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Stressors Experienced by Women Within Marine Corps Families: A Qualitative Study of Discourse Within an Online Forum

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The social constructionist perspective frames this exploration of the socioemotional and relational aspects of stress experienced by significant others of active duty Marines. Interpretive methods were applied to data from an online forum for Marine Corps wives, fiancées, and girlfriends. Open coding revealed six stressors: (a) stuck in a state of flux, (b) going through changes, (c) relational uncertainty, (d) loneliness, (e) alienation, and (f) anxiety related to deployment. Axial coding revealed three properties underlying these stressors: (a) issues of control and helplessness, (b) concerns over privileging individual or relational goals, and (c) the matter of locus of blame.

As of 2009, more than two million service members have deployed in support of the Global War on Terror (http://dod.mil), resulting in the largest number of troops returning from a war zone since the Vietnam War (Hoge et al., 2004). The impact of this and earlier long wars on service members and the challenges of redeployment have accrued considerable research attention. For instance, clinical

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research has examined reintegration interventions (Borus, 1973), often focusing on “role-exit” upon the service members’ return (Gambardella, 2008). Other clinical work on military families has focused on the prevention of psychological and psychosomatic disorders (Hobfoll et al., 1991), such as understanding the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) on marital satisfaction (Renshaw, Rodrigues, & Jones, 2008) and increasing family involvement in PTSD treatment (Batten et al., 2009). We seek to contribute to this literature by examining how the transitions inherent in deployment and redeployment contribute to the stress experienced by women in military families.

Generally, scholars who study stress have identified how either a single stressor or the accumulation of events and stressors influence the well-being of individuals and family systems in detrimental ways (Lavee, McCubbin, & Olson, 1987). For example, at the individual level, stressful life events have been associated with psychological problems such as depression, substance abuse, and suicide (Lantz, House, Mero, & Williams, 2005). Stress has also been related to physical complications, such as the reactivation of dormant viruses, susceptibility to infectious diseases, coronary heart disease, and mortality (Lantz et al., 2005). Importantly, the impact of stress on well-being is moderated by access to social support (e.g., Lantz et al., 2005), and a marital dyad’s strength positively influences the family’s physical, psychological, and social well-being (Bodenmann, 2005). Understanding the impact of stress on individuals and families, then, requires attention to how families and couples adapt and manage both stress and crisis (Boss, 1986). Our analysis of female partners of Marine Corps service members reflects an appreciation for both the stress experienced by these military family members and the role that women play in ameliorating the stress experienced by other family members.

An abundance of work has isolated stressors that place military families at risk for experiencing the aforementioned negative outcomes. Military families share the same challenges as all families, such as financial difficulties, child-rearing issues, insufficient alone time, spousal relationship troubles, and overscheduling (Curran, 1985). Families in the military are also subject to distinct stressors related to relocation and deployment, such as frequent moves (Black, 1993), loss of network support (Drummet, Coleman, & Cable 2003), changes in community support (Vormbrock, 1993), readjustment of roles during a service member’s absence and return (Merolla, 2010), disruptions to communication between spouses (Drummet et al., 2003; Merolla, 2010), and the threat and uncertainty of combat (Black, 1993). This research has illuminated the logistical challenges that confront military families; however, the socioemotional and relational issues that encompass both the service member and the spouse merit further attention.

The abridged conception of the interpersonal stressors experienced by military families apparent in the literature may stem, in part, from the methodologies typically employed in past research. Studies using interviews to investigate the
relational lives of military personnel have focused specifically on the service members’ ability to adjust to stress (Borus, 1973), predetermined stress issues such as role and identity concerns (Gambardella, 2008), or the relational maintenance activities of wives with husbands who were either currently or recently deployed (Merolla, 2010). These focused interviews illuminate particular issues, while neglecting other socioemotional and relational concerns. Survey methods also direct attention to particular types of relational stressors. For example, a survey by Dimiceli, Steinhart, and Smith (2009) asked military wives to describe the single most stressful situation they had experienced in the past 5 years. While informative, this approach may tend to overlook relationship issues that are pervasive across the array of stressors confronting a military family. In other work, the stressors examined are delimited a priori by the measures employed within the study (Black, 1993; Lavee et al., 1987; Renshaw et al., 2008). Although useful, these methodologies are shaped by the researcher’s theory, questions, and hypotheses; as a result, they may fail to capture a variety of issues that are salient for military families and specifically military partners.

