

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of soldier's experiences of being married and serving in the British Army

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Abstract

Research suggests certain aspects of military life, especially operational deployments, may negatively impact military marriages. However, much of this research is from the US and uses deductive quantitative methods. Qualitative research investigating the lived experiences of forming and maintaining marriages was conducted with six male UK Army personnel. Semi-structured interviews were analysed, using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, identifying five themes, each representing different dilemmas the soldiers' had to balance to maintain successful marriages and Army careers. These five themes are best understood as practical, emotional, and cultural dilemmas which can be alleviated with practical and emotional methods; such factors could be used to build resilience in soldier's marriages. These possible resilience factors could shape the content of interventions to increase resiliency in military marriages.

Key words: Marital relationships; Military marriages; UK military personnel; qualitative research; Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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When work interferes with the ability for one partner of a relationship to be emotionally committed, display affection, identify with their romantic partner, and fulfill role obligations - as normatively expected by each partner in the relationship - conflict is likely to occur (Segal, 1986). Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) proposed that work/family conflict has three forms 1) time-based conflict, 2) strain-based conflict, and 3) behavior-based conflict. Each may lead to work/family conflict if either the time devoted, the strain from participation, and/or the specific behaviours required by one role make it difficult to fulfill the requirements of another role. The nature of employment patterns in some occupations, particularly among military roles, such as shift work, long hours, regular work-enforced separations, and relocations, fit with all three forms of conflict and are likely to impact upon personal well-being, relationship stress, and relationship functioning (Orthner & Rose, 2009). Though unlike civilian jobs, compliance with military work demands is often not optional for military personnel (Segal, 1986). As might be the case for military personnel, work/family conflict may be intensified when there are negative repercussions for non-compliance with role demands (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). Such difficulties may reflect the finite pool of resources available to individuals (Goode, 1960; Voydanoff, 1988). This is likely to be exacerbated in the context of military life, where job demands are high; including frequent separations from spouses/partners. Furthermore, operational deployments which involve the risk of serious injury or death may exacerbate the strain of the separation (Busuttil & Busuttil, 2001).

While the majority of UK military personnel do not report relationship difficulties, a greater likelihood of reporting relationship problems was mostly associated with childhood adversity, limited support for and from partners, being in unmarried relationships, financial

problems, deploying for more than 13 months in three years, and work being above trade, ability and experience (Keeling, Wessely, Dandeker, Jones, & Fear, 2015). Much of the research investigating the impact of military life on the functioning and satisfaction of romantic relationships focuses on the impact of operational deployments, rather than the impact of military life more broadly. Rowe, Murphy, Wessely, and Fear (2012) reported that deployment to Iraq since 2003 was not associated with negative relationship change among UK personnel. Rather, poorer self-reported mental health, younger age, childlessness, financial difficulties, beliefs that the military did not provide enough support to their spouse, and that family did not provide enough support whilst deployed, were all associated with relationship dissolution.

Newby et al. (2005) found that married US Active duty Army soldiers deployed to Bosnia were more likely than unmarried soldiers to report negative consequences of deployment - including time away from family, missing important events, and the deterioration of their marital relationship. In contrast, among a US peacekeeping unit of reserve personnel deployed for nine months or more, Schumm, Bell and Gade (2000) found that while some participants reported being less happy with their relationship during deployment, those who remained in their relationship post deployment showed no overall change in relationship satisfaction, suggesting that reductions in satisfaction during deployment may be transitory; moreover, among those who reported relationship problems, these were often present prior to deployment (Schumm, et al., 2000). Lastly, other research suggests that, compared to deployed participants, those anticipating a return or who have already returned from a deployment report lower marital satisfaction scores (McLeland, Sutton, and Schumm, (McLeland, Sutton, & Schumm, 2008). These findings provide contradictory evidence for the impact of deployment on relationships. Relationship quality prior to deployment is likely to play a role in later potential relationship difficulties and particular aspects of deployment experiences such as deployment length may also play an important role. (Rona et al. (Rona et al., 2014)).

In a study of US airman who had experienced high levels of combat exposure, almost a third of those studied reported either they or their partner having filed for divorce or taking other steps to end the relationship six to nine months post-deployment, with only 44% having reported relationship difficulties prior to deployment. A further 37.5% of the US airmen participants reported significant relationship distress, thus in the total sample 55.4% of those who were married or in a serious relationship reported their relationship to be either significantly distressed, dissolving, or having dissolved (Cigrang et al., 2014).

The period of readjustment following deployment may be linked with relationship difficulties if military personnel and their partner struggle to renegotiate and re-define roles, routines, and boundaries when the serving personnel returns home (Bowling & Sherman, 2008; Faber, Willerton, Clymer, MacDermid, & Weiss, 2008; Reger & Moore, 2009; Rosen, Durand, Westhuis, & Teitelbaum, 1995; Wood, Scarville, & Gravino, 1995). During deployment separations, independence assists spouses to cope (Dandeker, Eversden, Birtles, & Wessely, 2013) and difficulties may arise when spouses are required to relinquish their new-found control and independence when the military partner returns (Gambardella, 2008). Bowling and Sherman (2008) found that wives who struggle to relinquish their control and independence may make the returned husband feel unwanted.

