, *12 Hours to a Great Marriage*, by Markman et al. (2004), that was provided to participants unable to attend the *PREP for Strong Bonds* weekend retreat. I watched and took notes of the instructor DVDs provided by the *Marriage LINKS* developer. I then read each curriculum coupled with its respective supplemental material multiple times, highlighting the appropriate sections and participant exercises for each research question. The content of each program was assessed using the components deduced from review of the literature. Programs were evaluated based on the presence (or absence) of each component, as well as the strength of incorporating the component if present.

Chapter 5 - Results

The qualitative content analysis of the data revealed that overall, each of the three marriage education curricula examined did meet most, but not all, of the components and criteria identified as important in the research literature. The two weakest or most absent elements were the explicit application of theory and making the course materials specific for couples in the military subculture. The results for each program are organized by the research question, and are provided in this chapter. Page numbers have been included to let the reader know where the information was found.

PREP for Strong Bonds

PREP for Strong Bonds included many criteria for effective problem-solving and relationship enhancement strategies. The authors, most of whom are well-known marriage researchers, placed heavy emphasis on the way partners handle conflict and differences and its subsequent impact on marital satisfaction. The program includes an emphasis on the assertion that how couples disagree is more significant than the disagreement itself, a common focus also found in early interpersonal conflict research (Gottman, 1994; Jones & Gallois, 1989; Leggett, Roberts-Pittman, Byczek, & Morse, 2012; Stanley et al., 2002).

Research Question 1: How well are common couple conflict concepts highlighted in the research literature?

Identification and description of negative conflict interaction patterns

Four main negative patterns of handling conflict (escalation, invalidation, negative interpretations, and withdrawal) were specifically identified and thoroughly described in the *PREP for Strong Bonds* curriculum (Markman et al., 2004, p. 24-36). To assess for existing negative patterns, the authors included a relationship quiz to survey the couples' current conflict interaction patterns using characteristics of known destructive patterns. In the survey, participants were asked to self-evaluate whether each question applied to their relationship almost never or never, once in awhile, or often. For example, "Little arguments escalate into big fights with accusations, criticism, name-calling, or bringing up past hurts" (p. 22-24). Therefore, this component was strongly incorporated into the *PREP for Strong Bonds* program materials.

Explanation of the negative impact these destructive patterns have on couples reaching successful conflict resolution

The authors of *PREP for Strong Bonds* conveyed the impact of negative interaction patterns. They explained this resulting chipping-away process in the curriculum as, “they [negative interaction patterns] threaten the bond that holds you and your partner together and that, over time, can lead to unhappiness and, in many cases, divorce” (Markman et al., 2004, p. 22). The authors also represented the strength of these negative patterns compared to positive ones: “Negative patterns and behaviors have a much stronger effect on marriage than the positive things” (p. 22). This component was also strongly integrated into the curriculum.

Identification of high conflict topics, as well as possible hidden or underlying issues and an explanation of their influence on conflict interaction

The *PREP for Strong Bonds* authors reported that most couples were known to fight most about money and issues about children, followed by other big issues, such as sex, communication, in-laws, leisure activities, alcohol and drugs, religion, careers, and household work (Markman et al., 2004, p. 63). In Hour 3 (or Chapter 3), the authors labeled a subsection, “Understanding Hidden Issues” to address hidden or underlying issues. They also gave more specialized attention to issues surrounding power and control, caring, recognition, integrity, commitment, and acceptance (p. 72-75). The subsection immediately following is labeled, “Recognizing Hidden Issues.” It described four signs that can help participants identify hidden issues that are preventing constructive conflict interaction: wheel spinning, small events triggering big arguments, avoidance, and scorekeeping (p. 76-77). Accordingly, this component was strong with entire subsections devoted to explaining what hidden issues were, how to recognize them, and suggested strategies for working on them.

Identification of co-occurring factors that influence negative interaction patterns

PREP for Strong Bonds assigned a subsection in Hour 2 “Common Communication Filters” to address the influence of co-occurring factors. Five main communication filters were identified - distractions, emotions, expectations, personality styles, self-protection, and mismatched memories (Markman et al., 2004, p. 45-49). The resulting outcomes of these filters were described as causing miscommunication and misunderstandings, and making conversations more difficult (p. 45-49). Thus, this component was strong.

Identification and description of positive conflict interaction styles

PREP for Strong Bonds taught skills and attitudes that research shows lead to good relationships by increasing the positive behaviors (take a positive approach, talk safely and clearly, handle your issues, solve problems, and follow the ground rules) that can lead to positive connections. One such skill presented was Gottman's gentle start-up approach to conflict that entails bringing up concerns directly and gently (p. 21-22). In Hour 2, titled "Simple Techniques for Talking Safely and Clearly," the authors presented several positive conflict interaction skills to help prevent the reoccurrence of destructive conflict (p. 43-55). These conflict techniques are identified and described in this chapter and included the time-out, creating a safe and supportive environment, and the speaker-listener technique. For those reasons, this component was determined to be strong.

Explanation of the positive impact constructive conflict interaction patterns have on predicting successful conflict resolution

The authors explained and reiterated that utilizing these simple positive techniques can have a preventative impact on destructive conflict interaction and also prevent the participants' loss of "closeness as friends, teammates, and lovers," with their partners (Markman et al., 2004, p. 43). They noted that the "deepest kind of intimacy and the strongest friendships develop when partners feel safe enough to say anything and everything to each other" (p. 52). By using the structured positive interaction method, the speaker-listener technique, to cope with conflictual conversations, participants are taught to increase the positive impact and keep their "emotions from racing out of control" and "prevent frustration and chaos" (p. 52). This component was deemed strong.

Inclusion of alternative views of conflict and positive reframing; conflict viewed as an opportunity for relationship growth

Participants in *PREP for Strong Bonds* were encouraged to anticipate future areas of stress and to imagine how they would deal with stress together with their partner, as a team, therefore suggesting an alternative view of stress. This has been described in the literature as reworking or reframing conflict into an opportunity for couples to overcome the source of stress by working together. As a result, they strengthen their relationship (Participant Manual, 2009, p. 33). This component was strong.