To address this limitation, we explored this research question: What socioemotional and personal relationship stressors emerge in the discourse among the wives and significant others of Marine Corps service members? In particular, we examined postings to an online discussion board for women linked to active duty Marines. Because the discourse we examined was not produced in response to the demands of research participation, it offers insight into an array of experiences, emotions, and concerns about military family life. Examining an online discussion forum also allows us to make use of the social constructionism framework, which assumes that people understand their experiences through describing, explaining, and accounting for the world in which they live (Gergen, 1985). Numerous studies have employed this perspective to emphasize how people co-construct meaning, frame their experiences of stress, and adapt through discourse to make sense of their social world (Boeije, 2002; Weber & Solomon, 2008). Our project constitutes formative research that operates outside the framework of a particular theoretical lens to gain a nuanced understanding of the interpersonal stressors that are experienced by the wives, fiancées, and girlfriends of Marine Corps service members.

METHOD

Sample

We sampled discourse from one discussion board designed specifically for Marine Corps wives, fiancées, and girlfriends. The discussion board is intended to be a forum where family members and significant others of Marines can seek support and information relevant to their unique lifestyle. As an online resource, the
discussion board we examined was accessible to people living or stationed anywhere in the world. Discussion boards are asynchronous online venues in which individuals can post a message or comment on an existing post. The compilation of messages in response to the original message is called a thread, made up of individual posts and, for the current study, each post on a thread was considered one unit of analysis.

To construct the data set, the second author reviewed the 623 most current threads (dated from August 10, 2006, to September 22, 2009) and identified 123 threads that included content relevant to interpersonal relationships or focused on socioemotional issues. Five hundred threads were excluded that were purely informational or task focused; however, we adopted a decision rule favoring the retention of ambiguous threads within the data set. A reliability check was conducted by the first author, who reviewed approximately one-third of the 623 threads to identify those threads with relevant content. Intercoder agreement with regard to inclusion of discussion board threads in the sample was acceptable ($\kappa = 0.87$). Each unit of analysis was printed, and the final sample comprised 312 pages of discourse, which was organized into 123 threads; the number of postings to each thread ranges from 1 to 129 ($M = 10.22, SD = 14.53$).

Procedures

To gain a broad and deep understanding of the stressors Marine Corps families face, an interpretive approach was employed. Following Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) framework, open coding was performed to identify the central concepts and their dimensions within the data. The first two authors reviewed the entire data set three times, with an eye toward identifying recurrent themes discussed by contributors. On the fourth review, they employed the constant comparative method to make sense of the data by identifying themes that permeated the discourse (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In particular, the identification of the themes was based on the frequency, extensiveness, and intensity of related discourse (Krueger, 1998), without emphasizing any one of these features over another. Another pass was completed wherein the first two authors independently reread the transcripts to identify points of departure from the developed framework. This reading allowed for refinement of the themes to capture the issues in the discourse more completely. Through discussion among the authors, we collapsed common themes and identified those that were unique.

Next, the first author reread the discourse three times and used axial coding techniques to explore topics that transcended the topical themes and encompassed multiple issues. The axial codes were used to relate categories at the level of properties and dimensions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). To this end, the first author indicated the commonalities and distinctions that surfaced within the categories identified through the open-coding procedures.
RESULTS

Open-Coding Analysis

Six categories were identified, which we labeled: (a) stuck in a state of flux, (b) going through changes, (c) relational uncertainty, (d) loneliness, (e) alienation, and (f) anxiety related to deployment (Table 1). As we describe the themes, which are presented in no particular order, we incorporate quotations from the discussion forum; the quotations are exact, and grammatical errors and spelling errors were not corrected.

**Stuck in a state of flux.** Military life often imposes constraints upon not just the Marine, but also the Marine’s family. Because a service member’s duties can change suddenly or be uncertain, Marine Corps wives and significant others can find it difficult to pursue their life goals or move forward with life plans. This state of affairs leaves women stuck in a state of flux, unable to make proactive life changes, despite the personal goals that they would like to pursue.