In sum, current literature indicates that military life and particular deployment experiences such as combat, longer cumulative deployments, and post-deployment reintegration, expose military personnel to challenges that may negatively impact on the functioning of their romantic relationships. However, much of the existing data focuses on the impact of operational deployments rather than military life more broadly and does not investigate why certain military work experiences may negatively impact relationships. In addition, the majority of this research has been conducted in the US. There are several differences between the US and UK military experience, such as deployment lengths, which

limit generalisability from one to the other. With these limitations in mind, the current study aimed to gain an in-depth experiential understanding of the impact of serving in the UK Army on the formation and maintenance of marital relationships. As such, this study uses Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009); a qualitative method committed to making sense of individual's personal and social worlds.

Method

Participants

A purposive sample of six participants was selected for this study in line with the recommendations proposed by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) for conducting IPA studies. The inclusion criteria for participants were based on creating a sample that represented the largest homogenous group of the UK Armed Forces who would likely be in their first marriage. Homogenous samples are used in IPA research due to its idiographic nature and so convergence and divergence across and within the individual and group can be examined. The sample included males serving in the Army who were: aged 25 to 34 years, Non-commissioned Officers (NCO), previously deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan, in a marital relationship, and who had no recent history of general mental health problems (as assessed with the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) (Goldberg & Williams, 1988) and the National Centre for post-traumatic stress disorder checklist (PCL) (Weathers, Litz, Herman, & Keane, 1994)).

Participant recruitment

Potential participants were UK Armed Forces personnel who had previously taken part in the (location removed for anonymous manuscript); a study based on a representative sample of the UK Armed Forces (Fear et al., 2010; Hotopf et al., 2006), and had agreed to be contacted in the future to take part in other research. Those who consented to be re-contacted and fitted

the relevant inclusion criteria were approached for participation in this study. A two stage sampling method was used to identify and recruit potential participants.

Stage 1: Participants from the King's cohort study who fulfilled the inclusion criteria were identified (n = 73). Of these, 42 were subsequently excluded (20 had addresses outside of the UK, 6 had left service since questionnaire completion, 8 were Ghurkhas, 1 was Fijian, 1 had died and 6 were over 35 years of age).

Stage 2: Invitation letters were sent to all potential participants (n = 31), with information about the study, a consent form, and a form asking them to state their current age, rank, relationship status, parental status, deployment status and current location. Two replies were initially received with signed consent forms and meeting all inclusion criteria, these two participants were recruited. Follow-up telephone calls were made to the remaining potential participants and invitation letters resent to those expressing interest. This led to four more replies and all participants being recruited (n = 6).

Study sample

Six married males currently serving in the British Army, of NCO rank, who were based in England at the time of the study, were recruited. The median age of this sample was 29.5 years. Four out of the six participants had one child (all between the age of 1 month and 6 years old); one was expecting their first child and one did not have any children. Table 1 presents a short biographical sketch of each participant (using their given pseudonym).

Table 1 approximately here

Materials

A semi-structured interview schedule was prepared in accordance with the recommendations of Smith et al. (2009). Open-ended questions were designed to encourage participants to talk openly about their experiences of having and maintaining romantic relationships whilst serving in the Army. The schedule included probes to assist if participants did not understand a question or if the interview became tangential. The research aimed to understand how Army personnel had experienced the process of starting and maintaining romantic relationships whilst serving in the military. Consequently, there were four broad question areas; 1) romantic relationships; included questions about their partner, how they met their partner, and any specific challenges they experienced in forming, managing, and maintaining their relationship; 2) family and friends; gathered background information of their relationship experiences with family and friends and how they function socially; 3) effects of deployment; including specific questions about frequency and locations, and their experiences of managing their relationships whilst deployed and any impact deployment separation had on their relationship; and 4) returning home; focused on how their relationships adjusted post-deployment and how they managed and made sense of separations and reunions.

Procedure

Two pilot interviews were conducted with two Army welfare officers to test the interview schedule. Both participants were male, married, NCOs, aged 32 and 47 years. The pilot interviews indicated that the interview schedule was appropriate in the scope of the questions; however, both pilot participants often focused on issues their wives experienced and avoided talking about their own experiences. Consequently, at the start of the study interviews, it was reiterated to each participant that the focus was on their experiences. This is common practice within IPA research since the aim is to uncover personal understandings of experiences

(Smith, et al., 2009). In the military context of a culture of regulated emotions (Christian, Stivers, & Sammons, 2009) this was even more pertinent.

The study interviews took place at the military base where the participant worked, and lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. At the start of the interviews, participants were reminded of the purpose of the study and that the researcher was independent of the Army and the Ministry of Defence (MoD). A digital voice recorder was used to record all six interviews. The semi-structured nature enabled participants to discuss issues they felt were important; consequently, the interview schedule was not prescriptive in sequence or use of the questions. All interviews were transcribed in line with the recommendations of Smith et al. (2009), including all spoken words, notable non-verbal utterances such as laughter and sighs, significant pauses and hesitations.