Identification of co-occurring factors that influence positive interaction patterns

Co-occurring factors, such as creating a safe and supportive environment and overcoming communication filters, were listed as titles for subsections outlined in Hour 2 of the PREP for Strong Bonds curriculum. These factors were identified and described as influential towards utilizing simple techniques for talking safely and clearly (Markman et al., 2004. 49-52). This component was then assessed as strong.

Summary

Because each component was determined to be successfully incorporated, the *PREP for Strong Bonds* program strongly included the couple conflict concepts.

Research Question 2: Specific to military, how well does *PREP for Strong Bonds* address couple conflict interaction within military culture and issues?

Specific attention to the demand-withdraw pattern predicted for military couples

Neither the textbook nor the participant manual specifically mentioned what negative conflict patterns were common among or predicted for military couples. However, the textbook does include a subsection that specifically addresses differences between men and women when dealing with interpersonal conflict that is consistent with research literature: “Men are generally more likely than women to withdraw from or avoid a potentially difficult discussion... because they don’t want to get into a fight,” (Markman et al., 2004, p. 38-39). Because the military is viewed as an inherently male-dominated culture and a majority of the soldiers are male, it can logically be assumed that the withdraw pattern would be present and common among military marriages. The *PREP for Strong Bonds* materials lacked a connection between the likelihood of the withdraw pattern for males to military marriages, and therefore was assessed as weak for this component.

Specific attention to positive reframing of or positive reinterpretation skills for daily challenges unique to military culture

The program materials lacked attention to military culture issues that research has identified as strains on couples, such as relocations, loss of social networks, and spouse employment. For that reason, this component was rated missing.

Identification of potential barriers to successful positive interaction within military culture.

Because the PREP for Strong Bonds materials lacked a connection between explicitly applying known barriers to successful positive interaction, this component was also determined to be missing.

Summary

Since the components were rated weak or absent all together, the degree of inclusion for couple conflict interaction within military culture and issues was inadequate for the *PREP for Strong Bonds* program.

Research Question 3: How well is deployment, a high-conflict area for military couples represented in *PREP for Strong Bonds*?

Explanation of how military deployments, especially multiple military deployments, can negatively impact couple interaction and marital satisfaction

A thought-provoking exercise within the *PREP for Strong Bonds* participant manual addressed probable negative impacts a military couple may face as a result of a deployment. On the workbook page titled, “What can Change?” participants were instructed to consider potential concerns about possible changes that may occur as a result of the deployment, e.g. communication patterns, roles and routines, and income (p. 46). Through participation of this exercise, couples anticipate and generate discussion about areas of their relationship that research shows could be negatively affected by the lengthy separation. Thus, this component’s incorporation into the program is strong.

Description of the 7 Emotional Cycles of Deployment with specific attention to the reintegration phase

The *PREP for Strong Bonds* program materials did not mention the 7 Emotional Cycles of Deployment, so this component was determined to be absent.

Specific application of positive reframing of to the couple’s experience of combat deployment

In the participant manual, the authors proposed a positive reframing of deployments as an “opportunity for each [partner]...to grow in their abilities to overcome setbacks and obstacles”

(p. 46). An exercise following this discussion, instructed the participant to imagine “changing in ways that help you be more resilient” associating this technique with the positive reframing of a long period of separation. For these reasons, this component’s representation in the program was strong.

Identification of how couple interaction is impacted by barriers created during deployment; specifically addressing the population of military couples experiencing multiple deployments as being high-risk for destructive conflict interaction patterns

The workbook page titled, “Expectations and Deployment,” addressed likely hidden or underlying issues that impact couple’s interaction; issues that surround deployment. One partner’s expectations, such as communication about problems in the relationship, romance, sexual fidelity, power, friendship, and sharing feelings can be influenced or altered by separation from each other (p. 47-48). These areas of concern are compatible with potential barriers described in research that may inhibit positive interaction within military couples. Thus, this component’s inclusion in the program was strong.

Addressing the population of military couples experiencing the reintegration cycle of deployment as being high-risk for destructive conflict interaction patterns

The *PREP for Strong Bonds* program materials did not address or mention the reintegration cycle of deployment at all, so this component was determined to be absent.

Target areas of developmental relationship tasks that are likely to be most impacted by a deployment, such as enhancing their communication in order to help understanding and appreciation of each other’s experience during the deployment, renegotiating spousal roles, reestablishing intimacy, and reestablishing family routines

Expectations with regard to certain developmental relationship tasks, like conflict communication, power, sexual fidelity, romance, emotional dependency and friendship and how they will be impacted by deployment were mentioned in the *PREP for Strong Bonds* program (p. 47-48). This component was strong.

Emphasis on an early proactive intervention approach, such as targeting couples in pre-deployment cycle or first deployment cycle since enlistment

PREP for Strong Bonds did not explicitly mention its target audience, however there are a few pages that use the word deployment which appears so it can be assumed that military couples who have experienced or will experience deployment would be encouraged to attend.

Summary

One out of three components was determined to be missing in the *PREP for Strong Bonds* program, while the remaining two components were assessed as strong. Thus, with regard to the program's incorporation of addressing the high-level conflict area of deployment for military couples was moderately strong.

Research Question 4: Is *PREP for Strong Bonds* theoretically based?

Incorporation of Social Exchange theory concepts when viewing relationship conflict's influence on marital satisfaction, from a cost and reward perspective

The *PREP for Strong Bonds* program lacks any explicit mention of Social Exchange Theory within its materials. However, the program did view negative interactions in response to conflict through a cost-benefit lens: Conflict was perceived as a cost to the relationship, one that "can damage closeness" (p. 4). This component was assessed as weak.

Incorporation of Role-Exit Theory concepts for military couples entering the reintegration phase of deployment

Similarly, there was no explicit reference to Role-Exit Theory. A discussion in the participant manual of probable changes in roles and routines as a result of deployment was incorporated into the curriculum. The corresponding exercise promoted discussion surrounding these anticipated changes by asking participants, "How might your roles and routines change?" (p. 46). There was no description of Role-Exit Theory's framework or four stages that role exiters must engage in before reestablishing one's identity in a new role. This component was also rated as weak.