The inability to pursue goals related to school and work were common occurrences within this theme. For example, one woman wrote, “Do they have like a college or anything there? I have been putting of my schooling until we get stationed but I wanted to start this fall.” Another woman explained, “No im not working . . . . Soo . . . I want to work but I think it would be pointless to start a job and have to quit it in a few weeks so I don’t know.” These quotes call attention to the need to put work and school on hold as a result of various military obligations, such as moving to a permanent duty station or being on temporary assignment.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Stressor Theme</th>
<th>Theme Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stuck in a state of flux</td>
<td>Reflects the inability of women to move forward with their personal goals because of all the changes associated with their life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Going through changes</td>
<td>Reflects the frequent moves and all the changes associated with the Marine Corps lifestyle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational uncertainty</td>
<td>Reflects women questioning the state of their relationship (e.g., intimacy issues, infidelity, long-term commitment).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loneliness</td>
<td>Reflects the sense of being alone and without companionship from their significant other or close friends and family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alienation</td>
<td>Reflects women’s feelings of alienation from those who don’t understand the military lifestyle, or from those within the Marine Corps community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety related to deployment</td>
<td>Anxiety prominent for both wives newer to the lifestyle, as well as the veteran wives, regardless of the number of deployments they had experienced, because every deployment is different and full of uncertainty.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Other women struggled with personal turning points that were disrupted by their connection with the military. In the following quote, one woman expressed how her wedding was affected by changes in her husband’s deployment schedule:

I’m a Marine wife to be. Had this deployment not been moved up, next Saturday I’d be getting married, but thanks to the USMC, my Marine has already left. I’m in La while he is deployed but when he returns I’m moving back to Jacksonville with him. I’m on here to meet new people who actually understand the title of Marine Wife/GF/Fiancée.

This quote illustrates a common frustration expressed within posts due to the lack of personal control over private events that fall outside the purview of the Marine Corps but are nonetheless affected by their partner’s military service.

This theme also captured the dilemma presented by the tradeoff between moving forward in life and remaining close to the service member. As one woman wrote:

I’m currently attending college back home in Missouri for music education, but we have both been thinking about the possibility of me transferring out to a school in California. . . . The only problem is . . . If I go out there I will probably be two years behind . . . I want to be with my husband as much as I can. We are apart during deployments. I don’t want to be apart more than we have to . . . I want to be with him, but I also want to get my degree.

Women often struggled with the decision of being close to their Marine or maintaining their own well-being through achieving personal goals and surrounding themselves with a support system. This struggle is exemplified by a woman who seeks advice about whether her husband’s goal of becoming an officer will threaten her own professional ambitions. She explained,

My marine is currently working on his package to become an officer. He is unsure right now and wants my opinion if this is something that we can do . . . . I am very supportive of his decision either way, but I also want a military spouse’s point of view so I know as much as I can about what we are about to encounter. I also have an established career. I am a little concerned about keeping my career and moving so much.

The fluctuation in the lives of military families interferes with many personal goals, whether it be work, schooling, or a desire to simply be with one’s significant other. Often the military lifestyle impedes these goals, leaving women feeling like their own lives are on hold.

**Going through changes.** Whereas the stuck in a state of flux theme uncovers feelings about being stuck, or unable to move forward with personal goals due
to the military lifestyle, the going through changes theme reflects the nature of that “in flux” life. Specifically, this theme represents women’s expressed uneasiness and frustration about the ongoing changes and numerous adjustments inherent in being a member of a military family.

Of particular salience are the difficulties that come with frequent relocations. One woman explained, “I am really nervous about everything and moving and finding a job and making friends and, and, and . . . .” While describing a move and upcoming marriage, another woman said:

I’m trying to figure out what . . . to do to get everything situated, between housing, moving and getting married . . . . I am trying to make this as easy and stress free as possible but with just a little over two months to go I’m starting to get very overwhelmed.

Another woman stated:

My husband will be going to 29 Palms for his PCS, and I am so lost as far as what to do with housing or finding a place to live, finding a job, and moving out there . . . . I have lived in my hometown all my life, and this will be the first time moving away . . . so it is a bit scary and frustrating going to a place I know nothing about and that is so far away.

The going through changes theme captures how women experience and express frustration with the recurrent pressure of moving and restarting life. Further, this stress is intensified as these changes are frequently managed without the aid of one’s primary support system, their relational partner. Instead, many of these women relied on each other for advice and support in order to get through these trying times.

**Relational uncertainty.** Although relatively infrequent, several women posted intense expressions of doubt about the future of their relationship with their partner. Service members are required to be away from home for training, schooling, and deployment for periods of time ranging from weeks to months. As a result, these wives and significant others are at times left with a feeling of relational uncertainty due to the Marine’s lack of physical presence. These women sought advice and solace from those who may have shared similar experiences.

