

Military Life Challenges Among Military Spouses: Implications for Future Interventions

Bianca Comicho, Ateneo de Davao University, Philippines

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Abstract

While there is a vast amount of research about the military in the Western setting, there is an undeniable scarcity in research involving the military, its members and their families in the Philippines. As the “overlooked casualties of war”, the researcher believes that military family members are equally impacted by the military lifestyle thus they also deserve equal research attention- especially the spouses who manage a handful of responsibilities in the family while the military member is away. This study aimed to arrive on certain research implications regarding the challenges faced by military spouses that will help design future interventions specific for military spouses in the Philippines. Using a mixed-method research design, the researcher investigated 4 major areas: stressors, coping resources, coping strategies, and perceptions of the spouses. The first phase of data gathering (survey) identified the top 5 responses in these 4 areas. While the second phase of data gathering aimed to elaborate the data. Data analysis revealed that anxiety was a major stressor. Other top stressors were media or media reporting, deployment and suspicion of infidelity. The spouses’ coping resources were classified into 2: social and personal coping resources. Coping strategies were categorized into 3: emotion-focused, problem-focused, and avoidance coping strategy. Lastly, perception about being a military spouse revealed 3 themes: resilience, sense of pride, and sense of security. These findings implied the need to design interventions specific for military spouses that will target stress reduction, enhancing coping resources and strategies and maintaining healthy perceptions of the spouses.

Keywords: Military Life Challenges, Military Spouses, Interventions, Stress, Coping, Perception

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Introduction

Military profession gives honor and pride not only to the military members but also to their families. As Blaisure, Dombro, Saathoff-Wells and Wadsworth (2015) pointed out, “military service is an obligation” above and before family needs. Each member of the family therefore commits to this obligation. Regarded as the “overlooked casualties of war” (De Burgh, Fear, Iversen & White, 2011), military families have gained little attention as research have greatly focused on military members. However, research attention shifted after the September 2001 terrorist attack where deployment of US military forces have been longer and more frequent. This event generated a lot of research queries in the military particularly the impact of military involvement and the lived experiences of military families. One research finding suggested that since the said attack, stress within US military families have increased dramatically due to deployment (Belasco, 2014). The stress of military life also reverberates towards the family which put a great impact among spouses (Beardslee, Cozza, Lester, Strouse & Wadsworth, 2013). Left with responsibilities of two house parents, the life of a military spouse may be very challenging and stressful and acknowledging this reality placed interest in research.

A vast amount to research literature pointed out how military lifestyle impacts military families particularly to the spouses. According to Barker and Berry (2009), the effects of separation along with other military- related stressors have caused high rates of mental health problems among military spouses. Illnesses that are due to military-related stress include anxiety disorders, depressive disorders, and sleep disorders have also been reported (Numbers, Osterlund & Ungvarsky, 2011). To overcome such challenges, military spouses employ different coping strategies to manage their situations and healthy coping must be developed in order to survive the impacts of stress (Beder, 2012). Moreover, there seems to be a slight interest with regards to how spouses perceive their military experiences but MacKenzie, McGuire, Runge and Waller (2014) suggested that understanding the perceptions of military spouses is important as it affects their own health and well-being. Thus, it is important to recognize that perception, along with stress and coping, forms a big part in military spouses’ experiences.

In the Philippines, although Philippine military research and statistics is scarce, result of informal interviews revealed similar findings especially during their husbands’ deployment where they need to manage the family alone. In 2019, there has been more deployment in areas of Mindanao where rates of armed conflicts are high. In the same year, there were also bombing incidences and other forms of violence taking place which called for higher security measures. More recently, in January 2020, as a response to the impending effects of the dispute between Iran and US, Philippine military troops were deployed in Iraq primarily to help in the repatriation of Filipinos. Situations like these where military members are working in high pressured situations may induce more stress not only to military members but to their spouses as well.