Incorporation of the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptability Model to explain how couples adapt to, interact with, and understand each other has an impact on marital satisfaction

Although there is no explicit mention, the authors utilized compatible variables relevant to the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptability Model's variables. For example, the *PREP for Strong Bonds* program addressed enduring vulnerabilities, stressful events, and adaptive processes, all of which are significant elements of the VSA Model. In the textbook, the VSA element, enduring vulnerabilities, is mirrored in the mention of possible communication filters that come from a partner's background or experiences, and how they play a role in determining one's interaction style (p. 49). "Every person has a unique way of communicating, based on his or her sex, culture, family background, and lots of other factors" (p. 47). Stressful events and their role in the relationship are discussed in the participant manual, with specific attention given to partners communicating with their spouses to tackle stress from a team approach (p. 33). Training participants on how to constructively approach conflict by utilizing adaptive processes or simple techniques outlined in the textbook, was the main goal of the program. The authors use the same premise reflected in Karney and Bradbury's conclusion that negative behavior of husbands and wives predict less stable marriages over time, and make a concentrated effort to transform the behavior into positive interactions. This component was moderately strong.

Summary

Despite the lack of explicit use of theory in *PREP for Strong Bonds* program, the authors did use some of the theoretical concepts related to Social Exchange Theory, Role-Exit Theory, and the VSA Model. The program's use of theory was moderately weak because theoretical concepts of the Social Exchange Theory were merely implied.

Summary of PREP for Strong Bonds Results

The *PREP for Strong Bonds* program was robust in its inclusion of the couple conflict concepts, however, specifics related to couple dynamics were relatively absent except for brief mention of the issues surrounding deployment. There was also a moderately weak theoretical basis.

ScreamFree Marriage

The self-help book, *ScreamFree Marriage* by Runkel (2011), was found to apply many of the couple dimensions listed in the criteria. Runkel's concentration on the conflict process and best practices for achieving a mutual resolution mirrors how a couple faces tense issues (Gottman, 1994; Jones & Gallois, 1989; Karney & Bradbury 1997); Leggett, Roberts-Pittman, Byczek, & Morse, 2012; Stanley et al., 2002).

Research Question 1: How well does *ScreamFree Marriage* incorporate couple conflict concepts highlighted in the research literature?

Identification and description of negative conflict interaction patterns

Runkel defined interaction patterns in his program as recurring issues that partners cannot seem to resolve. He posited that partners do not have a problem with one another, but instead have a "pattern" that is perpetuated by interactions (p. 64). He identified and described common negative interaction patterns (aggressive yelling, distance from one another, cutting-off the other partner, over/under pattern) and introduced a pattern not uncovered in the research literature reviewed. He called it "triangulating of others into the conflict" (p. 253-259). Runkel argued that identifying one's default way of screaming was a crucial first step in calming oneself down. This component was determined to be strong.

Explanation of the negative impact these destructive patterns have on couples reaching successful conflict resolution

Runkel emphasized the negative impact of how couples interacted during conflict, or how couples "screamed" (p. 12). He described how these forms of screaming produce not only negative outcomes, such as avoidance and marital instability, but they also lead to the very outcome the partner was trying to avoid. Screaming can make "the outcome you feared that much more likely to occur" (p. 19). This component's integration into the curriculum was strong.

Identification of high conflict topics, as well as possible hidden or underlying issues and an explanation of their influence on conflict interaction

The author applied his conflict resolution method to four common areas of high conflict, or “fires of conflict,” derived from his clients’ experiences – time accountability, extended families, household management, and sexuality (p. 88). He also addressed faulty expectations about what constitutes a happy or ideal marriage. The unrealistic expectations or underlying issues for couples mentioned were: spouses are supposed to meet each other’s emotional and physical needs; trust and safety are the most important qualities in an intimate marriage and; oneness equates to no boundaries, no separation, and no individuality (p. 37-48). Therefore, this component was considered strong.

Identification of co-occurring factors that influence negative interaction patterns

The author did not mention any co-occurring factors that influence negative interaction patterns, such as where conflict interaction takes place or how it gets started. As such, this component was determined to be missing.

Identification and description of positive conflict interaction styles

Runkel identified and described two main positive interaction techniques - Authentic Self-Representation and Calm Down, Grow Up, Get Closer, Repeat – as simple, yet effective, positive conflict resolution techniques. This component was strong.

Explanation of the positive impact constructive conflict interaction patterns have on predicting successful conflict resolution

The *ScreamFree Marriage* program included an explanation that a positive transformation of how one individual, not both, screamed, would lead to a “calmer, warmer, deeper connection” and marital satisfaction (p. 57). For example, one partner’s transformation of old negative patterns, like blaming and resentment, to new patterns of pausing and apologizing, introduced a lasting beneficial change to their marriage. This component was assessed as strong.

Inclusion of alternative views of conflict and positive reframing; conflict viewed as an opportunity for relationship growth

The author debunked old perspectives of relationship conflict where marital patterns were seen as indicators of irreconcilable differences and replaced it with a more positive view of

conflict: “opportunities to grow your personal integrity and transform your relationship” (p. 5). Runkel encouraged participants to learn to “embrace the natural conflicts of marriage, grow up, and grow closer through them” (p. 6). This component was strong.

Identification of co-occurring factors that influence positive interaction patterns

Entering conflict calmly and with confidence was identified as a co-occurring factor that “will likely lead to greater intimacy, as well as individual growth and marriage satisfaction” (p. 89). This component was determined to be strong.

Summary

With only one of the seven components indicated as missing the *ScreamFree Marriage* program is overall strong and well balanced with its concentration on couple conflict concepts. The author has even further expanded the knowledge base by introducing the additional negative interaction pattern, triangulation.

Research Question 2: Specific to military, how well does *ScreamFree Marriage* address couple conflict interaction within military culture and issues?

Specific attention to the demand-withdraw pattern predicted for military couples

Because the *ScreamFree Marriage* program was created for a general audience, it did not specifically address military couples or issues surround their environment. However, the program included the demand-withdraw pattern as the most destructive “screaming” pattern. Runkel described the demand-withdraw as “explosive attempts to connect and icy attempts to douse the flames” (p. 89). This component was deemed weak due to the lack of a direct connection between military couple and the demand-withdraw conflict pattern.