For some, the prolonged separation during military deployment exacerbates relational uncertainty, leading to questions about the future of the relationship. For example, one woman explained the uncertainty her husband seemed to feel during a phone call. She wrote:

today my hubby called me and it was so nice to hear his voice. I was so excited but he said that I didn’t seem like it. He kept asking me if something was wrong which
there wasn’t and after awhile of being ask what is wrong I got a little irritated. I have a lot on my mind with him being gone, family issues and school being so hectic. I want him to focus on his work and take care of himself.

Concerns about infidelity were especially intense when they surfaced in the discourse. For example, one woman expressed uncertainty about her husband’s fidelity during deployment, “I know this may sound like I am insecure (sp) or untrusting. But have any of you wives out there ever worried about your men cheating while they are deployed . . . . I am just wondering.”

Relational uncertainty was also experienced in association with the Marine’s reintegration with the family after a period of deployment. In one woman’s words:

Are any of your husband’s acting weird? Mine just told me he wants a divorce out of the blue, last time he said, that was months ago, and then everything seems fine. Oh yeah, and I’m 8 months pregnant, he said, he’s not happy . . . . We never fight, and today once again, out of the blue he got angry and started saying negative things like he can’t wait to divorce me, all I can do is cry.

Another woman wrote:

Now we’re married and living together and I’m really nervous about what it’s going to be like after not having seen him for so long and getting used to living in our new apartment alone. Does everything go right back to normal? Or is it difficult to adjust to one another again? I’m especially worried about the intimacy part.

In these examples, the long separation can lead to experiences that raise serious questions about the future of the relationship.

The relational uncertainty theme highlights how women have concerns about relationship well-being, intimacy, and fidelity, whether their Marine is currently residing with the family or deployed overseas. Although these concerns did not surface frequently in the discourse, they were especially poignant when they did.

**Loneliness.** Many women noted that they often felt alone, without company, and removed from sympathetic or friendly companionship. Marine Corps wives and significant others find it challenging to re-establish local support systems because of frequent moves and the absence of their Marine during deployment and training. One woman captured this sentiment:

My husband just got stationered at [Camp Pendleton] so I have moved out here to CA. Its a bit lonely though since I have no family/ friends here . . . . I’d love to hear from any wives/ fiancees/ gfs in the area!
This quote highlights how frequent military moves separate military wives, fiancées, and girlfriends from their support networks; thus, women are faced with the task of finding new sources of support to alleviate loneliness. Similar sentiments of loneliness show up even within posts that expressed optimism toward change, such as one woman who wrote, “I am so excited to start my new life here its just hard not really knowing anyone . . . . So if anyone has any suggestions on events or group things I would LOVE them!!!”

An additional concern for military families was how children might experience loneliness. One woman highlighted the effects of her husband’s absence on her child’s sense of loneliness. In her words:

My husband has just gotten to his MOS school and I feel like I am doing this all alone. We have a 3 year old so who is completely in love with his daddy and everyday that goes by is harder and harder on him. I have tried everything to reassure him that Daddy isn’t leaving him.

Because children also must establish new connections following relocations, many women sought out playgroups to acquaint their child with their new surroundings. This allowed women to interact with mothers in a similar situation. One woman expressed:

I[I]t helps knowing there are others out there lol. This base is so different than lejeune, I am still not used to it yet . . . hopefully one day I can find something to do! My poor little boy gets so bored sitting at home!

The previous quotes illustrate family members’ feelings of loneliness associated with separation from the Marine and separation from an established network of support. The loneliness theme also captures women’s concern for their children’s well-being when their partner is away.

**Alienation.** Military families have a unique lifestyle that is often misunderstood by those who are not members of a military family. As a result, women expressed that their networks sometimes made them feel like an outsider or isolated from the world. Although extended family and friends may begin to understand the intricacies of their lifestyle in time, frequent moves may result in a recurrent sense of alienation.

One poster exemplified this feeling of alienation in her description of how she didn’t feel like her social network understood her situation:

I’m trying to get involved with this website cause Im not sure what else I should do. Im 19 and new to being a wife, especially a Marine wife. Im soo bored and lonely. Most of my friends are immature and Id rather work on my marrige then party like they do but im not sure how if my husbands across the country.
A seasoned Marine Corps wife responded to a woman with similar frustrations and offered her empathy and advice. In her words:

It’s a hard situation being away from your marine . . . . I have been through some deployments and my biggest time passer was a good support system and remembering who I am as an individual not just a marine wife/gf. It took me a long time to figure out that I needed to do what made me happy when my guy wasn’t available. I shut my self off to the world . . . and only talked to my family and other marine gf bc I felt like my friends here at home didn’t understand.

