

Assessing the Impact of Army Life on Families Living in Europe

Lolita M. Burrell, Carl A. Castro and Doris Briley Durand

Walter Reed Army Institute of Research

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Abstract

Researchers at the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research conducted two studies in Europe to determine how the high operations tempo (OPTEMPO) impacts the health and well-being of the family and to identify the social and psychological factors that promote family health and well-being. The focus was on the four unique demands of Army life: geographic mobility, residence in a foreign country, fear of soldier injury or death, and deployments and separations. Spouses (N = 110) from units located in USAREUR were asked to participate in the study. The units were from the Southern European Task Force, V CORPS, 21st Theater Support Command, 1st Armored Division, and the 1st Infantry Division. Surveys were mailed to spouses in 2001. Interviews with spouses of junior enlisted soldiers and officers were conducted during April-June 2001 while interviews with spouses of Sergeant Majors and senior officers were conducted in January 2002. Based on the survey findings, overall, the spouses were in good physical and psychological health. Spouses of junior enlisted soldiers and officers who had a better perception of moving to Europe had better physical and psychological health and greater satisfaction with the Army. However, these relationships did not hold for spouses of Sergeant Majors and senior officers. The same pattern of findings emerged with regard to all four demands. Most spouses liked living in Europe, but spouses of senior military personnel had a significantly better perception of living abroad than spouses of junior military personnel. At least 75% of all spouses worried about their soldier being injured on a deployment and over 50% were worried about their soldier being killed. Spouses of junior military personnel had significantly higher fear levels than spouses of senior military personnel. Not surprisingly, military separations due to deployments and training exercises resulted in all of the spouses becoming more independent. However, spouses of junior enlisted soldiers and officers reported significantly more adverse effects on their marriages and families due to deployments than did spouses of Sergeant Majors and senior officers. These findings indicate that while spouses were similar with regard to some of their perceptions of these demands, spouses of senior military personnel generally reported more positive perceptions of these demands than did spouses of junior military personnel.

Introduction

Army families are often faced with a multitude of stressors that are intrinsic to military life. The demands most frequently cited as problematic to the military are the risk of injury or death of the service member, geographic mobility, periodic separation of the service member from the rest of the family, and residence in a foreign country (Segal, 1988). Over the course of a military career, most soldiers and families will experience these stressors. However, the soldiers and families stationed in a high OPTEMPO environment (e.g. Europe) will likely experience these stressors in rapid succession or even simultaneously.

In order to accomplish the Army's mission, geographic mobility is expected. The impact of geographic mobility on health may result in adverse consequences; however, the effects may be short-lived (Jensen, Lewis, Xenakis, 1986). A few studies have shown a relationship between relocation and psychological well-being. Two separate studies found that relocation was associated with spouses reporting decreased marital happiness (Ozkaptan, Sanders, & Holz, 1986 in Schumm, Bell, & Tran, 1994; Schneider & Gilley, 1984 in Schumm, Bell, & Tran, 1994).

While it is expected that an increase in mobility may be associated with decreased retention intentions, the relationship may be slightly more complex. In a study of family factors related to retention outcomes, those enlisted Navy personnel who moved frequently were more

likely to leave than those who moved infrequently. However, those who never moved were the most likely to leave the Navy (Szoc & Seboda, 1984).

Residence in a foreign country is a potential outcome of geographic mobility at some point in a soldier's career. Soldiers and their families will find living overseas is quite different from living in the United States. Decreased psychological well-being has been associated with residence in a foreign country. Burnam et al (1992) found that soldiers who were stationed overseas were less satisfied with their marriages and displayed less well-being. The ability to use successful coping skills may play a role in the degree of stress experienced by the spouses. Puskar (1990) studied international relocation and how military and corporate wives coped with such an event. Results from this study indicated that those women who adjusted best used active coping behaviors such as seeking information and making alternative plans, while those who did not adjust well used passive coping behaviors such as sleeping or eating more.