Specific attention to positive reframing of or positive reinterpretation skills for daily challenges unique to military culture

Although there was no explicit mention of daily challenges surrounding military couples in particular, Runkel did address the issue of household management, a high-conflict area predicted for military couples. The author devoted an entire chapter to this “fire of conflict” (p. 142). This is an area of conflict presumed to be common for military couples who face relationship challenges as a result of the service member spouse’s consumption by his or her job

commitment. Frequent periods of separation due to training obligate the at-home spouse to manage the daily operations of the household, another high-conflict area for couples that is a result of military culture. The author encouraged participants to approach this conflictual topic by utilizing positive reframing skills. For example, Runkel explained that participants could gain positive growth from this conflict by “growing yourself into a more grateful person” (p. 164). He suggested recognizing and thanking one’s spouse for all the things s/he does to keep the household operating smoothly. This positive reframing could logically be applied to couples in a military environment, who are faced with difficulties of imbalance and stereotypes of sharing household responsibilities. Despite the applicability, this component was also scored weak as a lack of the direct linkage between the use of positive reframing and couples submerged in military culture.

Identification of potential barriers to successful positive interaction within military culture

Due to the intended general audience for whom this resource was created, there was no special attention given to military couples or conflict interaction within military culture. However, Runkel’s identification of the marriage misconceptions (what an ideal marriage looks like) is also applicable to military marriages and could likewise, also serve as a potential barrier to successful positive interaction. Lies or misconceptions about what a military spouse looks like or what makes a happy military marriage could leave one spouse feeling inept when it comes to pleasing his or her partner. Although there is room for comparison, this component was marked weak due to its lack of incorporating barriers to successful positive interaction within military culture.

Summary

In light of this program’s target audience, all of the components specifically related to military culture issues for couples were rated low for their lack of representation within the curriculum. One of the strengths for each component was the attention to the topic as it pertained to nonmilitary couples, which could then be logically translated to military couples. Overall, the *ScreamFree Marriage* program was weak in its incorporation of issues pertaining to military culture.

Research Question 3: How well is deployment, a high-conflict area for military couples, represented in *ScreamFree Marriage*?

Explanation of how military deployments, especially multiple military deployments, can negatively impact couple interaction and marital satisfaction

There is no mention or explanation of the impact deployments have on military couple interaction. The author does thoroughly address areas of conflict, such as household management and sexuality that are two logical areas of probable conflict surrounding a military couple experiencing deployment (p. 142, 173). Therefore, this component was absent.

Description of the 7 Emotional Cycles of Deployment with specific attention to the reintegration phase

ScreamFree Marriage does not mention the 7 Emotional Cycles of Deployment or the included reintegration phase. This component was missing.

Specific application of positive reframing of to the couple's experience of combat deployment

The author's repeated visualizations of applying positive reframing techniques to areas of high conflict could presumably be applied by military couples experiencing a deployment. Runkel encouraged conflict, stating that it "generates growth, electricity, and chemistry" in marriage (p. 91). Military couples could utilize Runkel's positive reframing skills to transform their negative interpretations of the deployment to a mindset that views it as an opportunity for personal and relationship growth. However, this component was determined to be weak due to its lack of directly mentioning the application of reframing to deployment.

Identification of how couple interaction is impacted by barriers created during deployment; specifically addressing the population of military couples experiencing multiple deployments as being high-risk for destructive conflict interaction patterns

This couple education resource did not mention deployment's impact on couple military interaction, thus this component was assessed as absent.

Addressing the population of military couples experiencing the reintegration cycle of deployment as being high-risk for destructive conflict interaction patterns

ScreamFree Marriage did not mention the 7 Emotional Cycles of Deployment or the subsequent reintegration phase. This component was missing.

Target areas of developmental relationship tasks that are likely to be most impacted by a deployment, such as enhancing their communication in order to help understanding and appreciation of each other's experience during the deployment, renegotiating spousal roles, reestablishing intimacy, and reestablishing family routines

Although the author of *ScreamFree Marriage* focused on conflict communication, with chapters specifically marked to address household management and intimacy, he did not relate these areas to military couples and deployment. Consequently, this component was weak.

Emphasis on an early proactive intervention approach, such as targeting couples in pre-deployment cycle or first deployment cycle since enlistment

This program targeted a general audience, from newlywed to distressed couples. Runkel's only prerequisite to participate in his program is that readers "hold on" to their current marital state as it is right now (at the time of participation), good or bad, and listen to the tools he is teaching. The author does not target military couples specifically, thus making this component absent.

Summary

Each of the components related to the support of how well deployment was addressed, was missing. The most obvious explanation for this shortcoming is the resource's intentions of appealing to a general audience instead of creating a program designed for a specific subgroup. Considered together, the components were assessed as missing due to their direct mention of deployment and its effect on military couple interaction.

Research Question 4: Is *ScreamFree Marriage* theoretically based?

Incorporation of Social Exchange theory concepts when viewing relationship conflict's influence on marital satisfaction, from a cost and reward perspective

Although Runkel did not state that he explicitly used Social Exchange Theory in his self-help book, he did use compatible theoretical concepts to explain the backfire phenomenon seen by the negative outcomes “screaming” can elicit. From a social exchange theory perspective, emotional reactivity is viewed as a cost to the relationship and produces an undesired outcome; the very outcome one partner was attempting to avoid (p. 19). The author illustrated this theoretical concept in his example of a nagging wife who complains to her husband about coming home late. The more the wife nagged, the later her husband would come home, explaining, “no one wants to rush home to a nagging, needy spouse” (p. 95). This component was determined to be moderately weak.

Incorporation of Role-Exit Theory concepts for military couples entering the reintegration phase of deployment

Even though *ScreamFree Marriage* did not explicitly include any references to Role-Exit Theory, Runkel did utilize comparable theoretical concepts when addressing the common area of conflict of household responsibilities that have become unbalanced in the relationship. For example, when one spouse assumes too much of the cleaning burden or household management duties (pertaining to non military life; this scenario was not deployment-induced). Similar to the four stages of Role-Exit Theory (first doubts, seeking alternatives, turning points, and creating the ex-role), Runkel instructed participants to first calm down by pausing and confronting lies about equality and stereotypes. Next, Runkel suggested recognizing one’s contribution in creating those stereotypes, Lastly, he explained that in order to get closer, participants must discuss one’s expectations and discuss what one wants to do for oneself, such as a create a new role. This component’s lack of explicit use of theory makes it weak.