She then stressed the need to reconnect with “non-Marine friends” and said, “friends want to be there for you even when you may not think so. Family is great, but they cannot replace friends.”

Another form of alienation exists for military families who find themselves far from not only their informal support network of family and friends, but also the formal support network of base facilities. One woman whose husband is on recruiting duty wrote:

we are in the middle of nowhere and while my husband is here, he works 16–18 hour days so we rarely see him and while everyone out here is nice, they don’t want to be friends with a military family.

Other women expressed a sentiment of not fitting the mold of a Marine Corps family by waiting to have kids. One woman stated, “Their have been many times we’ve received odd looks or many questions from other military couples on why we don’t have children.” Another wife replied to this post and explained, “we get the odd looks too, when I tell them that (a) we DON’T have children and (b) that I have degrees and a career (not a job).” In contrast, another woman said “people ask me why I WOULD have kids with a husband in the military . . . the stereotype goes both ways.”

As the previous quotes illustrated, the stress of feeling stigmatized because of the inability to fit in with the Marine or civilian families around them caused women to turn to others who could relate to their feelings of alienation. In return, many women in the discussion forum provided advice and support to those who felt alienated from their surroundings.

Anxiety related to deployment. Women are repeatedly confronted with apprehension related to deployment and redeployment. Some women expressed uncertainty with how they could cope with deployments: “when my husband told me he was going there my heart sank . . . . I guess it’s just scary like the thought of Afghanistan because it’s the unknown . . . . I think it worried me more than it worried him . . . . I guess the fear and the sadness takes you over at some
points.” Other women expressed concern about the well-being of their Marine while deployed. This overall sense of anxiety related to deployment was a predominant theme throughout the discussion forum as women sought advice and support. One woman wrote:

my hubby is in the sandbox and i am a worry wart, big time! if something happen to him, how fast will i know? i try to think no news is good news but that doesn’t really seem to help! hes had to do some things lately that has got me worried about him.

This quote illustrates how concern about their partner’s safety during deployment is exacerbated by an inability to communicate frequently with their partner, and a lack of control over when this communication will occur. Other women felt trepidation on behalf of their Marine:

My husband is getting ready to go on his second deployment. He was excited about his first but he doesn’t seem to think he’ll come back from this one and keeps talking about fitting in as much time with me as possible before he goes.

And still others expressed concern on behalf of themselves, their child, and their Marine.

I just found outh that my husband is going to deploy soon. I am scarred out of my mind but trying my best to be supportive . . . . What about our little girl? What happens if he doesn’t come back? I know that I have a lot of support but sometimes do you ever just feel like you are completely alone? . . . . We aren’t even stationed yet, I don’t even know if I should bother moving to his PDS. So many things running though my mind. Help.

This woman experienced anxiety not just for herself, but also for her daughter. Moreover, as she expressed concern about her husband’s safety she also articulated her realization that once her husband departs she must continue through daily tasks without his presence.

Women in this online forum were also concerned with the daunting task of explaining deployment to children. In one woman’s words:

This is my husband and I first deployment. Am not real sure how to take it. Nor am I sure how to tell our 4 year old son. Being in a new place and my husband leaving is scaring and I really dont have support here like I did at home.

The anxiety about deployment theme highlights the angst that these women feel about not knowing where their Marine is, how safe he is, and when they can communicate with him again. In addition, for many women, anxiety related
to deployment seemed to stem from being away from extended family, a lack of experience related to deployment, and/or experiencing deployment with young children. This anxiety propels these women to seek advice about how to cope with the many unknowns about deployment and seek support from those who successfully endured deployments in the past.

Axial Coding Analysis

As explained previously, during axial coding, associations are made within and between the aforementioned themes to identify the specific features or conditions that contextualize the stressor experience (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Therefore, this step of the analysis attends to patterns that connect or differentiate the six stressor themes identified through the open-coding process. The axial coding revealed three properties or dimensions that underlie the six aforementioned relational stressor categories: (a) issues of control and helplessness; (b) concerns over privileging individual or relational goals; and (c) the matter of locus of blame (Table 2).