Occasionally, families may be separated from the service member, even if they have been able to accompany the service member to a foreign country. Fear of the unknown and limited contact with the soldier during separations are just two factors that may adversely impact the families left behind (Ursano, Holloway, Jones, Rodriguez, & Belenky, 1989). These factors may result in feelings of loss and depression (Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense, 1993b). Adler, Bartone, & Vaitkus (1995) assessed the effects of deployment on spouses whose soldiers were on a peacekeeping mission in Croatia and found that over half of the spouses reported sleep problems and that more than a third reported a loss of appetite. However, separation has not always been linked to negative outcomes. Positive outcomes may include the opportunity for the spouse to develop independence and self-sufficiency (Coolbaugh & Rosenthal, 1992; Hunter & Hickman, 1981; Schwartz, Braddy, Griffith, & Wood, 1988).

Separation anxiety and its relationship to retention was the focus of an Army study of spouses separated from their soldiers (Coolbaugh & Rosenthal, 1992). Findings from this study indicated that there were no significant correlations between spouses' scores on the separation anxiety scale and the soldier's stated likelihood of staying in the Army at the end of his current obligation. However, a significant correlation emerged between spouses anxiety scores and the desire for their soldier to remain in the military. The relationship suggested that the greater the separation anxiety, the more likely the wife was to favor her husband leaving the Army at the end of his current obligation.

Whenever a soldier is deployed there is a risk of injury or death. The impact of Operation Desert Storm (ODS) on military wives was examined by administering the 25-item Hopkins Symptom Checklist (HSCL) to them, once while the soldiers were deployed and once when they returned (Rosen, 1995). Results from this study indicated that 70% of the wives were symptomatic (total scale scores above 1.75 on the HSCL) during the deployment but 40% had recovered after the soldier returned. However, 24% were symptomatic at both times. Those who were symptomatic at both times still showed an improvement in symptoms from the time their soldiers were deployed until after they returned. In another study that examined the impact of deployment to ODS on Army spouses, it was found that spousal expectations emerged as a predictor of retention in the military (Rosen & Durand, 1995).

Based upon the literature, each of the four demands described has been associated with the health and well-being and retention preferences of military spouses. The subsequent effects of these demands on the spouse may negatively affect the entire Army organization through decreased soldier retention and readiness. The purpose of this study was to determine if geographic mobility, residence in a foreign country, fear of soldier injury or death and

separations and deployments were associated with physical and psychological health, satisfaction with the Army and retention preference for both spouses of junior and senior military personnel. Previous research has shown that for spouses of junior enlisted soldiers and officers that these four demands are associated with health, satisfaction and retention outcomes (Burrell, Castro, & Durand, 2002). However, when testing the demands model on spouses of Sergeant Majors and senior officers, the model was not significant for any of the variables tested.

Methods

Design

Spouses from units located in USAREUR were asked to participate in the study. The units were from the Southern European Task Force, V CORPS, 21st Theater Support Command, 1st Armored Division, and the 1st Infantry Division. Spouses were comprised of two groups, spouses of Sergeant Majors, Colonels or General Officers and spouses of soldiers at the company level (Private to Captain). Surveys were sent to spouses during 2001. Thirty-two spouses of senior leaders completed surveys out of 95 that were mailed (1 was undeliverable) for a 34% response rate while 78 spouses of junior enlisted soldiers and officers completed surveys out of 361 surveys that were mailed (57 surveys were undeliverable or incomplete) for a 26% response rate. In addition to completing surveys, a sub-sample also participated in interviews. During April-June 2001, 50 spouses of junior military personnel were interviewed across four different categories (12 spouses with a family member enrolled in the Exceptional Family Member Program, 6 single parents, 7 dual military and 25 civilian spouses). During January 2002, 28 spouses of senior military personnel were interviewed (spouses of 1 Sergeant Major, 7 Command Sergeant Majors, 12 Colonels and 8 Generals).