Incorporation of the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptability Model to explain how couples adapt to, interact with, and understand each other has an impact on marital satisfaction

Runkel recommends that couple’s interact with one another in a positive pattern (such as the calm down, grow up, and get closer technique). This is similar to the theoretical concept, adaptive processes, dominant in the VSA model. It “will likely lead to greater intimacy, as well as individual growth and marital satisfaction” (p. 89). He did not go into further detail concerning stressful events or enduring vulnerabilities, both integral variables in the VSA model, that also impact marital satisfaction. *ScreamFree Marriage* fails to explicitly mention theory or

connect the similar theoretical concepts used in the program, hence, the component was moderately weak.

Summary of *ScreamFree Marriage* Results

This program was rated strong in its inclusion of the couple conflict concepts, even expanding the knowledge base to include an additional negative pattern. One major weakness grossly apparent in Runkel's approach is the lack of any direct mention or application of his positive interaction method to the military couple. Although this book was recommended due to its popularity through public access on a military installation, it does not attempt to target this subculture specifically. Despite this shortcoming, his approach still appeared generalizable to military couples. Overall, the program's related components were assessed as both strong for the core concepts but weak due to their lack of incorporating the military couple and their unique challenges into the curriculum.

Marriage LINKS

Marriage LINKS was originally developed for the nonmilitary population and has undergone modifications to incorporate research literature specifically related to military marriages.

Research Question 1: How well does *Marriage LINKS* incorporate couple conflict concepts highlighted in the research literature?

Identification and description of negative conflict interaction patterns

The *Marriage LINKS* curriculum included descriptions of the extreme conflict management styles as a continuum with too passive and too aggressive as the end points with the happy medium labeled assertive and affirming. Although their mention in the *Marriage LINKS* program was brief, the negative interaction patterns identified were attacking, avoiding, passive-aggressive, "bottle-up" passive, "blow-up" aggressive, affirming but not assertive, and assertive but not affirming (p. 41). Van Epp explained that destructive or hurtful communication patterns occur in one of the three areas of communication – content of message, listener, or messenger. Although the descriptions were very brief and pertained only to the continuum explanation, because the various patterns were identified and described, the component was strong.

Explanation of the negative impact these destructive patterns have on couples reaching successful conflict resolution

Marriage LINKS included an explanation that the negative interaction patterns are considered a “more serious breakdown of trust” or a “major attitude breakdown” within couples that can have a negative impact on couples’ patterns of emotional responses (p. 41). This component was strong.

Identification of high conflict topics, as well as possible hidden or underlying issues and an explanation of their influence on conflict interaction

The author used the example of sharing roles and division of labor in the area of finances, citing that many studies have shown money conflicts are “among the top five sources of problems in marriage” (p. 67). To address underlying issues, the author discussed “templates” that each partner brings to the roles s/he takes in the marriage, as well as the roles expected for his or her partner (p. 67). A related exercise instructed participants to self-examine how their background settings influenced how they feel loved with particular attention to their own parents’ roles and intimate relationships. The curriculum also included an explanation about how imbalances in the templates of “responsibility, authority, and territory are most likely to lead to power struggles” that ultimately impact each partner’s role and expectations of one’s spouse’s roles (p. 68). This component was determined to be strong.

Identification of co-occurring factors that influence negative interaction patterns

Marriage LINKS identified and thoroughly explained the following co-occurring factors that impact negative interaction patterns: trust in one’s partner, bad attitude toward partner, and resentments toward partner (p. 28-36). These factors are known to begin as little irritants or issues that add up and eventually become big things which are ultimately all one partner can see when she or he reference his or her negative trust pictures of his or her spouse. Van Epp explained that “your feelings toward your partner, along with your expectations and thoughts immediately shift,” therefore negatively impacting the couple’s interaction patterns (p. 36-37). Thus, this component was strong due to its identification and comprehensive explanation of the gradual influence process these co-occurring factors have on the couple’s interaction pattern.

Identification and description of positive conflict interaction styles

Van Epp identified and described several positive interaction techniques in the *Marriage LINKS* curriculum. For the relationship bonding link, knowing, Van Epp stressed the importance of couples scheduling regular talk time or “huddles” that are to be structured by healthy communication to create “an atmosphere of openness and acceptance” (p. 24). Two main approaches, reframing and solution-oriented approaches were recommended for changing attitudes from bad to good (p. 36). The curriculum also included an exercise where small groups are instructed to come up with a list of the rules for healthy conflict management to assure conflicts are managed in a respectful affirming and yet assertive ways (p. 42). This component was assessed as strong.

Explanation of the positive impact constructive conflict interaction patterns have on predicting successful conflict resolution

The author explained that when couples implement the aspects of healthy communication they are able to blend their views with their partner’s viewpoint, “the true goal of marriage” (p. 21). “When both partners are practicing this approach...then there is an atmosphere of openness and acceptance” (p. 21-22). By practicing these positive interaction skills of positively and respectfully talking through minor disappointments and conflicts, couples will “develop skills needed to work through more serious conflicts and breakdowns of trust” (p. 41). This component was strong.

Inclusion of alternative views of conflict, positive reframing, as an opportunity for relationship growth

The curriculum explicitly encouraged the use of the reframing technique to redefine minor irritants with more positive meaning, such as how one’s partner’s actions or quirks add to one’s life, make one better than what one was on one’s own, and benefit the relationship (p. 36). This component’s explicit integration in the program curriculum was strong.

Identification of co-occurring factors that influence positive interaction patterns

Keeping a good attitude of “opinion toward your spouse” was described as a co-occurring factor identified and explained to be important for positive interaction patterns (p. 29). *Marriage LINKS* also included an explanation that a healthy relationship is when couples are regularly

balancing their imbalances in the areas of knowing, trust, reliance, commitment, and touch; the five love links or bonding dynamics that contribute to the overall feeling of closeness in a relationship. When one of the love links is low, it will interact with the other links and influence interaction patterns. This component was strong.