Ethical considerations

The King's Centre for Military Health Research cohort study received full ethical approval both from the MoD Research Ethics Committee and King's College Hospital Research Ethics Committee (NHS REC reference: 07/Q0703/36). A substantial amendment to the original cohort study ethics application was approved by the King's College Hospital Research Committee (Protocol number CSA/07/006; Amendment number 1.1). An amendment to the MoD Ethics was not required, as the NHS ethics amendment was sufficient for approval of this study; nonetheless the MoD ethics committee were informed of the study.

Analysis

The transcripts were analysed (by one of the researchers – initials to be added post anonymous review) using IPA following the procedures outlined by Smith et al. (2009). IPA is a qualitative research method grounded in the philosophy of phenomenology, that aims to gain a detailed and deep understanding of a certain topic by exploring how participants make sense of their personal and social world with reference to their experiences of the given topic

(Smith, et al., 2009). The focus of IPA is initially with the individual before moving to group analysis, thus each transcript was analysed in turn before moving to looking across the group. At all stages of analysis, transcripts were re-examined to ensure themes and connections related to the participant's experiential responses and reflected on the hermeneutic and interpretative processes. Meetings with the wider team (the other authors) enabled discussions at each stage of the process to check if initial interpretations were validated by the rest of the team's thoughts and interpretations. Themes at all stages were represented by extracts of text from the original transcript.

Results

The soldiers' experiences of being married whilst serving in the UK Army are best understood as dilemmas faced in finding a balance between their life as husband and as soldier. These dilemmas are represented by five themes: balancing Army and wife; separations create weakness and strength; guilt versus alleviating guilt; bravado versus emotion; and transition from lads' life to married life. Each theme, supported by extracts from the interviews (using given pseudonyms), is presented in turn.

Balancing Army and wife

The non-negotiability of work commitments, long hours, and need for undivided attention whilst working, creates a push and pull between work and married life. These work demands led to the soldiers having to sacrifice time and attention away from their wives which would have the potential to create tensions and difficulties.

Peter: *"You wouldn't get a civilian employer saying you've got to work the weekend, you know, at the drop of a hat...once I've explained to her, if they tell me to do something then I've got to do it and sorry to say but the Army does*

come first then...I can't turn round and say no cos then I'll get done and get charged" (Pg17, line 617)

Scott: *"I've got a job to do and I'm there to do that job, so it might sound a little selfish but that's where for that period of time my focus is, getting through that tour, and the rest of we'll worry about when I'm home"* (Pg20, line 728)

Over-investment of time or emotions in their Army work appeared to cause problems in their marital relationships. The soldiers had to find ways to balance work with their relationships. Many of the soldiers discussed how their wives over time had begun to understand the demands of Army life, which helped their relationships as their wives would not blame the soldiers when they missed events or plans had to change.

Jack: *"My wife is very understanding, and although she'll still gets annoyed and that for me cancelling coming home at short notice she knows that it's not just me being awkward but that it's something unavoidable"* (Pg2, line 62)

Managing the level of immersion in Army life was used as a method to find balance. The level of immersion differed amongst the soldiers, ranging from keeping Army and wife completely separate, to soldier and their wife being totally immersed in Army life. Thus, there is no 'optimum' level of immersion; instead the importance was finding the balance right for them and their wife. Especially important, was ensuring their wife is close to her preferred support; the location of their homes seemed to play a large role in this process.

Peter: *"When I'm here I'm very military and I'm in the Army but when I'm at home at the weekends I have nothing to do with the Army I don't even tell people I'm in the Army"* (Pg22, line 816)

Daniel: *“I used to take too much work home but now I’ve split it, that’s why I’ve moved the family down, it’s a 40 minute drive, is good for you to switch off and then switch back on when coming back in”* (Pg 4, line 111).

Increasing immersion in Army life when the soldiers deployed helped the wives manage the separation more effectively by accessing available support from the Army welfare services and the military community encompassing other spouses whose husbands were deployed.

Scott: *“Before the Afghan tour, (she) made a point of meeting all of the support and welfare teams that are available”* (Pg10, line 353)

Jack: *“I’ve got mates in work that are from close by where I am so their wives and girlfriends...although it’s not as big, there are still other people there who understand...so they can help each other out”* (Pg 10, line 373)

Separations create weakness and strength

Work-related separations from their wives created dichotomous experiences of weakness and renewed strength within their relationship. This dichotomy is interpreted as a necessary mechanism for the success of their relationship. Soldiers must balance the perceived weakness and instability, by reaffirming the strength and security within their relationship.

Separation linked to living 'unaccompanied', on barracks between Monday and Friday whilst their wives live in the family home in a different location and only seeing each other on weekends had a variety of effects. Such separation created feelings of longing to see their wives, missing shared experiences, and difficulties communicating. Separations associated with deployment appeared to create insecurities through fears of potential infidelity and due to the re-adjustment period post-deployment creating unstable relationship dynamics as they had to re-adapt and re-establish roles and routines.