Measures

Psychological health was assessed using the Brief Symptom Inventory 18. The BSI 18 (Derogatis, 2000) is an 18 item self-report scale of the intensity of symptoms experienced during the past seven days. The BSI 18 was developed from its longer parent instrument, the SCL-90-R. The BSI 18 measures three dimensions: somatization, depression and anxiety. In addition, the BSI yields a general severity index which represents the total score and is a measure of overall psychological distress. Spouses were asked how much they experienced symptoms such as feeling lonely, feeling no interest in things, and pains in the heart or chest.

Physical health was measured by a 24-item physical health symptom checklist that has been developed by researchers at WRAIR. Spouses were asked how much they experienced symptoms such as headaches, sinus troubles, back problems, muscle aches, cough, and dizziness over a one-month period.

The characteristics of Army life section was comprised of several subsections including: geographic mobility, residence in a foreign country, separation from the service member, concerns regarding the risk of injury/death, attitudes toward Army life and retention preference. As part of the geographic mobility section, questions regarding the family's moving history and their feelings about moving were asked. The section regarding living overseas contained questions about the kinds of life events that spouses were experiencing when living overseas, their knowledge of the culture, and their feelings associated with living in Europe. The

separations/deployments section was designed to understand how families deal with the service member's absence from home. Information was gathered on where the soldier had been deployed during his/her career and how many days the soldier has spent on deployments since being stationed in Germany and Italy. Also included were questions related to how the family adjusted to the reunion following the soldier's return from the deployment. Little research has been done on how individual family members prepare themselves for a soldier's injury or death. Although the Army has instructed its soldiers to prepare powers of attorney and wills, it is not clear how well prepared the families are for adversity and just how this relates to health, readiness, and retention. This section addressed both the preparedness of families and their feelings associated with such a risk. The spouse's satisfaction with the Army was measured by a scale that examined the spouse's satisfaction with the respect the Army shows spouses, the kind of family life one can have in the Army, and the Army as a way of life. With regard to retention preference spouses of senior military personnel were asked if they wanted their soldiers to remain in service for 30 years or more while spouses of junior military personnel were asked if they wanted their soldiers to remain beyond their current obligations or until retirement.

Results

Demographics

Spouses were primarily females (spouses of senior military personnel: 100%; spouses of junior military personnel: 97%). The mean age of spouses married to senior military personnel was 47 years while for spouses married to junior military personnel it was 29 years. Spouses in both groups were primarily white accounting for 88% of the spouses of senior military personnel and 76% of spouses of junior military personnel. Six percent of spouses of senior military personnel and eight percent of spouses of junior military personnel classified themselves as African-American while three percent of spouses of senior military personnel and ten percent of spouses of junior military personnel indicated that they were Hispanic. An additional three percent of spouses of senior military personnel classified themselves as Asian as did five percent of spouses of junior military personnel. One percent of spouses of junior military personnel classified themselves as other. Spouses in both groups were well educated, 75% of spouses of senior military personnel had at least some college training or were college graduates, as did 68% of spouses of junior military personnel. An additional 22% of spouses of senior military personnel had some graduate training or a graduate degree compared to 11% of spouses of junior military personnel. Ninety-four percent of spouses who were married to senior military personnel had children compared to 72% of spouses married to junior military personnel. Less than half of the spouses were employed (spouses of senior military personnel: 31%; spouses of junior military personnel: 48%).

Psychological Health

Although spouses of senior military personnel reported significantly fewer symptoms than spouses of junior military personnel in the past 7 days ($t = 3.57$, $df = 108$, $p < .001$), overall, all spouses reported minimal general distress. Feeling lonely, blue, tense and having no interest in things were the most reported symptoms by both groups of spouses.

Physical Health

Although spouses of senior military personnel reported significantly fewer physical symptoms than spouses of junior military personnel in the past month ($t = 3.23$, $df = 108$,

$p < .002$), overall, all spouses reported relatively few physical symptoms. Headaches and back problems were the two symptoms most reported by both groups.