Summary

Because each component was included in the curriculum, *Marriage LINKS* strongly incorporated couple conflict concepts emphasized in the research literature.

Research Question 2: Specific to military, how well does *Marriage LINKS* address couple conflict interaction within military culture and issues?

Specific attention to the demand-withdraw pattern predicted for military couples

Marriage LINKS did not identify the demand-withdraw pattern for nonmilitary or military couples. The author briefly illustrated the ways couples talk through disagreements by describing a continuum where too aggressive was at one end and too passive was at the opposite. For this reason, this component was assessed as weak.

Specific attention to positive reframing of or positive reinterpretation skills for daily challenges unique to military culture

Marriage LINKS did not include any mention of daily challenges unique to military culture, other than a reframing of deployment, which will be discussed in research question #3.

Identification of potential barriers to successful positive interaction within military culture.

The curriculum is targeted for couples who are frequently away from each other, for instance, as part of a job requirement, and addressed these “times of testing” through extensive discussion and exercises that promote resiliency, defined as “the ability to bounce back when hurt or challenged; adapt when facing change; cope when experiencing a trial or loss; and bend when thrown a curve” (p. 84). A military deployment was listed as an example of a “time of testing” for couples. The exercises facilitated brainstorming activities for partners to come up with ways to strengthen feeling being together even though the couple is physically separated. So, this component was strong.

Summary

The components listed in support of the research question regarding the inclusion military culture and issues influence on couple conflict was a blend of strong and weak. Overall, the components were moderately strong despite the absence of the specific demand-withdraw conflict interaction pattern.

Research Question 3: How well is deployment, a high-conflict area for military couples, represented in *Marriage LINKS*?

Explanation of how military deployments, especially multiple military deployments, can negatively impact couple interaction and marital satisfaction

Van Epp's *Marriage LINKS* workbook included supplemental pages labeled Pre- and Post-Deployment exercises that specifically identified common areas of probable conflict such as communication changes, roles and responsibilities, and connections that are drastically impacted by the military spouse's deployment. The author warned participants that "many changes take place during deployment that can cause conflicts upon reunion unless a couple practices supportive communication" (*LINKS* workbook, p. 49). This component was strong.

Description of the 7 Emotional Cycles of Deployment with specific attention to the reintegration phase

Four stages pertaining to couples who are faced with challenges, crises, and/or separation, with a military deployment listed as an example, are outlined in the *Marriage LINKS* curriculum: Cohesion, destabilization, mobilization, and adaptation. These stages are comparable to the 7 Emotional Cycles of Deployment, and therefore this component was strong.

Specific application of positive reframing of to the couple's experience of combat deployment

Van Epp included a post-deployment exercise for military couples that utilized positive reframing to meet the need for reunions to realign the entire relationship: "The reunion requires that you re-establish 'normal togetherness' which creates the opportunity to make areas of your relationship better than they were even before deployment" (*Marriage LINKS* Workbook, p. 50). This component was strong.

Identification of how couple interaction is impacted by barriers created during deployment; specifically addressing the population of military couples experiencing multiple deployments as being high-risk for destructive conflict interaction patterns

The *Marriage LINKS* exercises customized for military couples identified potential barriers to communication that are created by deployment and encouraged participants to discuss how they will overcome or work through these anticipated challenges, such as lack of face-to-face contact, time restraints, and restricted subjects (*Marriage LINKS Workbook*, p. 48-51). This component was determined to be strong.

Addressing the population of military couples experiencing the reintegration cycle of deployment as being high-risk for destructive conflict interaction patterns

Van Epp described the high-risk couples that experience the transition-sensitive time labeled reintegration: “Expectations that each of you has about your communication may be very different, leading to misunderstandings, conflicts, and distancing. Many changes take place during deployment that can cause conflicts upon reunion” (*Marriage LINKS Workbook*, p. 49). Accordingly, this component was strong.

Target areas of developmental relationship tasks that are likely to be most impacted by a deployment, such as enhancing their communication in order to help understanding and appreciation of each other’s experience during the deployment, renegotiating spousal roles, reestablishing intimacy, and reestablishing family routines

The participant workbook discussed changes within each of the high conflict areas – communication, roles and responsibilities, connection, and sexuality – that take place during post-deployment or the reintegration phase. For example, couples will experience major changes in communication “because amount of time has increased now that you are physically together” as opposed to a restricted communication method (*Marriage LINKS Workbook*, p. 49). The most at-risk couple according to the research reviewed on marriage – a military couple, facing a deployment, engaging in destructive conflict management styles regarding their finances – was specifically targeted in several exercises within the *LINKS* workbook. Multiple exercises facilitated discussion about saving or spending expectations, financial responsibilities, financial goals, and unforeseen expenses for pre-, during, and post-deployment stages (p. 55). For these reasons, this component was strong.

Emphasis on an early proactive intervention approach, such as targeting couples in pre-deployment cycle or first deployment cycle since enlistment

Van Epp's workbook sections are labeled pre- and post-deployment indicating that his target audience consists of military couples that are preparing for deployment and those who have just returned from one. By recruiting pre-deployment participants, Van Epp took a proactive intervention approach encouraging couples to anticipate the negative and positive impacts of deployment that they will soon experience. This component was strong.

Overall, all of the components were strong in their establishment of deployment as a high-conflict area for military couples.

Research Question 4: Is *Marriage LINKS* theoretically based?

Incorporation of Social Exchange theory concepts when viewing relationship conflict's influence on marital satisfaction, from a cost and reward perspective

Social exchange theory was explicitly used in the *Marriage LINKS* curriculum. Vann Epp used social exchange theory's cost-analysis perspective to explain that it is the measure of give and take in a relationship that does not always result in equal exchanges. He proposed that this theory helps explain a partner's view of the relationship depending on: a) the balance between what one partner puts into the relationship and what that partner gets out of it; b) what one partner believes s/he deserves to get out of a relationship; and c) what one partner believes are his/her chances of getting something better.