Peter: *“You’re just looking to Friday to go home...I find it quite hard cos you know you’re not going home that night, I’m just going back to my room and watching TV, and um, don’t really talk, well we talk on the phone every night, but we usually run out of things to say and things like that so it gets a bit difficult”* (Pg. 2, line 43)

Peter: *“I know wives that, their husbands have been in Afghanistan and they’ve been in night clubs chatting up other blokes from different regiments...once the husband is away the wives go out”* (Pg7, line 258)

Daniel: *“So many differences it’s unbelievable, those things you get used to doing your own thing around the house, or she gets used to her way...and then she wants it back this way and then...yeah”* (Pg18, line 639)

In contrast to experiencing these weaknesses, the soldiers’ experienced renewed strength as the separations increased appreciation for their wives as they longed to see them and made more effort to be close to them. Efforts to increase closeness could be considered as proximity seeking behaviours as proposed by Bowlby (Bowlby, 1988) in the context of attachment theory.

Peter: *“You do miss her a bit more, you think about her a bit more, you want to see her, you can’t wait to see her at the end of the tour, it makes you more closer...you’re making more effort when you’re away on tour”* (Pg13, line 467)

Jack: *“It makes you appreciate everything that you’ve got, obviously you miss the person that you are away from and she missed me...ey, it’s made the relationship stronger I think”* (Pg7, line 246)

According to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1988) when a couple have a secure attachment they become each other’s secure base which allows exploration of the outside world safe in the

knowledge that on return you will be fully accepted back and comforted if distressed. The secure base is attuned to the person's actions and consequently responds to them appropriately. Most of these soldiers indicated how their wives were their secure base.

Jack: *"Your wife knows when something's not right and she'll keep digging away at you until you tell her... it's good to have that... somebody to even notice that something is up with you before you do"* (Pg11, line 412)

Guilt versus alleviating guilt

Guilt surrounding the impact of their Army career on their relationships was experienced by these soldiers. When the soldiers expressed feelings of guilt, they often appeared to make efforts to counteract or manage these feelings using various methods.

Absences and abandonment created guilt due to the soldiers' inability to uphold their responsibilities as husband and father; to meet the emotional needs of their wives; or, to be present in their children's lives. On a day-to-day basis, this meant missing events and generally not being present or available.

Peter: *"I mean she had to go to weddings (alone) and her mates were going out the same time to the pictures and she was going on her own... and she'd be like oh I've had to go out on my own again cos my boyfriend is not here, and it does make you feel bad"* (Pg17, line 632)

Neil: *"Oh look she took her first steps, brilliant, I kind of push it aside, but I do really care about that kind of thing...it is bad that I missed first steps, first words"* (Pg14, line 496)

Absences during deployment caused guilt for the emotional turmoil they subjected their wife and family to and for their wives' and families' vicarious experiences of deployment through 'worst-case scenario' reports on the news and other media.

Daniel: *“You know what you’re doing every day of the week all they’re doing is watching the news seeing right so one person is killed, the MOD release that one person is killed, then every family I’m sure looks at the news thinking is it?... there’s always that”* (Pg8, line291)

Persistent guilt could lead to either the termination of their career or their relationship thus the soldiers used methods to alleviate the guilt such as: highlighting that their wives made an informed choice to take on the Army lifestyle; drawing attention to their wives' personal attributes of strength, independence and ability to cope; emphasising the support their wives received from other sources such as family, friends and welfare services; and controlling how much they told their wives about their deployment experiences to manage their wife's anxieties:

Terry: *“When I was away for 4 months (before they were married), it gave my wife a good look into what might happen if we were to stay together”* (Pg8, line249)

Scott: *“Three months after being married I deployed to Iraq for seven and a half months, umm and that period was quite (pause), she’s quite a strong women and you know she’s done quite a lot in her life before we met so you know it wasn’t too much”* (Pg2, line 45)

Daniel: *“But her mum and family are just round the corner really so; she’s from, her family are in XXXXX which is just a 10/15 minute drive really, um so she’s got those are, on call sort of thing, to pop around”* (Pg6, line 222)

Peter: *“If I had to tell her everything that happened...she’d be panicking every time I went cos she’d be more fretting...I play it down a lot so she’s not worried when I go away”* (Pg20, line 770)

Bravado versus emotion

Emotional bravado played two roles for these soldiers; managing their own emotions and protecting their wife's. Some soldiers struggled to express their true emotions surrounding challenging experiences, therefore, bravado was used to enable them to express emotions and cope with emotionally challenging elements of their jobs. Soldiers appeared to use non-verbal devices such as dismissive and sarcastic tones and the use of humour when discussing emotive topics as a mechanism through which to show emotions whilst maintaining a strong façade:

Scott: *“Obviously there were times, teary times and miss you times and stuff, but um (said dismissively with sarcasm)”* (Pg8, line 279)

Daniel: *“(I miss my son) like a hole in the head (laughs) no he's fine (laughs)...No I'm sure that I will miss them both...I missed them, I missed them both yeah”* (Pg16, line 563)

Keeping their fears to themselves and covering their true feelings with bravado was used to reassure their wives that they will be okay.