Control and helplessness. Many of the women in this forum confronted an internal struggle between a desire for control over aspects of their life and the helpless nature of their situation, whether that situation is their current state of flux, changes they are going through, relational uncertainty, loneliness, alienation, or dealing with deployments. This dimension highlights how women used the discussion forum to try to gain control in their lives and to vent their feelings of lack of control. Comments such as “The big issues I have are about all the maybes, kindas and what ifs that are to come,” and “I like to plan things out and I feel so helpless. Now what?” illustrate how women engaged the discussion forum in an effort make sense of their lack of control and to get advice about managing feelings of helplessness that can be a part of daily life in the military.

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<tr>
<th>Axial Codes</th>
<th>Description of Axial Codes Associated With Stressor Themes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Control versus helplessness</td>
<td>Reflects women’s acknowledgement that they had some control about the trajectory of their life, but also felt helpless to do anything about the nature of the situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual and relational goals</td>
<td>Reflects how women grappled with putting personal goals and achievements aside for the good of the couple and sometimes questioning if those same moves were being made by their significant other.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locus of blame</td>
<td>Reflects the question of where to place blame. Who can women blame for these ongoing stressors: the Marine Corps, their friends and families, their husbands, or themselves?</td>
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</table>
Some women were frustrated with their apparent inability to have control and certainty with their social networks. For example, their inability to control frequent moves or military orders that took their partner away from home had a direct impact on their feelings of loneliness and lack of network support. In contrast, other women used the board as their means of taking control of their lonely state of affairs and thus expressed their desire to increase their networks: “Also, if there are any wives here who are in Belton, say hi! I’d love to get a head start on making friends once we get moved here!” Similarly, some women used the forum to help them establish a feeling of control over their situations by seeking information on how to discuss deployments with children and manage all the “what ifs” and any “dos and don’ts” of the deployment process. Women also came to the discussion board for advice concerning how to reduce their Marine’s worries about their marriage so that the Marine could focus on doing his job and being safe.

The Marine Corps wives, fiancées, and girlfriends in this forum were challenged to assert some level of control over their unpredictable lifestyle, and their perceived inability permeated the categories of stressors revealed by the open-coding analysis. Furthermore, the numerous questions about how to manage their lives highlight the women’s desire to maintain predictability and stability in a life full of uncertainty. In fact, many of the women set aside their desire for control, predictability, and certainty and simply acknowledged that due to their primary obligations to the Marine Corps, achieving control over their lives was a lost cause.

Individual and relational goals. A second recurring issue involved the tenuous balance of managing both individual and relational goals. As mentioned previously, the fluctuation typical in the lives of military families interferes with the women’s identities as career women (“The best professions for military spouses are teachers, nurses, personal trainers, retail . . . these are careers that can transfer very very easily . . . there are sacrifices that are made”); as students (“I am planning on going to college for nursing, . . . but I am guessing I am to late for the Fall semester . . . maybe next spring or summer”); or even as wives (“Don’t forget, too, that marriage is always a challenge, even in civilian life, so being in the Marine makes it that much harder”). Thus, these women struggle with putting their personal goals and achievements aside. As one woman explained, “I have never felt more worthless. I have sacrificed everything to be with my Marine now I have to suffer consequences of loving a Marine. Just wanted to state that Marine wives get pushed to the side too often.”

At the same time, the discourse revealed preoccupation with relational goals. This was seen among women who wanted their Marine to focus on himself and stay safe during a deployment, those who expressed concern about infidelity or divorce, and those who worried about renewing intimacy after a long absence. Women’s relational goals also emerged alongside their feelings of loneliness or alienation from social networks. Whether women were venting about the lack
of understanding they encounter, seeking advice about how to meet others, or asking how to introduce their offspring to children in similar situations, goals for personal relationships were salient. Thus, the struggle to achieve individual goals and relational goals was seen within the couple, and also in efforts to form or maintain relationships with people outside of their marriage.

**Locus of blame.** Discussions of all the stressors were frequently imbued with language attributing blame, often to the military or to the Marine partner. One poster specifically identifies the Marine Corps as the root of her problem, stating that her schooling must be put on hold because of the Marine Corps. Other women indicated that they must wait to make decisions about their personal goals until they find out information about their next duty station, thus implicitly attributing their difficulties to the Marine Corps. Occasionally, blaming dynamics within the relational unit surfaced, such as women who explained their challenges as stemming from their partner’s decision to be in the Marine Corps or their choice to marry into this lifestyle.