Incorporation of Role-Exit Theory concepts for military couples entering the reintegration phase of deployment

When presenting the four major stages that couples encounter when faced with a crisis, as in the case of a deployment, the suggestions listed to help partners positively adapt to the challenge closely resemble the basic stages identified in Role-Exit Theory: 1) Assess what one needs to attain what is new, and what ones wants to attain from the old, 2) Establish a new routine that preserves and promotes one's core values, and 3) Form new connections that foster meaningful relationships (p. 90).

Incorporation of the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptability Model to explain how couples adapt to, interact with, and understand each other has an impact on marital satisfaction

Although there was no explicit mention of the VSA model in the *Marriage LINKS* program, there was evidence of some of the theoretical concepts. Van Epp emphasized how couples interact with one another, one of the VSA variables. This was evidenced in the discussion and exercises addressing healthy communication that aided in the blending of two individuals to one (p. 21).

Enduring vulnerabilities, another VSA variable, was integrated into the curriculum. In his discussion about resentment, the author encouraged participants to see their differences as benefitting one another. He stated, “Your partner brings different personality qualities and perspectives in order to stretch you beyond the person you would have been just on your own” (p. 38). The author suggested embracing the enduring vulnerabilities, a new twist on the VSA variable.

The third variable of the VSA model, stressful events, was represented when deployment was used as an example. This component was strong.

Summary

All the theories were either explicitly or implicitly incorporated into the program and as a result were determined as strong components. Several other theories were explicitly included in the *Marriage LINKS* program such as perceptual shifts theory and Gestalt theory, when explaining the “trust picture” that partners hold of their spouses (p. 31). Cognitive theory and attribution theory also were implemented during the discussion regarding reframing (p. 36).

Summary of Marriage LINKS Results

The *Marriage LINKS* curriculum consistently promotes the use of open communication and positive reframing by each spouse, two interaction methods proven to be associated with positive interactions and romantic-relationship satisfaction (Boyd & Roach, 1977; Canary & Cupach, 1988; Fincham & Beach, 2010b; Noller, 1984; Pasch & Bradbury, 1988; Sanderson & Karetzky, 2002). This program was the strongest in its incorporation of theory and theoretical concepts, although weak

Contrary to the common practice of reworking civilian marriage models to fit the military population, this curriculum took a unique military experience and applied the theories to civilian

marriages experiencing “deployments of life” (Vann Epp, 1997-2011, p. 87). Vann Epp suggested that by becoming stronger as a result of the times of testing (e.g. deployments), the bond or feelings of belonging together actually deepens when these times are worked through in healthy ways.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine how well popular marriage and relationship education resources for military couples were built on the existing research literature with regard to couple conflict. The results of the content analysis demonstrated that all three of the couple education programs were consistent with recent research findings with regards to couple conflict in general, with a primary focus on promoting positive conflict interaction techniques, most commonly open communication and positive reframing, in order for couples to work through their differences and strengthen the feeling of we-ness. For all programs, the demand-withdraw response to conflict was highlighted as the most destructive interaction within marriage. This pattern is predicted for military couples due to the male dominated and high conformity environment.

Markman et al. (2004) argued that conflict interrupts positive connections, such as fun activities. Due to the association between positive interaction and marital satisfaction made in the research literature, one could logically assume conflict poses an indirect threat to intimate couple time (Gottman, 1994; Pasch & Bradbury, 1998). These research findings support *PREP's* concentration on protecting intimate couple time from conflict by designating certain times to address conflict issues to keep conflict off limits during the remaining time. The goal of the *PREP for Strong Bonds* program is to teach partners how to recognize when they are handling conflict negatively and how to replace those interactions with positive conflict management patterns that build strong relationships for the long term.

Despite the programs' strengths, all of the curricula, participant workbooks, and supplemental texts failed to adequately address couple conflict interaction within military culture. There was an obvious lack of translating the literature to everyday military couple challenges unique to their culture. Many of the assumptions regarding what conflict looked like for military couples stemmed from logical predictions made from nonmilitary couples. Resorting to logical assumptions indicated huge gaps in research that is focused on military couple interaction.

For the two group-format programs that were tailored to military relationships, any attention to military-specific issues was isolated to deployments. There was no discussion or concentration of everyday challenges unique to military challenges, like relocation, loss of

support networks and careers, or finances. With regard to deployment-related areas of high interpersonal conflict, the *Marriage LINKS* program presented the most thorough discussion for participants to anticipate probable changes in their relationship and how to counterbalance them with positive conflict techniques as well as positive connections.

Neither group-based program appeared to be explicitly theoretically based, although all three programs did directly or indirectly utilize at least one of the three theories or its concepts—Social Exchange Theory, Role-Exit Theory, and the Vulnerability-Stressful-Adaptability.

The two programs that advertised their customized curricula for the military population, *PREP for Strong Bonds* and *Marriage LINKS*, presented a weak interweaving of the conflict management and intimacy enhancement tools within the situation of a military couple confronted with possible deployment stressors. Although both of these couple education programs are marketed as a military version or workbook, their real-life application to the military culture appeared to be an afterthought or simply included supplemental pages to an already existing and successful program designed for nonmilitary couples. Even when issues such as deployment are mentioned in the *PREP for Strong Bonds* workbook or corresponding exercises, it only seems to elicit a discussion about expectations regarding the deployment. For example, there is no specific curriculum content or exercise that addresses the challenges deployment presents for couples attempting to utilize *PREP*'s six ground rules when experiencing relationship conflict. For example: How would taking a time-out look for couples using video chat or instant messaging? How should partners schedule weekly couple meetings if there are periodic communication blackouts due to an unforeseen combat incident? *PREP for Strong Bonds* was not a program originally created with the military couple in mind. Its relationship concepts and skill set have proven useful when applied to the military setting, but may prove even more beneficial or carry a higher impact if it incorporated the specific challenges unique to military marriages throughout each program component.

An in-depth examination was conducted with the *PREP for Strong Bonds* participant manual that was issued to all participants. Although it was found to be robust in its inclusion of couple conflict concepts, it was also determined to be moderately weak in meeting the criteria of specifically targeting military couples facing a deployment challenge. Despite representing itself as *PREP "for Strong Bonds,"* translating the *PREP* concepts for the military to utilize, the first explicit inclusion of deployment-related topics was not observed in the workbook until the latter

half of the participant workbook. Additionally, the *PREP for Strong Bonds* program lacked a thorough interweaving of conflict management and intimacy enhancement tools with the situation of a military couple confronted with possible deployment stressors. Although this couple education program is marketed as a military version or workbook, its real-life application to the military culture appeared to be as an afterthought or simply supplemental pages to an already existing and successful program.

