Stress and Marital Satisfaction in Active Duty Servicemembers: A Pilot Study

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Abstract
The present pilot study examined perceived stress and marital satisfaction within an active duty military population stationed overseas at an isolated base. Twenty-eight active duty USAF participants, equally female to male as well as officer to enlisted personnel, and overwhelmingly self-described as in a relationship, provided data for this project. All individuals voluntarily completed an online survey containing a demographic questionnaire, the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10), and the ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale (EMS). An adequate control group could not be ascertained, and neither could another military sample be recruited, thus the significance of the data is not known as it compares to other active duty or general populations. However, the data gathered indicated perceived stress and marital satisfaction are worthy of further investigation.

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STRESS AND MARITAL SATISFACTION IN ACTIVE DUTY SERVICEMEMBERS:

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A DISSERTATION

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Abstract

The present pilot study examined perceived stress and marital satisfaction within an active duty military population stationed overseas at an isolated base. Twenty-eight active duty USAF participants, equally female to male as well as officer to enlisted personnel, and overwhelmingly self-described as in a relationship, provided data for this project. All individuals voluntarily completed an online survey containing a demographic questionnaire, the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10), and the ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale (EMS). An adequate control group could not be ascertained, and neither could another military sample be recruited, thus the significance of the data is not known as it compares to other active duty or general populations. However, the data gathered indicated perceived stress and marital satisfaction are worthy of further investigation.

Keywords: ENRICH Marital Satisfaction, PSS-10, Active Duty Military, United States Air Force.
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Introduction

The Military Oath of Allegiance is a sworn statement that is made by an individual upon commissioning or enlisting into the United States Armed Services, as follows:

“I, {insert name here}, do solemnly swear (or affirm), that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic, that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same, that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion, and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which I am about to enter. So help me God.” (5 U.S.C. 3331/332).

Although typically an individual is prepared for the demands of service in the military and is well-informed of the potential consequences of such a profession, the hardship endured by this commitment is generally glorified and described in strictly the most positive terminology— with good reason. When pledging one’s service it is unlikely that an individual wants to be reminded that the worst consequence of that service is death. The United States military is a noble profession, with roots dating far back into the 1700’s prior to the start of the Revolutionary War when the United States had yet to be named or recognized as anything other than “the colonies.” At that time, only men were allowed to volunteer their services to bear arms in militias which were organized by local leaders, and few were trained. Now, the military is a vast organization run by the United States government and is known for exceptional training, respectable careers, adequate health care, and global opportunities for the individual who volunteers and commits to join.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the less glamorous aspects of the military, specifically the current knowledge about the occurrence of stress and relationship satisfaction related to deployment and relocation among servicemembers in
the United States Armed Forces. The next sections survey the following topics: the nature of employment in the military; stress experienced in the service related to deployment and relocation; and the interaction of stress and marital or relationship satisfaction.

*Employment in the Military*

The United States military, containing the Air Force, Army, Navy, Marines, and Coast Guard, consisted of 1.4 million active duty and 836,256 reserve service members as of 2007 (www.militaryhomefront.dod.mil). The continuation of the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts has made it increasingly difficult to keep track of the current military population, especially given the multiple troop surges and draw downs, and service members being critically wounded or killed almost daily. The safety and security of military personnel is critical, and publication of military figures is not always in the best interests of those in harms way. Newer figures were not available at the time of this paper’s completion. Of those 1.4 million active duty servicemembers, only 13 percent did not have dependents, meaning spouses or children who rely on the member for financial support or care. Looking at just the United States Air Force, there are 331,486 active duty members, with 59% reported as married, and 449,153 family members that are supported by these active duty members (http://www.afpc.randolph.af.mil/library/airforcepersonnel statistics.asp).

As a member of the military, servicemembers and their families or significant others endure very specific consequences such as frequent relocations, frequent deployments or separations from loved ones, and reunion with loved ones that often result in family reorganization (Drummet et al., 2003). Relocations and separations can include national or international assignment, or international deployment to a combat
zone, such as Iraq, or to an austere overseas location not actively in combat, but prepared
to support any combat demands at a moment’s notice, such as Osan, South Korea.
Deployments and assignments can include geographic isolation, specifically from
extended and immediate family (Black, 1993). Enlisted servicemembers, generally young
in age, may be paid low wages, and are more likely to have young children living at
home (Black, 1993). Approximately one-third of military persons move every twelve
months (Orthner, 2002). Pollari and Bullock (1989) reported relocation is often
physically and emotionally overwhelming for adults, and cited relationships between
both spouses and between parents and children are taxed prior to, and following,
relocation. These membership requirements combined are what McCubbin et al. (1980)
termed the “pile up” of stressors (p. 861).

A military family exists in a “constant state of readiness” which may be
intensified during times of war or national crisis (Packman, Paone, LeBeauf, Smaby, &
Lepkowski, 2006, p. 67). This “readiness” contributes to the assortment of stressors that
are demanded from the military profession already mentioned above. These stressors,
although possibly found or felt in other professions, are characteristically the exclusive
situation of the military (Castro, Adler, & Britt, 2006). The military life is one of
ambiguity and uncertainty, in which stress is a likely consequence. “Readiness,” or
preparation for deployment, is essential. A servicemember who may be deployed at a
moment’s notice would benefit from an organized life in order to make certain the family
that remains at home will not be left with personal, financial, and legal responsibilities
that only the servicemember can manage (Packman et al., 2006). Organization can
include a current will, power of attorney, or a contact person within the military organization to serve as a liaison while the servicemember is away (Packman et al, 2006).

Also included in the profession of servicemember is a culture organized by rank. Pittman and Bowen (1994) reported an Air Force personnel’s rank was the approximation of economic resources and social standing. An individual’s rank determines how often they relocate, how much they earn, and the housing they qualify to obtain— all of which may include relocating with or without family or loved ones. Since rank determines a servicemember’s social standing and influence, it also demands certain expected behavior from the individual, and potentially, their family (Drummet et al., 2003). In a review conducted by Black (1993) it was reported 16 percent of enlisted active duty servicemembers with spouses are separated from loved ones for seven months or longer compared to 9 percent of active duty officers. Additionally, more than 69 percent of enlisted active duty servicemembers with spouses were separated from loved ones for one month or longer in a one year period, compared to 75 percent of active duty officers with spouses.

However, relocation is a common requirement of service and has been built into the culture of the military. Often servicemembers enter new assignments at the same time other personnel have received orders to relocate, meaning many people at one time are new to a location. The military has incorporated opportunities for new servicemembers and their families to meet others either new or established in the community through social functions or sponsorship (Marchant & Medway, 1987). If servicemembers and their families take advantage of these opportunities, it is likely adaptation to a new assignment will occur more quickly with practice, or further moves may “soften the
shock” of additional relocations (Marchant & Medway, 1987, p. 293). Marchant and Medway (1987) found a servicemember’s mobility history was less likely a predictor of stress when the servicemember had strongly identified with the military lifestyle. Although the researchers did not report what specific kind of stress was experienced by those who did not posses this strong identification, it was reported that they rated lower on a self-report measure of well-being. Relocation may have been tolerable if a strong identification with the service branch existed, but what was the underlying experience for the servicemembers who relocated just as often but did not have that sense of military identification? Further, relocation can involve assignment to locations that can expect to result in varying levels of stress, such as within the United States versus abroad. A few assignments involve relocation in which a servicemember must be separated from spouse and family for the duration, which in itself could reasonably be expected to result in increased stress. No research was found that examined the effects of these different types of assignments on stress of the servicemember. However, a body of research does exist that examines the effects of deployment, another type of assignment that involves separation from family and is associated with unique stressors.