Because of the frequent moves associated with the military lifestyle, it was relatively easy for women to express frustration toward the military for uprooting them from their social support networks. Other women blamed their networks for making them feel like outsiders. A small number of women did not attribute blame, but simply acknowledged that their situation was difficult; for example, one wife explained, “I’m torn between going home and being away from him for the betterment of our financial situation, or staying here with him and struggling to get by. I know the answer is obvious to most people but it’s just so hard to have to leave him again.”

**DISCUSSION**

Due to the operational tempo of combat deployments since 2001, the military and academia have increased attention to the effects of wartime stress on military families. The primary purpose of this investigation was to provide a nuanced understanding of the personal relationship and socioemotional stressors associated with being a woman in a Marine Corps family. By examining online discussion boards, we sought to identify the frequent, intense, and extensive stressors experienced by Marine Corps wives and significant others.

We drew upon the social constructionist perspective to illuminate how women construct and frame their lived experiences through naturally occurring discourse among Marine Corps wives, fiancées, and girlfriends from all over the world. The discussion forum allows women to reach out to others who could coconstruct the meaning of their stressors and offer different ways to reappraise those situations. Thus, the themes that emerged in our analysis captured not just specific stressors
that have been identified in previous studies, but also the relational and socioemotional implications of military life. For example, our analysis suggests that it is not just the logistical difficulties of frequent moves that are stressful to women in Marine Corps families (Black, 1993), but it is all the various things associated with those moves (e.g., decisions to privilege individual or relational goals, issues of control, loneliness, alienation) that make the experience stressful. The social constructionist perspective provides a useful framework to guide future work in the context of military families, using the medium of online discussion boards.

Although the quotes offered in our analysis are categorized within individual stressor themes, the discourse often transcended across dimensions, encompassing multiple issues of control and helplessness, individual and relational goals, and locus of blame. For instance, whereas loneliness may not be as hurtful for women who exert control by facilitating meetings with others and blaming the Marine Corps for their partner’s deployment, loneliness may indeed be detrimental for those who feel paralyzed when trying to meet others and choose to blame their partners for continuing to re-enlist in the Marine Corps. The relative impact of each stressor may be understood as a function of the combination of both dimensions of perceived control and locus of blame. The latter dimension also illuminates feelings of relational uncertainty. These feelings may be viewed as acceptable when the problem is seemingly caused by issues out of the Marine’s control (e.g., deployments, orders to a new duty station, ability to call home during deployment); however, issues that are under the Marine’s control, including infidelity, a decision to stay in the Marine Corps, and discussions of marital/relational dissolution, may have a stronger impact on women’s feelings of uncertainty. Furthermore, these instances may encourage women to question their Marine’s individual and relational priorities and consequently reconsider their own individual and relational goals.

Our analysis also allowed us to see how stressors often overlapped in the discourse. In particular, the theme of anxiety related to deployment is a wide-reaching net that encompasses anxiety about the deployment and the Marine’s well-being, as well as the stressors of being stuck in a state of flux, going through changes, relational uncertainty, alienation, and loneliness. This is consistent with previous research, which indicates that “deployment separations can heighten anxiety, uncertainty, and loneliness, as well as decrease relational closeness, satisfaction and emotional support” (Merolla, 2010, p. 5). Our results suggest that efforts to focus on relational maintenance in the context of military families experiencing deployments are well placed. Merolla indicated that military families are able to sustain both stable and satisfying marriages by performing relational maintenance throughout a service member’s deployment. We see benefits to expanding the study of relational maintenance to consider how discourse among military wives, as opposed to solely between spouses, can also serve a relational maintenance function. In particular, we propose that the ability for military wives to
communicate collectively and seek support from those in a comparable situation may help them identify ways to adapt and maintain their marital relationship in functional ways.

One body of work that may shed light on the communication of support among Marine Corps significant others is research on communal coping (Lyons, Mickelson, Sullivan, & Coyne, 1998). According to Lyons and colleagues, communal coping is the perception that the stressor is “co-owned” and should be solved and acted upon by both partners. Although communal coping is typically examined as occurring within a family unit, our findings point to the potential utility of extending communal coping to understand how it exists within one’s larger community. In many situations, our research illustrated ways in which women reached out to others on the forum to receive support and assistance with coping and adapting to the stressful situation. Accordingly, communal coping may address both how co-owned stressors are solved and acted upon by marital couples, as well as how they are managed by communities.