Peter: *“Cos she'll be on the phone to me going oh, this might happen and I've seen this on the news and then I'm feeling the same but trying to be stronger, ...then I'm putting down the phone and going out on operations and thinking oh god!”* (Pg6, line 215)

Transition from lad's life to married life

Five of the six soldiers in this study recalled their experiences as young recruits in the Army and the “lads” lifestyle associated with it. The “lads” lifestyle for these soldiers was about drinking, partying, and meeting women. Relationships during this period did not appear to be taken seriously and the lifestyle did not seem conducive to a committed relationship.

Peter: *“So the culture of going out is ripe, it’s massive, it’s all, all your social activities are around alcohol and going out (pause) and getting the most birds you can get to be honest, it’s living the lad’s life all the time”* (Pg3, line 98)

Although the five participants had positive memories reminiscing about the “lad’s life”, all of them conveyed experiences of having transitioned from the “lad’s life” in order to have a committed relationship. This transition was also associated with a promotion in rank.

Terry: *“There were five of us who lived in a room, so everything we did together...so it was like a relationship then like a bro-mance...and it’s just a natural progression isn’t it really, when you get to an age when you know you’ve done all your going out and not going to sleep for four days and just going to different pubs and all that”* (Pg17, line 628)

Neil: *“It’s just a natural progression through age, rank, um, especially rank in the military, um, and then with that comes family and that”* (Pg25, line 938)

From the experiences of the soldiers in this study, it is evident that the “lad’s” lifestyle is not compatible with or conducive to having a serious committed relationship. Peter explicitly discussed this as he had friends who continued to behave like “lads” but with a detrimental effect on their relationships:

Peter: *“A lot of people go out and get drunk and pick up and cheat on their wives and then they try to cover it up then and then they get caught out eventually, so I don’t think it’s the job I think that it’s more the social aspect that breaks up marriages”* (Pg14, line 506)

Discussion

Using IPA, interviews with six male Army personnel were analysed generating five themes each representing a different dilemma that required balancing in order for the soldiers to have both a successful marriage and Army career: balancing Army and wife; separations cause weakness and strength; guilt versus alleviating guilt; bravado versus emotion; and transition from lad's life to married life. All the soldiers gave the impression that despite the challenges they had faced, they were happy with their marital relationship. This research adds to current literature by providing an experiential insight in to how male NCOs of the British Army find ways to manage and maintain their marriages whilst serving in the British Army.

Balancing Army and wife

The soldiers experienced a dilemma between the Army and their married life as they attempted to balance the demands for time and attention between the two. This is consistent with literature from the general population suggesting that conflict between work and family may exist due to contradictions in needs, time, place, and resources (Goode, 1960; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Wagner & O'Neill, 2012). It appears that the military work environment is different to civilian jobs due to the unpredictable and non-negotiable requirements of work. Most civilian jobs have agreed hours and overtime, whereas in the military, compliance with demands and workload is often not optional or negotiable (Jarvis, 2011; Segal, 1986). Increased job significance (how much military personnel identified and connected with their job) (Britt & Dawson, 2005), time-based conflict, when one role produces a pre-occupation that makes it impossible to meet the needs of another role (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985), and the collectivist nature of the military instilled in soldiers, are potential aspects of military work not conducive to a healthy marriage as they take away resources available for giving time and attention to their married lives.

It appeared that in order to maintain good relationships with their wives, the competing demands between the Army and their wives had been balanced. The soldier's wife's having an understanding of military life assisted in this balancing. Well adapted families are likely to understand military structures and have a positive outlook on military life and its purpose (Riggs & Riggs, 2011). By understanding the demands, wives may be less likely to blame their husbands for adversities caused. Research suggests that having benevolent cognitions can help manage negative relationship experiences, thus allowing each partner to maintain a positive view of each other and their relationship, resulting in relationships that are more stable than those where couples blame each other (McNulty, O'Mara, & Karney, 2008). This is consistent with findings from Desivlya and Gal's (1996) research identifying placing blame as being a key factor leading to relationship problems in Israeli military personnel.

The amount which soldiers were immersed in Army life was used to balance work and their marriage. The soldiers' physical location seemed symbolic of their individual approaches to balancing their lives, which included ensuring their wives' were close to their preferred sources of support. The amount to which the soldiers and their family immersed themselves in Army life was often a transient process; physical closeness and frequency of use or contact increased during times of deployment separation. There is evidence supporting the use of increased closeness to military resources as a protective factor for relationships and spousal well-being (Burrell, Durand, & Fortado, 2003; Gottman, Gottman, & Atkins, 2011).

Separations create weakness and strength

Work-enforced separations are a frequent feature of Army life which have the potential to cause weaknesses whilst concurrently renewing strength in marital relationships. This dichotomous experience can be understood in the context of attachment theory. Riggs and Riggs (2011) described a family attachment network model of military families during deployment and reintegration. Their proposed model demonstrates that whilst deployment

separations may lead to family and relationship difficulties, strength and resilience are also present in most families, helping to maintain relationships during separations.