**Stressors of Deployment**

In a report released by the U.S. Department of Defense in 2004, it was revealed how stress related to deployments and separations had impacted a sample within the military. In the 2002 Survey of Health Related Behaviors Among Military Personnel it was discovered that, of 12,500 active-duty servicemembers from 30 different military installations surveyed, approximately one third of them felt stressed because of their employment (Miles, 2004). Nineteen percent of these reported deployments and
separations from their family as their primary stressors. Often these servicemembers attempt to employ healthy ways to cope, but more than 25 percent endorsed having used cigarettes or alcohol to cope, and approximately 50 percent of women and 40 percent of men endorsed having used food to cope with the stress. Regarding coping with alcohol, 18.1 percent endorsed heavy drinking (5 drinks or more at one sitting at least one time a week) which was an increase of 2.7 percent from the last survey conducted in 1998. Those most affected by the increased alcohol consumption were younger servicemembers ages 18 to 25, in which 27 percent endorsed heavy drinking. This is nearly double the rate of heavy drinking documented in civilian counterparts of the same age (Miles, 2004).

Just as deployed servicemembers struggle to cope in healthy ways during separation, spouses who remain at home also struggle to cope with the absence of the service member. Mansfield et al. (2010) reviewed outpatient mental health appointments documented in the medical records of 250,626 active duty Army wives. Results indicated 34.7 percent of the spouses were diagnosed with at least one mental health diagnosis. Additionally, those spouses of deployed service members on prolonged deployments had an increased number of mental health diagnoses and number of visits for care (Mansfield et al., 2010). “Mental health effects of current operations are extending beyond soldiers and into their immediate families,” (Mansfield et al., 2010, p. 105).

Operation Provide Hope, a 6-week medical assistance humanitarian mission in Kazakhstan in 1996, offered a unique opportunity to study stresses related to non-combat deployment. Eight women and 27 men (35 servicemembers total), of which three were officers and 59 percent were married, participated in a research study which assessed
perceptions of work, stress experienced, and psychological and physical health throughout pre-deployment and deployment. Servicemembers reported having experienced stressors which included difficulty communicating (with loved ones in the U.S.), travel difficulties, isolation, feeling removed from familiar things, feeling limited in their abilities to help the population, and some endorsed boredom. Servicemembers also reported that they were less likely to use adaptive coping mechanisms (i.e., exercise more, prayer) and reported increased cigarette (doubled from 10 cigarettes per day to 20) and alcohol consumption (from 4 drinks per week to 6.5 drinks per week) to cope. Depression decreased slightly during the deployment assessment. The findings evidenced servicemembers had significantly underestimated their experience of feeling isolated, far from familiar things, and difficulty communicating. Servicemembers reported phone calls to loved ones were of poor quality, involved long waiting periods due to a small number of phone lines available, and mail took nearly a month to reach their assignment location. Stress was mainly experienced around feeling isolated and cut-off from home and servicemembers coped with the stress with increased maladaptive coping mechanisms (Britt & Adler, 1999).

Peacekeeping missions offer different stressors than combat. Stressors and psychological problems related to combat deployment have been documented as far back as the Civil War (Rahe, 1988). In an attempt to clarify Acute Combat Reaction from Chronic Combat Reaction, Rahe (1988) described the causes of and symptom presentation seen in servicemembers exposed to combat. Acute Combat Reaction is a reaction to battle exposure, and includes a rapid onset of hyperarousal which can persist for minutes to hours, can cause life-threatening behaviors, but is reversible. Chronic
Combat Reaction is a reaction to repeated exposure to battle (i.e., weeks, months, or years) but is characterized by withdrawal and depression-like symptoms (Rahe, 1988). Servicemembers who are deployed to combat are at risk of exposure to battle and potential difficulties in coping with the stress of conflict or war.

War stress symptoms and psychological problems were assessed in a study which examined military reservists either deployed or not deployed to Operation Desert Storm (ODS). Reservists were asked to participate in the study during mandatory weekend reserve training after having returned from deployment or being released from alert status. Five hundred ninety one reservists from the Army, Navy and Marines were offered a psychoeducational presentation on war stress and the effects on families and individuals, invited to discuss personal experiences with peers, and then asked to provide information on the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI), the Symptom Checklist 90-R (SCL-90R), the Mississippi Scale for Combat Related Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and a self-report military history demographic questionnaire (Perconte, Wilson, Pontius, Dietrick, & Spiro, 1993). Of the participants, 126 were active status but not deployed, 26 were deployed to Europe, and 439 were deployed to the Persian Gulf. Of those deployed to the Persian Gulf there was evidence to support elevations in PTSD scores, BDI scores, and SCL-90R scores (a measure of global psychological distress) as compared to those deployed to Europe or to their non-deployed peers. The research evidenced combat deployment was linked to an increase of psychological distress and symptomatology in this sample.

Suicide has also been reported as an issue which faces the deployed servicemember. In a broadcast by National Public Radio (Bowman, 2007) it was reported
that 99 active-duty Army servicemembers killed themselves in 2006, and more than 25 percent of those servicemembers committed suicide while stationed in either Afghanistan or Iraq. More striking was the 6 percent increase in suicides since 2004. Reasons for these suicides were reported as failed romantic relationships, occupational stress, and legal and financial troubles resulting from lengthened combat deployments. The strain in the relationship endured by the waiting loved one while the servicemember is deployed to a combat zone has sparked what are known as “dear John” letters, where an email or letter is sent to the servicemember stating the relationship is over. White Army males with the rank of Private or Specialist, between the ages of 21 and 30, and assigned to the infantry were the most likely to have committed suicide, specifically after the breakup of a relationship. Attempted suicides, those acts that warranted a hospital visit or hospitalization, occurred in 948 servicemembers within the military system in 2006 and 935 in 2007, including both overseas deployments and assignments within the United States (Zoroya, 2008). The United States Army documented 115 soldier suicides in 2007, with failed relationships related to 65% of those deaths, and 37% of those suicides occurring within a month of those relationships’ end (Zoroya, 2008). The U.S. Army has borne the weight of the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts, deployed for 12 months, once raised to 15 months, and now back to 12 months. 2009 numbers have yet to be officially released, though by December 2009 the Army had 147 confirmed suicides, (Thompson, 2009). By comparison, the Air Force had 38 confirmed suicides at the end of 2008, and the Navy and the Marines had 41 confirmed suicides each by the end of 2008 (McMichael, 2009).
But the strain in relationships has been felt in deployments to peacekeeping missions as well. In a study conducted during Operation Uphold Democracy in Haiti in 1995, Hall (1996) reported servicemembers experienced another set of stressors in non-combat deployments that also contribute to the risk of suicide, specifically elevated levels of psychological stress. Three servicemembers killed themselves in the first 5 weeks of the mission, out of 20,000 who were initially deployed (Hall, 1996). One servicemember who took his own life was confirmed to have had a failed romantic relationship, unfortunately the common cause of suicides in Bowman’s (2007) findings.

It was important to describe potential problems experienced by servicemembers who are deployed to both peacekeeping and combat missions as the servicemember’s mental health status can affect their family and loved ones upon their return. It was also important to describe the involvement of reservists in peacekeeping and combat missions as National Guard and reserve units have experienced an increase in deployments as a direct consequence of Operation Iraqi Freedom (Cozza, Chun, & Polo, 2005).