ScreamFree Marriage was also robust with its comprehensive review of couple conflict concepts and conflict coaching techniques, however, it was missing inclusion of the military couple, an audience considered at-risk for marital conflict. Interestingly, even though the program's target audience is the general public, it has not limited its use by military couples. The program is the only self-help format among the couple education programs reviewed and is more readily accessible.

In contrast to the *PREP for Strong Bonds* program, *Marriage LINKS* was not as robust in its discussion of couple conflict concepts. It was, however, very powerful in its direct linkage of the concepts to military challenges, specifically pre- and post-deployment challenges to interpersonal conflict.

Implications

Implications for Future Research

There were several gaps in the literature that call for further research. Outcome evaluation research was only found to be conducted on one of the three programs analyzed, *PREP for Strong Bonds*. Further research conducted on the remaining two programs could assess whether these couple education resources produce similar favorable evaluations that prove to benefit couples and increase marital satisfaction.

Researchers need to further investigate the co-occurring factor of existing mental health disorders resulting from deployments. For example, how might Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or Traumatic Brain Injury further impact a couple's conflict interaction patterns. What types of conflict interaction patterns characterize couples with a veteran suffering from a mental health disorder? Would positive conflict interaction skills be able to counteract the negative impact these disorders have on relationship conflict? Would the combat trauma prevent rational and purposeful steps required to stop current negative conflict patterns and utilize more constructive

methods, e.g. taking a time out, schedule weekly huddles, or integrate positive connection time? At what point would patients suffering from these illnesses be able to devote their concentration on relationship conflict?

Implications for Practice

The most significant implication for practice is the need for improved marriage and education resources. We need a program that is designed for the military, one that incorporates theory and relationship dimensions that are applicable to the unique and daily challenges of today's military couple. These programs do not include those. The ideal program, one that was exclusively made for the military couple in mind, would incorporate military culture and scenarios into every couple conflict concept. Even when issues such as deployment are mentioned in the *PREP for Strong Bonds* workbook or corresponding exercises, it only seems to elicit beginning conversation about expectations regarding the deployment. The ideal program would walk couples through an illustration or example of how common areas of conflict for military couples would be walked through. For example, there is no specific discussion or exercise that addresses the challenges deployment presents for couples attempting to utilize *PREP's* six ground rules when dealing with relationship conflict. How would taking a time-out look for couples using video chat or instant messaging? How should partners schedule weekly couple meetings if there are periodic communication blackouts due to an unforeseen combat incident? *PREP for Strong Bonds* was not a program specifically created with the military couple in mind. Its relationship concepts and skill set have proven useful when applied to the military setting, but may prove even more beneficial or carry a higher impact if it incorporated the military couple scenario throughout each topic.

Without a knowledgeable facilitator present that has experienced multiple deployments him/herself and can effectively integrate those experiences throughout the curriculum, the existing programs failed to assimilate research findings into a military marriage facing multiple deployments scenario; a very common vignette in today's military. Military couples are believed to exhibit pre-existing high levels of chronic stress due to the constant challenges inherent in military subculture, and are more at-risk if provided fewer resources to counteract the onset of an acute stressor (e.g., combat deployment) and therefore can expect a harder time coping that should further affect the marriage negatively (Karney, Story, & Bradbury, 2005). Due to the adaptive processes targeting the sources of stress, like problem-solving, and their strong

association with marital satisfaction, military couples would benefit from learning effective adaptive processes such as those methods presented in the *PREP for Strong Bonds* model, *ScreamFree Marriage* model, or RAM model, (Gottman et al. 1998; Huston et al., 2000; Karney & Bradbury, 1997, 2000). When military couples possess adequate coping resources, such as the newly created marriage education program, *ScreamFree Deployment*, proposed herein, the experience of a combat deployment would serve a positive role giving the couple an opportunity to bond and become closer, not further distressed, as a result of this acute stressor (Karney et al., 2005).

Possible next steps could include an internet-based program or creation of a self-help guide specifically made for military couples experiencing a deployment titled, “*ScreamFree Deployment*,” that included a combination of skill sets gleaned from the three programs’ reviewed, accompanied by a concentration on and interweaving of specific challenges unique to military marriages with the skill sets identified.

This type of customized, integrated program for the military could have implications for other couples that experience long periods of separation, such as jobs that require frequent and lengthy traveling. Following the illustration in the *Marriage LINKS* program, Family Life Educators could utilize the positive reframing of military deployments as an example to other couples on how to transform a trial or hardship into an opportunity for personal and relational growth.

Chapter 6 - Conclusion

The present analysis lends support of the inclusion of research-based conflict interaction skills in couple education resources utilized by military couples. Based on this knowledge, these resources would address common barriers to handling conflict interaction that are associated with the context of deployment.

For the military couples described in the vignettes at the beginning of this paper, their participation in couple education programs reviewed herein could have benefitted them during the intense transition points experienced during a deployment cycle. By participating, the couples would have established a positive method to resolving interpersonal conflict and anticipated changes to this method during various stages of the deployment. Establishing ground rules, such as a No Hanging up the Phone unless mutually agreed to, or how to bring up concerns about a partner's use of leisure time, could have been advantageous for husband and wife, Wayne and Helen, reaching a level of open communication and constructive conflict interaction. Learning about common issues surrounding the reintegration phase and techniques on how to successfully exit the role of Interim HomeFront Manager could have assisted second military couple mentioned, where the wife was overwhelmed with mixed emotions resulting from her husband's return home.

Not only could these couple education resources have prepared couples, such as the two mentioned here, for the challenges deployment brings to relationship conflict interaction, but they also could have provided them with the skills to transform their view of the deployment to a more positive one; the deployment could be viewed as an opportunity for personal and relationship growth, an opportunity to strengthen their relationship and increase the feeling of we-ness that would ultimately allow the soldier to focus their concentration on the mission at hand.

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