Army Satisfaction

Overall satisfaction levels were significantly lower for spouses of junior military personnel compared to spouses of senior military personnel ($t = -4.93$, $df = 107$, $p < .000$). Most spouses ($< 48\%$) were not satisfied with the respect that the Army shows for them. Compared to spouses of senior military personnel, far fewer spouses of junior military personnel were satisfied with the kind of family life they could have in the Army (43% vs 84%) and with the Army as a way of life (38% vs 84%).

Retention Preference

Fifty-eight percent of the spouses of senior military personnel wanted their soldiers to remain in the Army for 30 years or more. Nineteen percent said they did not want their soldiers to stay in beyond 30 years and 23% were unsure. Among spouses of junior military personnel, 61% of spouses said that they wanted their soldiers to stay beyond their present obligation, while 24% wanted their soldiers to leave upon completion of their current obligation and 15% were undecided.

Geographic Mobility

On average, both groups of spouses reported living in Europe almost 2 years. Few spouses in either group ($< 12\%$) agreed that the sponsorship program in Europe functions well. Spouses of senior military personnel have moved significantly more ($t = 8.2$, $df = 108$, $p < .000$) than spouses of junior military personnel, including to overseas locations ($t = 4.68$, $df = 108$, $p < .000$). The majority of spouses of senior military personnel reported that their move to Europe was a positive experience but the majority of spouses of junior military personnel did not ($t = -4.85$, $df = 108$, $p < .000$). While spouses of junior military personnel who moved more reported better psychological health (Median split: ($t = 2.08$, $df = 76$, $p < .039$), greater satisfaction with the Army (Median split: ($t = -2.57$, $df = 75$, $p < .012$) and wanted their soldiers to remain in the Army ($X^2 = (2, n = 75) = 8.95$, $p = .01$), these relationships were not significant for spouses of senior military personnel. Additionally spouses of junior military personnel who had a better perception of moving also reported better physical (Median split: ($t = 2.48$, $df = 6$, $p < .016$) and psychological health (Median split: ($t = 2.94$, $df = 76$, $p < .003$) and greater satisfaction with the Army (Median split ($t = 3.73$, $df = 75$, $p < .000$)). Having a worse perception of moving was associated with spouses of junior military personnel being more likely to want the soldier to leave the Army ($X^2 = (2, n = 75) = 6.92$, $p = .03$) rather than to remain but again these relationships were not significant for spouses of senior military personnel.

Residence in a Foreign Country

Most spouses liked living and shopping in Europe but spouses of senior military personnel had a significantly better perception of living abroad than spouses of junior military personnel ($t = 3.50$, $df = 107$, $p < .001$). Forty-five percent of spouses of junior military personnel could hardly wait to go stateside compared to only 16% of spouses of senior military personnel. Fifty-three percent of spouses of senior military personnel and 62% of spouses of junior military personnel said that being away from friends and relatives back home was difficult for them. Few spouses (38% of spouses of senior military personnel and 34% of spouses of

junior military personnel) felt comfortable using the local language. Spouses of junior military personnel who had a better perception of living in Europe had better psychological health (Median split ($t = 3.41$, $df = 75$, $p < .002$), and greater satisfaction with the Army (Median split ($t = 3.19$, $df = 74$, $p < .002$). These relationships were not significant for spouses of senior military personnel. Perceptions of living overseas were not significantly associated with retention preference for either of the two groups of spouses.

Fear of Soldier Injury or Death

While 84% of both groups of spouses reported that their soldiers were well trained to handle the dangers of deployment, at least 75% of all spouses were worried that their soldiers would be injured and over 50% of all spouses were worried about their soldiers being killed during a deployment. Spouses of junior military personnel had significantly higher fear levels regarding soldier injury or death than did spouses of senior military personnel ($t = 3.36$, $df = 101$, $p < .001$). Despite these fears, the majority of spouses in both groups did not have medical or general powers of attorney. Over three-quarters of spouses of senior military personnel had wills (77%) compared to less than a third (32%) of spouses of junior military personnel. Spouses of junior military personnel who had higher fear levels were more depressed, had more psychiatric symptoms, had more physical symptoms and were less satisfied with the Army (Median splits: (t 's > 3.23 , $df \leq 69$, p 's $< .002$). Additionally, spouses of junior military personnel who had lower fear levels were more likely to want their soldier to remain in the Army than those who had higher fear levels ($X^2 = (2, n=68) = 7.41$, $p = .025$). Spouses of senior military personnel with higher fear levels were no different with regard to health, satisfaction with the Army or retention preference than those with lower fear levels.