Impact of Deployment on the Military Marriage

Marital satisfaction has been researched heavily in recent decades, due in large part to continuing high rates of divorce in the United States (Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000). The U.S. Census Bureau has reported a prediction that over 90 percent of the current adult population in the United States will marry during their lifetime, and divorce will be the outcome of virtually half of these marriages (Waldinger et al., 2004). Marital satisfaction has received much attention as it has been found to impact an individual’s reported well-being, has been reported to influence family well-being, and has been linked to benefits in society (Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000). Given the
protective factors marital or relationship satisfaction seem to offer, it could be an important strength that military servicemembers could utilize to offset some of the stressors of military service reviewed above. Unfortunately, results of studies investigating marital satisfaction in military populations have been discouraging. In one study, military men were found to experience significantly lower relationship satisfaction, whether married or in an unmarried romantic relationship, than their nonmilitary counterparts (McLeland & Sutton, 2005). In another study, 1,320 dual-military couples were sampled using the 1992 Department of Defense Worldwide Survey of Military Members and Spouses to research gender effects on marital satisfaction (Schumm, Resnick, Bollman, & Jurich, 1998). The researchers found that military wives were less satisfied in their marriages than were military husbands. These studies did not address the potential reasons for decreased relationship satisfaction in military couples compared to their civilian counterparts, but it may be reasonable to wonder whether the frequent separation involved in trainings, assignments, and deployments might contribute to perceived marital dissatisfaction.

Maintaining a relationship can be challenging enough while in the same location, but for servicemembers who are often separated from a loved one for training and deployment purposes, it can be even harder. Though long-distance relationships have been little researched, it is likely that separation places a strain on both servicemembers who are married and servicemembers who are unmarried, but involved in romantic relationships. Drummet et al. (2003) described some benefits to a significant other or spouse during separation such as independence, but described more hindrances to relationships, such as loneliness for the partner who remains at home. In a study
conducted by Black (1993), spouses of servicemembers reported separation as the utmost source of discontent with the military way of life. There is a real risk that the discontent will lead to decreased functioning and increased marital dissatisfaction or divorce. At an unnamed base following Operation Desert Storm, it was reported that divorce requests doubled after the return of servicemembers, as compared to divorce requests prior to deployment for combat (Vormbrock, 1993). In 2004, divorce occurred in 3,325 Army officers’ marriages, a marked increase of 78 percent from 2003, the beginning of the War on Terror (Zoroya, 2005). For enlisted personnel, 7,152 divorces occurred in 2004, an increase of 28 percent from 2003 (Zoroya, 2005).

Even if a couple does not divorce following deployment, significant stressors are placed on the family during deployment that can have a negative impact on relationship satisfaction.

Vormbrock (1993) examined job-related and wartime marital separation and its impact upon reunion. The researcher found partners that remained at home reported dissatisfaction with the military establishment, loneliness, and strain. In another study investigating the effects of separation on marital satisfaction during peacekeeping deployment (Shumm, Bell, Knott, & Rice, 1996), civilian wives of enlisted servicemembers endorsed high levels of loneliness (93.9%) and difficulty communicating with the deployed spouse (71.5%). Smaller numbers endorsed other stressors, such as pregnancy (13.4%) or the death of a relative or close friend (10%). The military wives reported maintained or improved marital satisfaction after the servicemember returned home. Further research was conducted by Schumm, Bell, and Gade (2000), who examined relationship satisfaction as perceived by the deployed servicemember during a
peacekeeping mission. Servicemembers reported decreased marital satisfaction prior to membership in the unit and pre-deployment. Marital quality was reported as unchanged and marital satisfaction was reported at its highest during the start of the peacekeeping deployment.

Although Vormbrock (1993) reported positive substantial changes made by the waiting partner in seeking support from the community, engaging in adaptive coping such as making new friends or choosing new pursuits, and altering the parental role played at home, other researchers found maladaptive behaviors emerged for some spouses of deployed servicemembers. For example, it was recently reported in the USA Today newspaper (Zoroya, 2007) that children of deployed Army servicemembers were more likely to be abused or neglected by their mothers that remain at home. The researchers found that after a decade of decreased abuse and neglect reports within the Army, the recent mobilization and deployment of troops to Iraq and Afghanistan had led to an increase of stress on the parent that remained at home, which in turn resulted in a sharp increase of the maltreatment of children. It was reported that the physical abuse of Army children had nearly doubled during combat deployments, and neglect of these children had nearly quadrupled compared to rates of physical abuse and neglect in non-deployment families. The researcher speculated that the stress endured by a spouse whose loved one is deployed to a combat zone interfered with their capacity to properly care for their children.

Upon reunion of the servicemember and their family or loved one, marital estrangement, decreased intimacy, anger, jealousy, resentment, or feelings of parental undermining reportedly occurred (Vormbrock, 1993). Sometimes couples were not able
to maintain the relationship in the face of the difficult emotions mentioned above and the
different changes each partner had made in the time of absence. Further, it was reported
that the reunion of servicemember and spouse was equal to the crisis of the separation.
Although spouses or significant others “may have been compatible at the time of
separation, the years of maturing in different worlds at different rates have introduced
obstacles which may take months to clear away” as described by Hill (1945) in his
seminal work on the strain of separation within the military community (p. 32). In later
research, Hill (1949) described the adjustment phase which would inevitably follow a
servicemember’s return from deployment as particularly stressful. A conflicting report
was made by Kelley (1994), in which there was evidence of improved family closeness
upon reunion in her study of servicemembers returning home from deployment to
Operation Desert Storm. However, the focus of the research differed in that Kelly (1994)
examined child behavior as related to parenting style and did little to research partner
interaction or relationship satisfaction.

“Boundary negotiation” describes the confusion upon a servicemember’s return
and the potential conflict surrounding parental and spousal roles which may have altered
while the servicemember was away (Drummet et al., 2003). Essentially, the spouse or
significant other that remains must compensate for the temporary loss of the
servicemember and take on duties that may have belonged to the other. Upon the
servicemember’s return, change once again has to be made to allow the servicemember to
resume filling those roles and responsibilities in the relationship. This may not be an easy
transition for the partner that remained at home while the servicemember was away. As
Drummet et al. (2003) reported, a sense of independence or self-sufficiency may have
been adopted and could be very difficult for the person to relinquish. It was reported that those spouses or significant others that remained at home fared better if they extended the boundary to include the servicemember psychologically as an important member, but allowed the servicemember’s duties or role to be given to a temporary figure in the servicemember’s absence (Drummet et al., 2003).

Finally, long term emotional effects of combat deployment such as PTSD or depression can have a significant impact on a military marriage. In a press release from the American Psychological Association (Whisman, 2004), it was reported marital satisfaction was affected by the mental health status of each spouse within a marriage, with marital satisfaction rated lowest when both spouses had elevated levels of depression. Both partners within a relationship could be at increased risk for depression during and after deployment, which could also increase risk for marital dissatisfaction.