While programs and community support exist, there is very little or no known study that explored on psychological interventions especially offered for military spouses in the Philippines. Considering the accounts suggesting that stress due to military involvement have significantly affected western military spouses, it is highly likely that Filipino military spouses are at stake too and their coping and perceptions may be affected as well. Such experiences and the lack of intervention serve as the primary motivations of this study. Thus, by discovering such experiences (stressors, coping, perception), this study aims to provide

scientific data to draw out implications that will help the concerned agencies in giving future interventions that facilitate the needs of military spouses. Through a mixed- method research design (combining quantitative and qualitative methods), the researcher aims to satisfy the said objectives.

Conclusion

According to the ABC-X Theory of Family Stress and Coping (as cited in Rosino, 2016), families may encounter stressors (variable A) that may disrupt the family functions. In order to survive, the family needs to possess some crisis-meeting resources (variable B) to cope and maintain equilibrium. The theory also suggested that the perceptions (variable C) that the family makes out of their experiences with the stressors may impact their family functioning as well. The overall interaction between the kind of stressors that the family encounter, their coping, and perceptions will then determine the crisis (variable X) that the family will face. Such concept from the ABC-X theory is applied in this study to understand the challenges that occur in military families particularly among the spouses. Literature possesses significant evidence which suggest that among the members of the family, military spouses receive the biggest impact especially because they assume the responsibilities of two houseparents.

Using a mixed-method research design (survey and one-on-one interviews), the following are the relevant findings of the study:

Stressors of the spouses

Based on the findings, the researcher identified *Anxiety* as the major stressor. Specifically, the stressors of the spouses that were driven with anxiety are (1) media or media reporting, (2) deployment which involved partner's safety, parenting, and loneliness, and (3) suspicion of betrayal.

Media or media reporting

Currently, Facebook is the most frequently used social media platform for the spouses. Most of the spouses in the study are unemployed, stay-home spouses thus they rely more on the use of internet to provide connection with the outside community and entertainment as well. However, media has been a great source of stress for the spouses of this study due to the presence of "fake news" and other unreliable information. Fake news makes the spouses anxious and worried. Exaggerated comments from other Facebook users that are usually filled with emotional content were said to also add more anxiety to the spouses. Another stressful experience in the use of Facebook which affected the spouses was their tendency to empathize with other people who were posting about their loss and experiences with betrayal. Facebook posts that express the mourning and sadness of other spouses and families tend to drag the spouses emotionally.

Deployment

Many studies in the literature have tried to focus on the lives of military families during deployment and in fact Hall (2016) regarded deployment as one of the biggest challenges of military profession. In this study, there were three stressors that posed a great concern to the spouses during periods of deployment: (1) partner's safety, (2) parenting responsibilities, and (3) loneliness.

Partner's safety

Based on the demographics of the spouses in this study, majority had partners assigned to ranks that were noted to be active in the field of operations like Sergeants, Staff Sergeants, and Corporals. As these positions engage in operations, it is not surprising that safety is a concern among the spouses. According to the spouses in this study, the uncertainty of their partner's comeback and worrying about partner's safety has brought mixed emotions. They felt worried and fearful too while thinking about what was happening to their partners in the area. They revealed that their feelings were unexplainable at those times but certainly it made them feel uneasy. The stress from worrying over partner's safety was also found out to be reinforced with loss of communication or contact.

Parenting responsibilities

During deployment, the spouses felt as if they were "single parents" because they assume the roles of two houseparents. They were relied upon to become the primary child-rearers and manage all the things needed to sustain the family. More specifically, they revealed that one of the most complicated challenges related to parenting was taking care of a sick child. Moreover, according to the spouses, they also sometimes feel worried about the quality of care that they give to their children. According to Green, Lester and Nurius (2013), it was the spouses' role to maintain equilibrium and provide an anchor-like stabilizing role within the family. Otherwise, if the spouse fails to do the tasks efficiently, family functions may be disrupted. This puts more pressure in rearing the child or children alone and they thought it needed bigger efforts to fulfil their responsibilities as both mother and father.