Deployments

On average, spouses of senior military personnel reported that in the last year their soldiers had been gone for approximately 43 days for training or field exercises. Junior soldiers and officers had been gone an average of 80 days ($t = 2.88$, $df = 105$, $p < .005$). The average number of times that senior leaders have been deployed since being in Europe was less than once. Junior soldiers and officers were also deployed an average of less than once. Spouses of junior military personnel reported significantly more adverse effects on their marriages and families due to deployments than did spouses of senior military personnel ($t = 4.81$, $df = 50$, $p < .000$). However, 70% of spouses of senior military personnel reported that the separations from their soldiers were stressful compared to 57% of spouses of junior military personnel. Spouses of junior military personnel who had positive perceptions of deployments and who reported more positive impacts of the deployments reported fewer depression symptoms, had higher psychological well-being and were more satisfied with the Army (Median splits: t 's > 2.42 , $df \leq 42$, p 's $< .02$). Perceptions of deployments were not significantly related to retention preferences for either group of spouses.

Separations

Many spouses felt lonely during separations due to training exercises and military deployments. Eighty-nine percent of spouses of junior military personnel and 77% of spouses of senior military personnel reported this to be the case. However, many became more independent and experienced greater closeness after the separations. Ninety-three percent of spouses of senior military personnel and 73% of spouses of junior military personnel indicated that they became

more independent while 73% of spouses of senior military personnel and 79% of spouses of junior military personnel reported that they experienced greater closeness following separations. The two groups of spouses were not significantly different from one other with regard to their independence ($t = 1.50$, $df = 91$, $p < .136$). Spouses of junior military personnel who were more independent and had higher positive emotions regarding military separations due to training and deployments reported fewer psychological and physical health symptoms and higher satisfaction with the Army (Median splits; t 's > 2.02 , $df \leq 63$, p 's $< .05$). Spouses of junior military personnel who felt more independent due to separations were also more likely to want their soldier to stay in the Army than those who felt less independent. ($X^2 = (2, n = 63) = 10.80$, $p = .005$). However, spouses of junior military personnel with negative emotions were not significantly different from those with positive emotions with regard to retention preference. The perceptions of spouses of senior military personnel were not significantly associated with health, satisfaction with the Army or retention preference.

Discussion

The findings presented here show that although all spouses were in good physical and psychological health; spouses of senior military personnel reported better overall health than did spouses of junior military personnel. With regard to the four demands of military life (moving, living overseas, military deployments and separations, and fears regarding soldier injury or death), spouses of senior military personnel reported better perceptions of these demands than did spouses of junior military personnel. However, while these demands were significantly associated with spouse health, satisfaction with the Army, and the desire for the soldier to remain in the military for spouses of junior military personnel, they showed no association with the outcomes for spouses of senior military personnel. As expected, positive perceptions of these demands were associated with better health, greater satisfaction with the Army and a desire for soldiers to remain in the military. These findings suggest at least three possible explanations: 1) Self-selection has occurred. That is, spouses who are satisfied with the Army way of life are more likely to remain part of the military while those who are not satisfied choose to leave. 2) Experience with the Army way of life may allow spouses to adapt to the lifestyle, such that the first few years in the Army may have the most significant impact. Thus, spouses who may not be happy in the early years may actually adjust to the demands and not be affected by them during the later years. 3) These demands may actually benefit the spouses such as when they gain more independence and experience a greater sense of closeness to the soldier following separations. Future research will test the Army demands model on other Army spouses in varying locations and under different circumstances.

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