The above review of current literature regarding the experience and manifestation of stress in the military makes it very clear that significant stress exists within the lives of military members. Stress can be experienced as a result of the demands and duties involved in carrying out military responsibilities and also results from the strain placed on families and loved ones. However, stress varies in the manifestation and severity of symptoms based on the particular demands of military employment that are asked of a servicemember, such as being deployed on a peacekeeping mission versus a combat mission. Peacekeeping servicemembers have been reported to experience psychological stress, increased risk of suicide, increased use of maladaptive coping strategies, feelings of isolation, and difficulty communicating with loved ones. Servicemembers in combat environments have been reported to experience many forms of psychological stress,
financial, legal, and relationship problems, an increased risk of suicide, difficulty communicating with loved ones, and an increased risk of death. Although the current literature addresses the varying stressors reported by servicemembers deployed in peacekeeping and combat missions, these are not the only types of deployment asked of servicemembers. No information was found regarding the experience of military servicemen and women in deployments that do not involve direct military combat or assignment to a specified peacekeeping mission. Specifically, data could not be found on the stress experienced in various international assignments where servicemembers are deployed without their families for a specified length of time, or where servicemembers are deployed with their families for a specified duration. Additionally, research has primarily been conducted prior to the deployment of servicemembers or after the return of servicemembers from missions and assignments. It is necessary to research servicemembers who are currently in the midst of deployment and who are deployed to various locations that are not specifically related to combat or peacekeeping operations in order to gain a full understanding of any differences in the experience and the severity of stress servicemembers may endure within the military system. If a complete understanding could be reached, appropriate support services could be offered to help decrease the specific kinds of stress that are associated with each deployment scenario.

*Purpose of the Current Study*

Based on the information presented above, stress clearly exists in the military and there appears to be a correlation between stress and marital satisfaction. A source of stress that could lead to marital dissatisfaction is relocation and potential related separation from family. There are three kinds of assignments common to non-deployed
servicemembers and their families: assignment to a base in the United States, in which servicemembers and their families live together in generally culturally familiar environs; assignment to a base outside of the United States, in which servicemembers and their families live together in culturally unfamiliar and possibly isolating environs; and assignment to a base outside the United States, in which a servicemember must live temporarily apart from family in unfamiliar and potentially isolating environs. One can readily see how these three different kinds of assignments may have differing levels of associated stress. The question is, are there indeed differing levels of stress associated with these kinds of assignments, and, if so, does this stress have an impact on marital satisfaction? If it does, perhaps there are implications for family support groups and other interventions to be offered to servicemembers and their families facing high stress assignments and who are potentially at high risk for marital dissatisfaction in order to prevent divorce and/or other negative consequences. This could also help to lower the stress associated with these assignments and therefore help the servicemember to be more focused and effective in his or her assignment.

The United States’ Armed Forces endure physically and psychologically dangerous environments and job demands. Stress on servicemembers and their families is one inevitable consequence of the profession. Unfortunately, little research has been conducted on the impact of deployment, frequent relocations, and separations on the servicemember, specifically regarding the amount of stress endured or their own view of marital and relationship satisfaction. Further, no research has specifically viewed the location of the deployment or assignment as an influential factor. Overall, the marital satisfaction research on military personnel is wanting. The earliest research involving
marital satisfaction was conducted on the wives and fiancées of servicemembers to
determine what the effects of separation were (Schumm, Bell, Knott, & Rice, 1996), with
less attention paid to what impact separation had on the servicemembers themselves.
Further research should be conducted to determine what effects the stresses and
deployments of the military way of life have on marital satisfaction, enlisted and officer
alike. Such information could be used to increase support services available. As Castro,
Alder, and Britt (2006) concluded in their review of the military, military personnel and
their families deserve both the best available support and respect for undertaking such a
demanding occupation.

The overall aim of this study is to (a) examine whether or not the level of
perceived stress for an active duty servicemember stationed overseas for one year is
significantly different as compared to available control groups, (b) examine whether or
not the level of marital satisfaction for an active duty servicemember stationed overseas
for one year significantly differs from available control groups, and (c) determine
whether a relationship exists between perceived stress and reported marital satisfaction. It
is expected that active duty personnel assigned overseas without family or a significant
other, if in a relationship, will report lower levels of marital satisfaction and higher levels
of perceived stress, as compared to available control groups. It is further hypothesized
that higher levels of perceived stress will be associated with lower reported levels of
marital satisfaction for active duty military and for controls. Additionally, the aim of this
study is to (d) determine if levels of perceived stress and marital satisfaction differ
between enlisted personnel and officers, (e) examine if years in service for the military
influences reported levels of perceived stress or marital satisfaction, and (f) examine if
reported perceived stress differs between those in relationships versus those not in relationships. It is expected that enlisted servicemembers will report higher levels of perceived stress and lower levels of marital satisfaction than will officers. It is also expected that those individuals with fewer years of experience in the United States Air Force (USAF) will report higher levels of perceived stress and lower levels of marital satisfaction, if in a relationship, as compared to their counterparts whom have served in the USAF longer. Finally, it is expected that those in relationships will report higher levels of perceived stress than will those not in relationships.

Method

Participants

Sampling first involved the selection of a military installation categorized as OCONUS (Outside the Continental United States): Osan, South Korea. The target location included an Air Force population consisting of active duty airmen deployed without spouses or families at an isolated Air Force Base (AFB) in South Korea. The other intended location included an overseas AFB where active duty airmen are stationed with their spouses and family in Italy, however access to the sample was not granted by the Command at the base, and the third location, a CONUS (Continental United States) base was eliminated as a control due to continued access difficulties.

Data was collected using an online survey product known as Survey Monkey. Participants were contacted via email by the Wing Commander of the base and invited to access the survey at their leisure. The target sample included airmen of any rank or pay grade, including enlisted and officer personnel. Respondents voluntarily and
anonymously completed self-administered questionnaires that took approximately 15 minutes.

**Measures**

*Demographic questionnaire.*

A demographic questionnaire was created to obtain information across several domains including the participants’ gender, age, race, rank, time in military service, current assignment, time at current assignment, previous assignments, marital status, the length of the romantic relationship (if in one), the number of children (if they have children), the amount of contact they have with significant other or family, and the method by which they contact those individuals. This information allowed for comparisons of those in relationships to those who are not, with the latter serving as a control for perceived stress.

*Perceived Stress Scale – 10.*

The Perceived Stress Scale-10 (PSS-10), proven to be valid and reliable, was created by Cohen, Kamarck, and Mermelstein (1983) and is a subjective report of perceived stress which assesses current experiences or situational factors that could be judged as stressful to an individual. The measure is brief in nature, consisting of 10 items, and allows a respondent to report their experience on a continuum from mild to severe, with responses ranging from “never” to “very often” using a five-point Likert scale. Respondents are asked to assess how often in the past month they have experienced “difficulties” ranging from 0= Never to 4= Very Often. Sample questions include: In the last month, how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems; in the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the
important things in your life; and In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and "stressed"? Four items are reverse-scored, and the total score is determined by summing all 10 items. Scores can range from 0 to 40, with higher stress indicated by a higher score. However, no specific cutoff scores have been determined or published due to the measure existing as more of a general stress indicator and not a diagnostic tool. Internal consistency of the measure was determined by Cronbach’s alpha to be 0.88 (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983).

**ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale.**

The ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale (EMS), created by Fowers and Olson (1993), is a 15-item questionnaire. It is the abbreviated version of the 125-item ENRICH Inventory. The EMS consists of 15-items with responses ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” using a five-point Likert scale. Sample questions include: My partner and I understand each other perfectly; I have some needs that are not being met by our relationship; and I am very happy about how we make decisions and resolve conflicts. Five items comprise the Idealistic Distortion Scale (ID), items which measure marital conventionalization. Ten items comprise the Marital Satisfaction Scale, items which sample 10 different domains of a marital relationship (e.g., sexual relationship or communication) (1993). Six items are reverse-scored, and the total score is determined by the summing of the IDS and the Marital Satisfaction Scale (PCT) separately. The raw scores are found using the norm table which provides the percentile score for each scale. The following equation is implemented to find the EMS score:

\[
\text{EMS score} = PCT - [(0.40 \times PCT)(ID \times 0.01)]
\]
A score ranging from 41 to 60 is considered moderate marital satisfaction, with scores higher than 60 considered high marital satisfaction, and scores lower than 41 to be low marital satisfaction (Babaee, Jain, Cardona, Williams, & Naghizadeh, 2009). The EMS has been proven to be a valid measure, and has respectable internal reliability and test-retest reliability ($\alpha = .86$, and $\alpha = .86$, respectively).

Procedures

Measures that would ascertain perceived stress and marital satisfaction were first selected based on validity and reliability research, and based on the advised time constraint of 15 minutes. A demographic questionnaire appropriate for military personnel and the purposes of the study was created. Materials were submitted to the Institutional Review Board, and approval was obtained. The measures and the demographic questionnaire were put into an online survey tool, www.surveymonkey.com, and emailed to a committee member for this research, Major Eric Oglesbee, Psy.D., and person of contact within the United States Air Force. Appropriate authorization was obtained through government channels at the base in Osan, South Korea. An electronic message was sent to the Wing Commander to forward on the greeting and weblink, the connection to the survey tool, to those under his or her authority. Participation was voluntary. Participants could click on the link, read the informed consent, proceed to the survey, and discontinue at any time. The website was password protected, and data was downloaded for analyses.

The control group was self-selected from an intern listserve at a clinical psychology graduate program located in the Pacific Northwest, as well as gathered via snowball sampling by word of mouth to other interns known to the principal investigator.
at their own internship location, who then nominated or volunteered interns from their own graduate programs. The demographic questionnaire was altered to make military specific questions more general for non-military members. The demographic questionnaire and measures were placed on the same online survey tool, www.surveymonkey.com, and emailed out. Participation was also voluntary. Participants could access the link the same way the military population had access. The website was password protected, and data was downloaded for analyses.

Results

Analyses

To determine if significant differences between groups exists for (a) perceived stress, (b) marital satisfaction, and (f) levels of stress for those in relationships versus those not in relationships, \( t \) tests were the planned method of analysis. To determine question (c), if any relationship exits between the scores on the PSS-10 and the EMS, a correlational analysis was implemented. To determine the final questions, (d) if rank affects the report of stress or marital satisfaction, and (e) if time in service, measured in years, affects the report of stress or marital satisfaction, \( t \) tests were implemented. Data were entered and analyzed using SPSS 15.0 software.

Twenty-eight active duty United States Air Force officers and enlisted personnel took part in this study as the experimental sample. Fourteen participants were female, and 14 were male. Fifteen participants described themselves as White, four as Hispanic, five as Asian, three as Black, and one as Biracial. They reported their ages by categories: 22-25 \((n = 3)\), 26-29 \((n = 5)\), 30-33 \((n = 8)\), 34-37 \((n = 3)\), 38-41 \((n = 4)\), and 42 \((n = 5)\). Fifteen reported their rank as that of an officer, and thirteen as that of an enlisted person.
Participants reported their time in service (T.I.S.), which was sorted into categories for analyses purposes: 0-5 years (n =11), 6-10 years (n =8), 11-15 years (n =3), 16-20 years (n =3), and 21 or more years (n =3). Twenty-three reported as in a relationship, though only 21 completed the marital satisfaction measure. Five participants reported they were not in a relationship. Of those in relationships, the majority were married (n = 17), with engaged (n = 4) and dating (n = 2) as the minority. See Table 1 below.
Table 1: USAF Sample Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>%</th>
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<tbody>
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<tr>
<td>Dating</td>
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</table>

A control group was selected from a convenience sample of graduate level psychology interns who were separated from spouses and significant others due to
internship locations that required a move out of their area. Interns often move for a training opportunity which allows for the completion of their doctoral training which lasts one year. Seven psychology interns took part in this study. Three were female, and four were male. Five participants described themselves as White, one as Hispanic, and one as Other. They reported their ages by categories: 22-25 (n = 1), 26-29 (n = 1), 30-33 (n = 5). All seven participants stated they were in a relationship, with (n =1) married, (n =1) engaged, and (n =5) dating. See Table 2 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2: Control Group Demographics</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Age Range</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>22-25 years</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-29</td>
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<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td>30-33</td>
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<td>72</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Relationship Status</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Not in a relationship</td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type of Relationship</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaged</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dating</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The active duty military sample reported an average score on the PSS-10 in the low range, (\(M= 15.75, SD= 7.074\)), and the control group reported an average score on the PSS-10 also in the low range (\(M= 17.29, SD= 5.122\)). The military sample had a
median and mode response of 15.00, ranging in response from as low as 3 to as high as 32. The control sample had a median response of 16.00, ranging from as low as 11 to as high as 26. No mode could be reported as there were only seven participants in the sample and all responded with different scores.

The military participants reported an average score on the EMS in the moderately satisfied range, \((M= 51.95, SD= 13.010)\), and the control group had an average score on the EMS also in the moderately satisfied range \((M= 48.29, SD= 14.477)\). The military sample had a median response of 51.00, and a mode of 47.00, ranging in response from as dissatisfied as 17 to as satisfied as 80. The control sample had a median of 49.00, ranging from as dissatisfied as 21 to as satisfied as 65. No mode could be reported as there were only seven participants in the sample and all responded with different scores.

*Between Groups Comparisons*

Unfortunately, this study did not recruit an adequate number of participants to calculate meaningful comparisons due to the limited number in the experimental group \((n =28)\) and the control group \((n =7)\), so the planned analyses to test hypotheses regarding between groups differences for (a) perceived stress and (b) marital satisfaction could not be conducted. In order to provide descriptive comparisons and more context to the results, literature was sought which utilized a participant pool of both military members and a comparison group of non-military persons, measuring marital satisfaction or stress, or both. McLeland and Sutton (2005) sampled 23 activated National Guard members and 23 nonmilitary private university students from the Midwest on marital satisfaction. The nonmilitary members consisted of 12 married and 11 non-married men aged 18-29 \((n =16)\), 30-39 \((n =3)\), and 40-49 \((n =4)\). Nonmilitary men reported higher marital
satisfaction ($M = 59.35, SD = 7.8$) as compared to the military men ($M = 49.17, SD = 10.79$) when measured on the ENRICH Marital Satisfaction measure (EMS), $F(1, 42) = 9.98, p = .003, \eta^2 = .20$. It cannot be determined if any statistical differences between this study’s military group and McLeod and Sutton’s (2005) military group are significant, however based on descriptive comparisons, it appears as though the findings are similar.

The military participants in this study rated marital satisfaction similarly to the activated National Guard members as it relates to total score, a difference of almost 3 points higher, but dissimilarly as it relates to military to non-military comparison. This study obtained results which indicated non-military members had a slightly lower level of marital satisfaction than the military members.

Other groups were also sought in the literature which utilized a participant pool of both military members and a non-military comparison group measuring stress. No studies reporting PSS data with a military sample were found.