Regular separations are likely to activate the attachment system. Pistole (2010) reports that although there is no evidence of long distance relationships being less stable than geographically close ones, it is expected that distress may be evident in the form of separation protest, such as a longing for increased proximity. Moreover, separations may create a void of shared experiences and strained communications such as artificial telephone conversations. Gerstel and Gross (1982) report that spouses who are separated during the week miss "trivial" talk about everyday topics as they find they are unable to casually discuss and share family matters and their daily experiences. This may create feelings of weakness if perceived as a sign the partners are moving apart (Gerstel & Gross, 1982), as demonstrated by the soldiers in the current study.

Concerns of potential infidelity were raised by the soldiers in this study. Reger and Moore (2009) suggest that thoughts of infidelity are common in both deployed and non-deployed partners, and that whether these concerns are real or imagined is irrelevant; what is pertinent is the emotional distress it causes for both partners. Gottman, Gottman, and Atkins (2011) report that trust, betrayal, and concerns of infidelity are main sources of distress and relationship problems in the US military. Karney and Crown (2007) suggest that military separations create an opportune environment for infidelity as they provide access to alternative partners usually denied to civilian couples and a situation where they may be more likely to turn to an alternative for support in the absence of support from their existing partner.

Consistent with a wealth of evidence, the need to renegotiate and define roles, routines, and boundaries during the post-deployment readjustment period were another potential cause of relationship weakness (Beder, Coe, & Sommer, 2011; Bowling & Sherman, 2008; Medway, Davis, Cafferty, Chappell, & O'Hearn, 1995; Vormbrock, 1993). During deployment

separation, the spouse who remains at home is likely to establish new routines and rules, thus when the soldier returns, the home may not be as they left it, which is likely to cause problems if the returning soldier expects things to return immediately to the status quo, or lead to the soldier no longer feeling wanted or needed (Beder, et al., 2011; Bowling & Sherman, 2008; Gambardella, 2008; Reger & Moore, 2009; Vormbrock, 1993) . A challenge for spouses of deployed military personnel may be that they find it hard to accept the soldier back into the family when they return (Rosen, et al., 1995) and may be ready to defend their new position of independence (Vormbrock, 1993). Wives' not wanting to relinquish their new found power and independence could be associated with distancing behaviours seen during reunions with primary care givers following separations in infants (Rosen, et al., 1995).

Vormbrock (1993) states that the amount couples detach and create distance during separation will affect how difficult they find reintegration. Becoming too emotionally detached during separation is likely to create problems at reintegration since high detachment threatens the attachment bond making it difficult to re-establish a sense of security at reunion. The best reunion outcomes are seen in couples where interdependence is maintained so that the amount of attachment and detachment are balanced. This allows the bond between partners to continue but also have the independence to manage life whilst separated from each other. At reunion, re-establishing security is less challenging as the attachment was not under threat (Vormbrock, 1993).

Although the soldiers experienced these potential weaknesses as a result of separation, they had also experienced renewed strength. This is consistent with Rosen et al.'s (1995) results that 68% of the Army spouses in their research reported positive relationship experiences following their husbands' deployment. Strength developed and realised during these separations seems to be the result of appropriate attachment behaviours being activated and used in reaction to the separation. The participants in this study reported feeling closer to their

wives due to their feelings of missing their wives. The feeling of missing someone can be understood as feelings of separation anxiety and overt declarations of missing someone as separation protest behaviour. Separation anxiety and protest behaviours function to activate the attachment system so that proximity to the attachment figure can be re-established and maintained through methods such as writing letters and increased feelings of appreciation which help to bring them closer together (Collins & Feeney, 2004).

In securely attached relationships, the partners become each other's secure base which enables the partners to explore the world alone in the knowledge that their partner will still be available on their return (Bowlby, 1988). This was evidenced in all of these soldiers' experiences. Having a secure base allows them to concentrate their attention on the job at hand knowing that they and their partner are secure and safe (Reger & Moore, 2009). Soldiers' wives being their secure base may also have assisted them in managing readjustment post-deployment as they would have achieved an optimum amount of interdependence as proposed by Vormbrock (1993).

It is proposed, based on the evidence from this theme that a protective factor against perceived relationship difficulties for soldiers may be a securely attached relationship. This is supported by Riggs and Riggs (2011) who conclude that families with a secure family attachment network adapt and cope better with deployment separations and are able to provide support for the deployed soldier enabling them to concentrate on their work, further reducing any relationship conflict.

Guilt versus alleviating guilt

Generally, guilt can be functional for relationships, as it shows that the person who feels guilty cares for the welfare of the person they have upset and emotional inequality in the relationship is rebalanced as both partners experience emotional distress (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1995). Continuous and pervasive guilt, however, is likely to lead to the

termination of a relationship (Baumeister, et al., 1995). Persistent guilt experiences, therefore, need to be managed for relationship success.