Loneliness

Due to the nature of military life which they had to deal with, the spouses were prone to experiencing loneliness from not having their partners around all the time and as Pincus et al. (as cited in Savych, 2008) put it, "the soldier's departure creates a hole which can lead to feelings numbness, sadness, being alone and abandonment." Similarly, the spouses in this study reported that their loneliness primarily stemmed from the absence of their partners in the household. They felt lonely as they missed their partners being around, helping them in doing the household chores. They also missed the bond that they used to have with their partners particularly the ordinary conversations. According to Hinojosa and Hognas (2012), conversations or communication is very important for military couples as they go through deployment. They further explained that the diminished familiarity with one another's day-to-day lives may create a sense of disconnectedness and additional difficulties between couples (Hinojosa & Hognas, 2012).

Suspicion of Infidelity

Four out of five spouses who participated in the interview phase of this study confirmed that they have experienced betrayal by their partners in the past. But even the spouse who did not report having such history still reported to worry about the possibility of it happening to them. Even without prior experience, the spouses considered infidelity as a stressor because they perceive that betrayal is a part of military life as it was commonly experienced by other spouses. Thus, the spouses experienced the same anxiety. In fact, the spouses view it as a "normal" part of the challenges of being a military spouse. Furthermore, suspicion of betrayal makes the spouses overthink and experience mood changes. Such impact mirrors anxiety.

Coping of the Spouses

Coping is basically the response that a person makes towards life's stresses. Two dimension

of coping were explored in this study- coping resources and coping strategies. Further analysis classified the coping resources of the spouses into 2 types- personal and social coping resources.

Social coping resources

The researcher of this study defined the term social coping resources as “the types of coping resources that are found outside the individual.” In other words, these are coping resources that are drawn from other people. Social coping resources of the spouses in this study included the family (for strong family bond), god (for religion or spirituality), the partner (for partner’s support), and the children (support from child or children).

Personal coping resources

According to the researcher, personal coping resources are “the types of coping resources that are found within the individual.” The spouses in this study identified self-esteem a personal coping resource. Self-esteem was useful to the spouses as it allowed them to be more confident in handling stressors or problems. With high self-esteem, they believed that they were able to fulfill their tasks efficiently. Majority of the research found in literature have agreed that people with high self-esteem have less vulnerability towards stress while people with low self-esteem were prone towards psychological effects that eventually made them more vulnerable to stress (Farhan & Khan, 2015).

Coping strategies

Coping strategies refers to ways in which people use appropriate coping resources to protect themselves from the negative effects of stressors (Aycock, 2011). Further analysis classified the coping strategies of the spouses into emotion-focused, problem- focused and avoidance coping strategies.

Emotion-focused coping strategies

The spouses in this study prefers dealing with their stressors through prayer, venting, and reflecting. Such strategies had different advantages to the spouses but the most common was that it provided emotional relief. Generally, in using such strategies, they are putting more priority in releasing their feelings and emotions rather than directly confronting the problem.

Problem-focused coping strategies

Problem-focused coping strategies were used by the spouses in this study by employing planning and problem-solving strategies. While emotion-focused coping strategies helped the spouses by providing more emotional relief, these strategies helped by providing more direct solutions to their problems, eliminating the problems sooner, as the spouses explained.

Avoidance coping strategies

Avoidant coping strategies aim at distancing oneself from the stressful situations by engaging in distracting activities or socializing with others. The spouses this study used distraction by keeping themselves to distract them from frequently thinking about their problem. The spouses said that it was a form of escape. Spouses typically transfer their attention towards doing household chores or managing children’s needs.

Perception about being a military spouse

The responses of the spouses revealed three themes- resilience, sense of pride and sense of security.

Military spouses viewed themselves as resilient

In this study, resilience among the spouses was manifested in three ways: their commitment, responsibility, and adjustment. The spouses of this study believed that the longer they endure their role as a military spouse, the more they prove their commitment. Along with this commitment comes the sense of responsibility that they believe they possess as are expected to manage the entire household including child rearing. Lastly, part of their resilience is shaped by their ability to adjust their personal life in order to fulfill their responsibilities. Mainly, their biggest adjustment is on having limited socialization.