**Within Group Comparisons**

To determine question (c), whether a relationship exists between perceived stress and reported marital satisfaction, a correlation was computed. It was expected that higher levels of perceived stress would be associated with lower reported levels of marital satisfaction for active duty military and for controls. All data gathered was correlated, and the results were not significant, $r(28) = -.214, p = .352$.

To answer test question (d), if rank affected the report of either perceived stress or marital satisfaction, an independent samples $t$ test was computed. Enlisted personnel, ($N = 13$) responded on the PSS-10 with a slightly higher mean score, ($M = 16.08, SD = 6.689$) as compared to officers ($N = 15$) who responded with a slightly lower mean score
(M= 15.47, SD= 7.615). Levene’s test for equality of variances (F = .50, p = .485) demonstrated the variances are equal. However, test results (t(26) = .224, p = .825) with (CI = -5.00 ≤ µ1 – µ2 ≤ 6.220) indicated the results are not significant as p is greater than .05, nor are they reliable or robust.

Although rank did not affect the report of perceived stress, an independent samples t test was computed to determine if marital satisfaction scores were affected by rank. Responses on the EMS were as follows: enlisted personnel (N= 10) responded on the EMS with a slightly lower mean score (M= 51.60, SD= 9.228), than officers (N= 11) who responded with a slightly higher mean score (M= 52.27, SD= 16.175) consistent with the hypothesis. Levene’s test for equality of variances (F = 1.08, p = .311) demonstrated the variances are equal. However, test results (t(19) = -.115, p = .909) with (CI = -12.875 ≤ µ1 – µ2 ≤ 11.529) indicated the results are not significant as p is greater than .05, nor are they reliable or robust.

To answer test question (e), if time in service, measured in years, affected the report of either perceived stress or marital satisfaction, an independent samples t test was computed. Time in service was measured on the demographic questionnaire in the following categories: 0-5 years, 6-10 years, 11-15 years, 16-20 years, and 21+ years. Given the small military sample size that was collected for this study, it was decided that for the purpose of meaningful analysis, it would be best to compare those having served 0-5 years to those who had served 6-21+ years. This was done as those with 0-5 years tend to have been initially trained at a basic program, trained in a specialty career field, and have nearly completed or completed one contracted commitment of service as compared to those with 6 or more years who have likely already committed to a second
contracted term of service. It was hypothesized that those individuals with fewer years in the United States Air Force (USAF) would report higher levels of perceived stress as compared to their counterparts with more years of experience. Those personnel with 5 years or less time in service, \((N=11)\) reported a perceived stress score of \((M=15.73, SD=7.254)\), which was almost identical to those personnel \((N=17)\) having served 6-21+ years \((M=15.76, SD=7.181)\), not supporting the hypothesis. Levene’s test for equality of variances \((F = .076, p = .785)\) demonstrated the variances are equal. However, \((t(26) = -.013, p = .989)\) with \((CI = -5.771 \leq \mu_1 - \mu_2 \leq 5.697)\), indicating the results are not significant as \(p\) is greater than .05, nor are they reliable or robust.

To determine if time in service affected marital satisfaction scores, an independent samples \(t\) test was computed. It was hypothesized that those individuals with fewer years of experience in the USAF would report lower levels of marital satisfaction, if in a relationship, as compared to their counterparts who have served in the USAF longer. Those personnel with 0-5 years reported slightly higher levels of marital satisfaction, though still in the moderately satisfied range \((M=54.57, N=7, SD=12.515)\) in opposition of the hypothesis. Those service members with 6-21+ years of service reported slightly lower levels of marital satisfaction as compared to their counterparts, though still in the moderately satisfied range \((M=50.64, N=14, SD=13.511)\). Levene’s test for equality of variances \((F = 0.77, p = .784)\) demonstrated the variances are equal. However, \((t(19) = .643, p = .528)\) with \((CI = -8.865 \leq \mu_1 - \mu_2 \leq 16.722)\), indicating the results are not significant as \(p\) is greater than .05, nor are they reliable or robust.

The final planned analysis to determine if \(f\) any differences existed in perceived stress for those who were in a relationship compared to those who were not in a
relationship could not be conducted because only 5 participants in the military sample reported they were not in a relationship.

Discussion

The information gathered for this pilot study rendered any between groups comparison difficult. In this study, military members reported perceived stress levels similar to those reported by the control group. Published results have demonstrated military members tend to rate their marital satisfaction as lower than do their civilian counterparts, usually attributed to the nature of their employment. However, it appears military members reported slightly higher marital satisfaction when compared to their civilian counterparts in this study, a result in an unexpected direction. Examining the marital satisfaction data in the McLeland and Sutton (2005) study, it appears that both the military and nonmilitary samples in this study obtained scores on the ENRICH Marital Satisfaction scale more in line with McLeland and Sutton’s military sample, and that the civilian sample in the McLeland and Sutton study obtained higher scores of marital satisfaction than did both the military and control group in this study. This suggests that perhaps civilians separated from romantic partners suffer similar declines in marital satisfaction as do military personnel. It is important to keep in mind, though, that the results obtained in this project are unreliable given the size of each sample group and, therefore, the results lack statistical significance or robustness.

The first within group analysis examined the relationship between perceived stress and marital satisfaction for the military sample. Although not statistically significant, the obtained correlation indicated a relationship in the expected direction for these two variables. Other results for within group comparisons were mixed in relation to
investigator expectations and obtained outcomes. Enlisted personnel did report slightly higher levels of perceived stress, and slightly lower levels of marital satisfaction as compared to the officers in the sample, and as predicted. However, these results are again not statistically significant. It was expected that time in service would have greatly impacted a participant’s obtained score for both measures, namely that less time as a military member would produce higher perceived stress and lower marital satisfaction. Findings demonstrated that 5 years or fewer time in service actually resulted in almost identical obtained scores on perceived stress compared to those with more time in service, a surprise to the principal investigator. Even more shocking, marital satisfaction was rated higher by those having less time in service than those with 6 years or more time in service. Again, it is important to keep in mind the results were not significant or reliable. However, it is an interesting finding, though difficult to determine if the time in service component of this study is important or meaningful as little exists in the literature using this variable for the purpose of comparison. Time in service may be a useful variable in future research applications.

Given substantial limitations, the current study is presented as a pilot study and there are many improvements that could be made for future studies examining these variables. Limitations will be discussed in three sections: first, sampling challenges; next, ambiguous scoring criteria of measures and different scoring approaches to the measures in the literature; and finally, limited survey construction. This project will be concluded by discussing future directions for research.

First, sampling challenges abounded and desired sample targets were not achieved to allow for statistical significance. Any time a civilian student researcher attempts to
gain access to a government body, namely the military, during a time of war and financial crisis, it would be highly recommended to anticipate some obstacles. Given the likelihood of struggle in gaining access to active duty military personnel that may well have exceeded the number of years the principal investigator was able to devote to graduate school, the principal investigator attempted to bypass the cumbersome and lengthy process of the government institutional review board by utilizing a contact within the United States Air Force and presenting him with a project approved by the student’s university institutional review board. The contact was an active duty USAF member and a graduate of the PI’s program, stationed at an overseas installation on an unaccompanied tour. An unaccompanied tour is a base and duty assignment, usually lasting 12 months, where the military service member relocates without their family or spouse, which was one of the target samples.