The soldiers in this study reported experiencing feelings of guilt for the impact their Army career had on their wife and their relationship. Baumeister, Stillwell and Heatherton (1995) propose that guilt is the product of neglect, unfilled obligations, and selfish actions towards a close relationship partner. Not being present for certain events and missing milestones in their child's development meant the soldiers felt guilt due to their inability to fulfil their role as husband and father. Causing their wives and families emotional distress also aroused feelings of guilt as they were neglecting their wives' emotional needs and were not able to protect them from emotional hardship. Guilt caused by absences (Buckman et al., 2011; Logan, 1987; Rohall, Segal, & Segal, 1999) and the inability to fulfil the obligations of being a husband have been reported elsewhere in the military literature (Greene, Buckman, Dandeker, & Greenberg, 2010).

Baumeister et al. (1995) suggest that guilt can serve to protect and preserve relationships, as it motivates behaviour change to limit the likelihood of the recurrence of guilt or manage the severity of guilty feelings. Due to the nature of Army work, many of the situations such as job-enforced separations, which cause guilt, cannot be changed by the soldiers. Therefore, rather than changing subsequent behaviour they alleviate guilt by highlighting mitigating circumstances surrounding the situation which serves to displace blame and responsibility. This could be understood as an emotion focused coping strategy that helps to prevent negative emotions from becoming overwhelming (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Emotion focussed strategies include ways to directly or indirectly change the way a stressful experience is perceived, leading to a cognitive reappraisal of the stressor. The soldiers in this study implicitly used this technique in their interviews through reframing their understanding of particular situations, actions or behaviours. By drawing attention to their wives' attributes

such as their strength, independence and ability to cope and emphasising the support their wives received from family, friends, and military services, they were able to diminish their responsibility for having left their wives. Choosing what to tell their wives about their deployment experiences is used to limit the amount of distress their wife and family feel and in turn the amount the soldier feels guilty. However, evidence suggests this particular method of guilt alleviation could be counterproductive as family members may become frustrated when they know they are being deceived and a lack of information can be a source of stress for those at home (Hinojosa, Hinojosa, & Hognas, 2012).

Bravado versus emotion

It is apparent from the soldiers' experiences that bravado was used to manage their emotions and to protect their wives'. Difficulty expressing their feelings was evidenced in soldiers' use of humour and sarcasm to discuss their emotions surrounding missing their wife and children. The use of humour and sarcasm and other non-verbal mechanisms to manage emotive subjects has a long history in Army culture (Hockey, 1986). Christian, Stivers, and Sammons (2009) report that US military training, culture and social hierarchies "explicitly regulate(s) the expression of emotion in many circumstances" (pg. 31). To achieve the Army's goal of protecting the country it serves it has to be an overtly masculine organisation (Hatch et al., 2013; Hockey, 1986). To this effect the expression of emotion is perceived as a sign of weakness and a threat to one's masculinity. This seems to be concurrent with these soldiers' experiences. Green et al. (2010) found that some soldiers report not having the ability, or the language, to communicate emotions due to the overly masculine nature of the Army and a fear of being perceived as weak.

Suppressing and managing emotions assists the soldiers to maintain their masculinity and acceptance in their Army units which enables them to function as effective soldiers (Reger & Moore, 2009). It is, however, suggested that soldiers who suppress their emotions to spare

their wives worry and anxiety, risk detaching from their families emotional needs. This could lead to them being less responsive to their families desires for reassurance and comfort (Gottman, et al., 2011; Reger & Moore, 2009). Bowling and Sherman (2008) propose that although emotional numbness may assist soldiers to function with the stress of deployment and manage their fears, it can have a negative impact on reintegration following operational deployment. This is consistent with attachment based theories of understanding the reintegration process as discussed above (Riggs & Riggs, 2011; Vormbrock, 1993). It therefore, seems that soldiers need to find the correct balance between managing their emotions so that they are able to remain effective members of their units, whilst not being too detached to risk weakening their relationship with their wives.

Transition from lad to husband

As discussed above, the Army has a strong masculine culture which is necessary for its effective functioning (Christian, et al., 2009). The process of entering the military as a new recruit and becoming a soldier has been described as a rite of passage where the soldier must prove themselves as a man (Green, et al., 2010; Hockey, 1986). Once soldiers prove their “soldierly abilities” and masculinity, they gain more respect and can progress up the ranks. Leisure activities of off-duty male soldiers are often focused around drinking alcohol and pursuing women (Green, et al., 2010). The soldiers in the current study expressed how the lad’s lifestyle, when they were junior ranking soldiers, had involved going out drinking and “picking up women”, and that this did not permit committed relationships. All of the soldiers in this study conveyed how they had made a transition from the lad’s life to being a husband.