Being a military spouse is a pride

Undeniably, military profession was an honorable and well respected profession. In fact, military families reported increased sense of pride from having a military member in the family (Beckett et. al., 2008). Similarly, the spouses in this study revealed that they have gained a sense of pride as spouses of military members. It was discovered that their pride was primarily a result of their perception about their partner's job. They also shared that such pride came from having respect towards the huge responsibility of the military partner, being brave protectors of the country and maintain peace. The spouses also said that they were proud also because their partners' job enabled them to help others in financial need.

Being a military spouse ensures economic security

In the year 2018, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte ordered a 100% base pay hike among military uniformed personnel. Such increase surely made an impact in the economic status of military families, thus financial burden in part of the spouse who manages the finance was lessened. In their study, Dursun and Sudom (2009) noted that majority of spouses were more comfortable in coping when there was financial comfort. This was supported by Page (2018) who pointed out that job security to be one among the highly important factors in coping among military spouses. This perceived security came primarily from the benefits that gave current financial comfort to the family until life after retirement.

Implications and Recommendations

The main aim of this study was to arrive on certain research implications that will help frame future interventions for military spouses in the Philippines. The following are the implications derived from the results of this study:

- 1. Introduce anxiety-reducing strategies.* Introducing effective anxiety-reducing strategies will help them manage the behaviors and feelings brought by anxiety especially during deployment or separation from their military partners where anxiety was most likely to occur and escalate. Since help from other people is not available all the time, relaxation techniques that are easy and can be done at home will be convenient and practical. Psychoeducation by trained professionals like psychologists, counselors, and social workers will also be useful in helping them deal and understand anxiety's nature.
- 2. Conduct group activities that encourage family involvement.* Social coping resources that were found to be most helpful particularly family and God (religion or spirituality) need to be sustained and strengthened through family activities that promote family interaction.
- 3. Establish and organize support more groups involving military spouses.* As coping resource, support groups may provide spouses the sense of belongingness knowing

that they are talking to people who can relate to their experiences. This can encourage them to be more open thus they can raise their personal concerns and be helped. Establishing support groups will also make it easier to conduct interventions that are better done in groups.

4. *Employ couple interventions to enhance marital relationships.* Relationship between couples will also be a good target in addition to family programs. Interventions for couples that will highlight faithfulness, trust, effective communication between couples and other values surrounding a healthy marriage will be helpful in maintaining quality marriage.
5. *Allow military spouses to model good practices and help other spouses at risk.* Group interventions may highlight spouses who can serve as models or inspiration to other spouses who may have poor perceptions about their experiences. In this way, military spouses may be empowered not only as spouses but also as women.
6. *Conduct and encourage researches that would help frame future interventions.* As noted, the spouses viewed their stressors as normal. Also, since least attention was given to them, there was a lack of scientific evidence to prove the need for interventions among the spouses and thus no intervention for the spouses exist, particularly psychological interventions. Because of this, the spouses have yet to realize that they can be helped and their situation can improve if interventions were available for them. This implies the need for researches that focus on different dimension of the life of a military spouse. Research will help design interventions that are more extensive and appropriate for the unique experiences brought by military lifestyle.
7. *Train personnel.* This study acknowledges that there is an insufficient number of mental health professionals working in the Armed forces of the Philippines (AFP) nowadays. Because this reality cannot be controlled, the AFP can train their staff in handling spouses' concerns that are related to military lifestyle. It is very important that mental health service providers in the AFP are trained in order for the spouses to receive appropriate and effective assistance.
8. *Establish a helpline or an online channel.* This study revealed that the spouses spend more time online as outside socialization due to responsibilities at home becomes limited. To utilize the time spent online as well as the online resources, the AFP can create an online channel, a Facebook page for example, which will be regulated by the AFP itself. Aside from being a convenient and accessible source of information, this will ensure legit information and decrease anxiety of the spouses over fake news. It will be efficient also if the helpline or channel is available all the time so that spouses can report their concerns as they appear.
9. *Allow stakeholders to help.* There are many stakeholders in the community that can help and support the programs of the AFP. The AFP can allow different stakeholders to offer their services to the spouses and even to the personnel provided that proper permission from authority is obtained. This can be a convenient and practical strategy which will also expand the AFP's community involvement at the same time allow the spouses to be more recognized by the society.

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Contact email: comichobiancaj@gmail.com