As mentioned before, the military system is constructed by rank, requiring a chain of command to accomplish many tasks. The chain of command can be political in nature, and though directed by numerous levels of military guidance and instructions, these rules allow for some room of interpretation as seen by the consulting military official. Issues related to a need to protect one’s career, to guard military procedures or secrets, to be mindful of the reputation of the military, as well as to shield personnel from any unnecessary or additional risks, threats, or stressors also can become relevant when individuals in the chain of command are approached about outside research. Given this long list of concerns, many talks ensued between the USAF contact and his leadership to determine an appropriate course of action to sample an active duty military population.
As mentioned in the procedure section, permission to email an invitation to participate in the study was granted at the Wing level at Osan, Air Force Base, South Korea.

To better understand what power a Wing level commander has consider this: the USAF is constructed top down. The top is the Commander in Chief, followed by the Secretary of Defense, then the Secretary of the Air Force, then the Air Force Chief of Staff, then the Major Command, the Numbered Air Force, the Wing Commander, then the Group Commander, then the Squadron Commander, and lastly the Flight Commander. This means three commanders gave approval before permission was requested of the Wing Commander. At Osan, Air Force Base there is one Wing Commander, but still many Group Commanders. Permission was granted by the Wing Commander, but only one Group Commander followed through by sending the email to his personnel to invite them to participate in the study. As a result, 28 enlisted and officer men and women completed the survey out of almost 3,600 available personnel. The desired target was 300 participants to ensure adequate power for analyses, though it is clear this number was not reached.

Another obstacle to accessing the desired number of participants at this site included some technological difficulties. When approval was granted, the email invitation contained an internet hyperlink intended to connect the viewer to the online survey website and the specific survey. However, the initial invite contained an error in the hyperlink, and troubleshooting occurred over several hours to correct the problem. It is likely many more participants attempted to navigate their way to the website and were unable to participate in the survey. By the time the error was corrected, it is likely people receiving the email had deleted it or simply moved on to other things. How many
participants were lost due to this error is unknown. Additionally, even after the error was corrected, 22 individuals who started the survey did not complete it. Again, the nature of why this occurred is unknown.

The next goal was to sample another USAF base located overseas which allows for an accompanied tour, meaning an assignment of an active duty service member with their family. The USAF contact again attempted to navigate the chain of command for approval of the emailed invitation for participation; however, after many months access was denied because the leadership at Aviano, Air Force Base, Italy understandably preferred Air Force institutional review approval rather than the lower level university approval. The time constraints of graduate educational requirements intervened at this point, along with ethical issues related to the principal investigator’s change in status from civilian student researcher to commissioned USAF officer. Any solicitation of participation from any service member lower ranking than the PI could be seen as an order to participate, rather than a request to volunteer to participate. The plan for the third military site within the continental US was also discarded at this time for the same reasons.

In addition to the challenges that resulted in a solitary and small sample of active military service members, the characteristics of the sample itself offer a limitation. The participants were all active duty Air Force personnel, within a specific career field breakdown under the umbrella of an Air Force Group command, who self-selected to participate and complete the survey. Considering that less than 1 percent of the American population joins the military at some point in their life, and that the sample was a fairly specific and homogenous group within that 1 percent, it is highly likely that the sample
participants were similar in personality characteristics, values, and career stressors.

Clearly the size of the sample, but also the nature of this group, does not permit conclusions which would necessarily generalize to other military populations at other bases or to non-military adult men and women in relationships.

Given the lack of a military comparison group, the PI and committee attempted to find a civilian comparison group for the obtained military participant data to determine if there were specific stressors related to military service that contributed to changes in stress or marital satisfaction compared to civilians in similar, but non-military, stressful situations. Psychology graduate students away at clinical internship were targeted as the control group sample. Although educational level would be different, other demographic characteristics such as gender, age, race, and ethnicity would likely be similar enough between the two samples to allow for comparison. The current life stressor of graduate school internship training which usually requires geographic relocation, often without significant others or loved ones, made this population similar to the military population sampled at Osan, Air Force Base, South Korea. However, only seven individuals responded to invitation to participate, not allowing for an adequate comparison sample size. Had there been a better response rate, this interesting question of the unique nature of military stress and its effects on individual’s perceived stress and marital satisfaction could have been addressed. Unfortunately, the small sample size made this impossible.

Even with this limitation, however, it is interesting to note that the similar findings for these two groups, with both scoring in the low range for perceived stress and in the moderate range for marital satisfaction, indicates that for this particular sample the nature of employment did not appear to impact scores.
The second major area of limitation, ambiguous scoring criteria of measures, made it difficult to determine what obtained data specific to perceived stress and marital satisfaction actually meant. Although the selected measures had been used in previous research and were found to be reliable and valid, after implementing the study and scoring the measures, it was clear each measure contained limitations. The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10) did not contain score cutoffs in the manual to aid in interpretation of a score as “high” or “clinically elevated,” etc., thus there was no way to know what the score meant without a comparison group. Using the PI’s best clinical judgment, since the highest possible score on the PSS-10 equals 40, it was decided the mean scores around 16 were less than half of the highest possible score and thus “low” scores of perceived stress. The ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale (EMS) is usually given to both partners in a marriage or relationship, and the total scores of both partners are then calculated and compared together to determine couple agreement. This study only sampled one half of the coupled dyad and thus had no corresponding score to calculate or compare it to, therefore the scores were taken alone as an indicator of the individual participant’s perceived marital satisfaction. Ideally, set criteria for scoring or standard implementation of the measures would be used in future research applications.

Additionally, the literature offered different scoring approaches to the measures, such as the study done by Mikolajczyk, Maxwell, Naydenova, Meier, and El Ansari (2008) which utilized the PSS and reported an item mean rather than a total score. There were also different versions of the PSS used in the literature, further confusing accurate comparison between samples.
Finally, the demographic questionnaire could have been improved regarding the construction of its domains. During data cleaning and analyses, it was evident some of the ranges that were created, such as that for age, limited the analyses that could be computed. If the demographic questionnaire had been set up to allow for more specific data, such as allowing participants to fill in their age exactly, more meaningful within group analyses could have offered further evidence if the hypotheses related to time in service and rank were accurate, despite the sampling challenges. Hopefully it is clear now that this pilot study offers more descriptive data than it does any significant findings.

Future directions

There are many components of this project that can be improved for future application. Most importantly, it would be greatly helpful to gain access to the military through “front door” versus “back door” means, indicating the use of military institutional review board processes rather than university level approval. This would hopefully provide a larger, broader sample of enlisted and officer personnel at various locations for more meaningful comparisons. Given the cumbersome nature of military institutional review boards, this could mean that such research is not feasible for a student to conduct, given the time constraints of graduate school requirements. An interesting and perhaps more feasible option might be for a student to attach him or herself to an ongoing research project that is already approved through the proper channels. Since beginning this project, more research has focused on active duty service members given the incredible demands placed on them for the past 9 years in the Middle East. It may be likely this investigator could partner with another researcher given the focus on the
military, easing the difficulty of recruiting a sample, and increasing the likelihood of maintaining them for a longer period of time, possibly for a longitudinal project.

Other changes to research design could address some of the noted limitations of this pilot study if a follow up study were to be conducted. It would be helpful to revise the demographic questionnaire to provide the cleanest data and most meaningful analyses possible. Additionally, either a different measure of marital satisfaction should be used, or perhaps the romantic partner could also be targeted to determine the true relationship satisfaction score for more robust statistical conclusions. Similarly, a stress measure with specific cutoffs could be substituted for the PSS-10, or again, subjective cutoffs could be utilized given the principle investigator’s familiarity with this measure at this point.