Transitions from lad to husband were understood by the soldiers in terms of maturity, increased responsibilities, and progression through the ranks. It is suggested that modes of change are often interrelated, that is more than one transition may happen at the same time such as employment change and marital status change (Hatch, et al., 2013). Promotion to NCO

requires a cultural and behavioural shift due to increased responsibility and the need for junior ranks to respect them and respond appropriately to their commands. Consequently, heavy drinking sessions and behaving like the junior soldiers would not be consistent with the requirements of their job. This is consistent with findings from Green et al. (2010) who report that although portraying "hard masculinity" in the military is appropriate at certain stages, overplaying masculinity could lead to being disrespected and condemned by both their peers and subordinates. The transition from lad to husband seems necessary for the success of a committed relationship. The lifestyle of junior ranking soldiers is not only incompatible with the role of the NCO, but also with married life as emphasised by one of the soldiers in this study, those who continue to go out drinking and cheating on their wives are likely to have relationship problems.

Convergence of themes

It is proposed that the identified themes (dilemmas) can be understood as practical, emotional, and cultural. The practical factors include: increased workload and job significance, work-enforced separations, and the non-negotiability of the demands, as identified in the first theme balancing Army and wife. These practical factors create emotional challenges such as experiencing weakness due to concerns of infidelity, difficulties readjusting post-deployment, and experiencing guilt for the hardships military life causes their wives, as identified in the themes separations create weakness and strength, and guilt versus alleviating guilt. Culturally, the soldiers must adhere to certain elements of the Army's overtly masculine and collectivist culture to have a successful career; the challenge is managing this without becoming too detached from their wives. The results from this study indicate that the soldiers' manage all these dilemmas to create resiliency in their relationships with practical and emotional methods. The presence of both practical and emotional resiliency is consistent with Riggs and Riggs (2011) who propose that resilient wives are able to draw on both external (practical) and

internal (emotional) resources and support; it appears that this is also true for the military husband.

The practical resiliency factors are; the soldiers' wives having an understanding of the demands of Army life thus not placing blame on the soldier for the experienced challenges; negotiating the right level of immersion in Army life appropriate for the individual and their family; and ensuring their wife has access to their preferred source of support. Emotional resiliency factors are to have a secure attachment with their wives and to be able to use emotion focused coping to alleviate their guilt. Having a secure attachment enables the soldiers to use effective proximity maintaining behaviours to manage the weaknesses Army life may create. Moreover, the couple are interdependent enabling each partner to function independently whilst maintaining affectionate and supported relationships with their distant spouse. This decreases the likelihood that either partner would become detached and/or would be unfaithful. The proposal that secure attachments are a resiliency factor against relationship problems for military personnel is supported by the theoretical papers of Vormbrock (1993) and Riggs and Riggs (2011). Consistent with the current study, both propose that secure attachments work because although the spouses may initially experience some distress, they are able to draw on their internal and external resources and available support to find the right balance between dependency and detachment.

Strengths and limitations

This study moves beyond existing literature that has focused mostly on the work based and practical challenges of work/family conflict by highlighting the emotional and cultural dilemmas faced in managing Army life and married life. Whereas the vast majority of previous research has focused on the impact of Army life on marriages from the civilian spouses' perspective, this study focused on the experiences of the male serving military personnel. This is one of few UK studies solely focusing on the serving regular personnel and their experiences

of managing and making sense of their romantic relationships and their military careers. Interpretation of the findings should however be considered in the context of the idiographic nature of the study and generalisations to other groups, such as female military personnel and those in unmarried relationships, made cautiously. This study used a specific purposive sample and, therefore, tells us something about these participants' experiences.

Implications

This research highlights certain factors that have the potential to cause relationship problems for UK Army personnel such as over immersion and focus in military work, the challenge of accepting and adapting to the demands of military life, feeling persistent guilt for the impact of military life on their wife, continuing to live the "lad's life", problems expressing emotion, and not having a secure attachment with their wives. Programs designed to aid military personnel and their spouses in managing their relationships can use this information to help inform the content of the programs they deliver. Resiliency training for relationships is one method that is consistent with services in the US (Gottman, et al., 2011; Saltzman et al., 2011). Based on the application of attachment theory to these results one element of resiliency training could incorporate attachment theory as a framework intending to strengthen and create secure attachment bonds. Adult attachment styles are thought to be flexible and open to change based on the assimilation of new relationship experiences and cognitive schema (Fuller & Fincham, 1995). In this vein, literature proposes that attachment styles can be modified and adjusted to become more secure, though this is more challenging for avoidant styles (Levine & Heller, 2011).

Conclusion

Interviews with six male Army personnel indicated that having and managing a marital relationship whilst serving in the British Army is experienced and understood in terms of five dilemmas that need to be balanced. These dilemmas appear to fall into categories of practical,

emotional, and cultural conflicts between the Army and married life. In the context of this research and its applicability to UK, male, Army soldiers of NCO rank, the findings are both consistent with and add to current literature. It is proposed that the marital relationships of Army personnel may be resilient due to certain practical and emotional factors. Practical resiliency factors include: soldier's wives understanding the demands of Army life, a balanced level of job involvement and significance, and ensuring their wives are supported. Emotional resiliency is achieved through the use of emotion focused coping to manage any guilt experienced for the potential negative impact Army life may have on their wife, and having a secure attachment relationship with their wife.

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