Although speculative, we believe that the results of this study also relate to research on shared “turning points” in family life (Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999). Our results suggest that the absence of shared turning points may be related to the emergence of various stressors, because military life inhibits the natural development of a family identity. Many women in this study were adjusting to their Marine’s absence during first or subsequent births, birthdays, anniversaries, and other holidays. Though extant work recognizes issues of identity and role changes in military families (Gambardella, 2008), our results indicate that many military families adapt and develop family identities despite the frequent absence of service members during turning points. To this end, exploring how military families adapt to form their joint identities may inform future research to strengthen these families and alleviate stress.

The relational turbulence model (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004) may also provide a useful lens to examine military life and the stressful relational and communication experiences that follow. The relational turbulence model emphasizes the ways in which transformations in relationship environments might raise uncertainty about the relationship. The theory also underscores the complications that emerge as partners renegotiate patterns of interdependence (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). In our findings, wives and significant others of Marines experience various states of relational uncertainty, whether related to separation, suspected infidelity, intimacy following long separation, or erratic behavior. This is consistent with the model, which suggests relational uncertainty is expected to recur during changes in circumstances within the relationship. The theory further proposes that interference, the result of a disruption in the performance of a partner’s daily routine, is increased when couples must renegotiate interdependence (Knobloch & Solomon, 2004). Interference can be recognized in each of the stressors that surfaced, as well as the underlying dimensions of control and
helplessness and locus of blame as they apply to hindering individual and relational goals. When applied to military families, the relational turbulence model offers a framework for understanding the communication complexities inherent in military life.

In general, our findings provide an increased understanding of the relational and socioemotional stressors associated with being a wife, fiancée, or girlfriend of a Marine. Building on this formative foundation, future work can seek to operationalize these stressors within a diagnostic tool that assesses the prevalence of stressors within the lives of Marine Corps significant others. In turn, our findings can serve as a foundation for the creation of an intervention designed to assist significant others in coping with the inordinate amount of socioemotional and relational stressors that they face on a daily basis. The growing number of members on discussion boards specifically designed for women in military families indicates a desire and ability for these women to communicate with and seek support from others who have similar life experiences. Thus, we see potential for using this venue to deliver interventions that help women develop strategies for both eliciting support and providing support to those in need.

Notably, our research methods imposed certain limitations. For instance, we were unable to probe individuals for more information about topics discussed on the forum. In addition, important stressors may exist that women simply did not feel comfortable discussing due to the public nature of the forum. For example, women may be unlikely to discuss illegal behaviors or behaviors that could lead to discharge from the military. Also, we restricted our data to those stressors that were relational or socioemotional in nature. Thus, our data do not account for the broader variety of issues that may have emerged as people attempt to construct their lived experiences. Other aspects of the research design restrict the generalizability of our conclusions. In particular, people who do not have Internet access, typically lower socioeconomic status individuals, were not included in this sample, and stressors that might be unique to that population are not captured in our study. Likewise, the discussion board we examined was tailored to female intimate partners of deployed Marines. As a result, our sample does not contain the unique perspective of male partners of service members. Collecting data through an online forum also limits our ability to identify the demographic characteristics of participants. Furthermore, our data were largely restricted to significant others of Marines; therefore, these findings may not generalize across military branches. Finally, this analysis focused on only one forum. A number of other forums exist that include similar relational or socioemotional data that were not explored.

The qualitative methodology we employed also has some inherent limitations. Glaser and Strauss (1967) emphasized that the researcher should have “no preconceived ideas” when collecting and analyzing data; however, researcher bias is impossible to avoid. Previous personal and professional experiences, a priori beliefs about how and what is to be investigated, motivation and qualifications for
exploration of the field, and perspectives and theoretical foundations guiding the research will inevitably affect the research findings (Malterud, 2001). In addition, there is no clear, predetermined coding process when conducting open coding. As a result, it is often difficult to know when the process of coding should end (Allan, 2003).

CONCLUSION

The goal of this study was to adopt a social constructionist perspective to frame an exploration of the socioemotional and relational aspects of stress experienced by the wives or significant others of Marines. Although military families are a microcosm of society, our results illuminate the issues that are especially salient to women experiencing the stress of military life. Furthermore, our investigation emphasizes how women coconstruct their experiences through communication. To the extent that future research can capitalize on the strength of this study and address its limitations, we are optimistic that these findings lay a foundation for research that may identify strategies for alleviating the challenges that confront military families.

REFERENCES