If each of these improvements could be made, an interesting and pertinent study could be done to examine the similarities and differences in stress and marital satisfaction for military servicemembers in the midst of a variety of relocations and deployments. Ideally, the study would include samples of approximately 300 individuals from four military assignments including: an unaccompanied overseas location (e.g., South Korea), an accompanied overseas location (e.g., the United Kingdom), a base located within the continental United States, and a deployment environment (e.g., Afghanistan or Iraq). Each participant would report demographic information on the improved questionnaire, marital satisfaction, and perceived stress. If similar numbers of participants could be ascertained from each local, analyses would have adequate power to demonstrate if a significant difference does exist between the environments of service which military members often find themselves living and working in. In this ideal study, results would indicate the environment which is most stressful and most difficult for romantic
relationships. If the most challenging environment could be determined, it would provide information which may influence commanders, as well as mental health providers and military social services, on how to better help prepare servicemembers for the assignment and the likely adjustments, or on how to better cope when they return from the location. The military values “readiness” and this information would be in line with that value and the mission.

Regarding this pilot study, if data had supported significant results, indicating moderate to high perceived stress levels in the sample, or critically low marital satisfaction, it would have been important, and the most ethical course of action, to offer a clinical recommendation to the Group or Wing Commander regarding what possible social supports or clinical interventions might be of use for their personnel. The United States Air Force has mental health services available to all of its members, varying from mental health clinics with licensed clinical psychologists, social workers, and psychiatrists, to additional community supports and social services. Most Air Force bases also possess multiple community groups for single members, spouses, families or all of the above. Appropriate referrals would have been encouraged if data had suggested any red flags. A standard for any commander in the military is to know the people for whom he or she is responsible, and to know when to intervene and offer help. Feedback would have been vital to support this aspect of the military’s mission, if it had been observed. As it was, no notification or feedback was necessary, and future research may focus on time in service as a factor of interest as it relates to perceived stress and marital satisfaction. Additionally, it might be possible to give each Group Command their own survey weblink, so that if it was discovered that any personnel reported significant
distress, a Group Commander could be notified to offer targeted briefings on stress or marital discord support to further assist service members.

It was interesting to note that years in service had not previously been examined. Future research could focus on this variable as it relates to marital satisfaction and stress as it may offer insight into the point in military service that is most difficult, as well as least difficult. If a range of time in service in a military career is noted as problematic, it could inform what health and wellness assessment might be appropriate to determine the necessary services or referrals that would be advantageous to better support military members. Additionally, if a range of time in service was noted as relatively free of these challenges, then research could be implemented to determine the factors which contribute to the lesser degree of struggle or strife within the military system and those characteristics could be better supported.

**Summary**

This study offered descriptive information about a small group of active duty Air Force members who were in the midst of an assignment to an overseas base in which some were without their spouses, significant others, or families. It did not offer reliable or significant statistical information about either this very small part of the USAF or of the much larger United States’ Armed Forces. In this study, military servicemembers reported low levels of perceived stress and moderate levels of marital satisfaction. There was a nonsignificant correlation between higher levels of perceived stress and lower levels of marital satisfaction for this sample. Enlisted personnel reported slightly higher perceived stress and slightly lower marital satisfaction as compared to officer personnel. Time in service had no impact on whether someone rated higher or lower on a perceived
stress measure. It did have an impact on marital satisfaction ratings, albeit a nonsignificant one, in that 5 years or less on the job in the USAF appeared to be related to higher satisfaction for this sample. Although results of this pilot investigation do not offer significant findings due to notable limitations, a follow up study examining the experience of perceived stress and marital satisfaction for military personnel in a variety of assignments and deployments would be valuable in offering opportunities to increase job and life satisfaction for this very deserving population.
REFERENCES


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Appendix A

Demographic Questionnaire with instructions and measures.

You have agreed to participate in the following survey. Please provide the following information.

1. Gender: ___ Male  
    ___ Female

2. Present Age: (please place a check mark on the appropriate line)  
   ___ 18-21  
   ___ 22-25  
   ___ 26-29  
   ___ 30-33  
   ___ 34-37  
   ___ 38-41  
   ___ 42+

3. Race: (please place a check mark on the appropriate line)  
   ___ Black/African-American  
   ___ White/Caucasian not Hispanic  
   ___ Hispanic/Latino(a)  
   ___ Native American  
   ___ Pacific Islander  
   ___ Asian  
   ___ Middle Eastern/Arab  
   ___ Other (please specify): __________________________________________

4. Rank: (please place a check mark on the appropriate line)  
   ___ E-1 Airman Basic (AB)  
   ___ E-2 Airman (Amn)  
   ___ E-3 Senior Airman (SrA)  
   ___ E-4 Staff Sergeant (SSgt)  
   ___ E-5 Technical Sergeant (TSgt)  
   ___ E-6 Master Sergeant (MSgt)  
   ___ E-7 Senior Master Sergeant (SMSgt)  
   ___ E-8 Chief Master Sergeant (CMSgt)  
   ___ O-1 2nd Lieutenant (2Lt)  
   ___ O-2 1st Lieutenant (1Lt)  
   ___ O-3 Captain (Capt)  
   ___ O-4 Major (Maj)  
   ___ O-5 Lieutenant Colonel (LtCol)  
   ___ O-6 Colonel (Col)  
   ___ O-7 through O-10 General Officers
5. Time in service branch (please specify time in months and years): USAF

6. Current Assignment/Deployment: ____________________________________________

7. Time at Current Assignment/Deployment (please specify time in years and months):

_________________________________________________________________________

8. Previous Assignments/Deployments and Time Spent at location (please specify time in years and months):
_________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________

9. Are you in a romantic relationship? ___ Yes  ___ No

If the answer to the above question is no, please skip to questionnaire (PSS)

10. If you are in a romantic relationship, please specify the nature of your relationship:
___ Married  ___ Divorced  ___ Separated  ___ Widowed  ___ Engaged  ___ Dating

11. Please specify the length of your relationship in years and months: _______________

12. Do you have children: ____ Yes        ____ No

13. If you do have children, do your children live with the person in which you are currently involved? ____ Yes  ____ No

14. On average, how often are you in contact with your romantic partner?
___ Daily  ___ Weekly  ___ Monthly

15. How do you contact your romantic partner?
___ Phone  ___ Email
____ Instant Messenger/Web chat
____ Other

Please proceed to the following questionnaire.
Appendix B

Perceived Stress Scale (PSS)- 10 item (This title of the measure will not appear before the instructions. It is stated here for proposal purposes).

Instructions: The questions in this scale ask you about your feelings and thoughts during the last month. In each case, please indicate with a check how often you felt or thought a certain way.

1. In the last month, how often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?
   
   ___0=never ___1=almost never ___2=sometimes ___3=fairly often ___4=very often

2. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?
   
   ___0=never ___1=almost never ___2=sometimes ___3=fairly often ___4=very often

3. In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and "stressed"?
   
   ___0=never ___1=almost never ___2=sometimes ___3=fairly often ___4=very often

4. In the last month, how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems?
   
   ___0=never ___1=almost never ___2=sometimes ___3=fairly often ___4=very often

5. In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way?
   
   ___0=never ___1=almost never ___2=sometimes ___3=fairly often ___4=very often

6. In the last month, how often have you found that you could not cope with all the things that you had to do?
   
   ___0=never ___1=almost never ___2=sometimes ___3=fairly often ___4=very often

7. In the last month, how often have you been able to control irritations in your life?
   
   ___0=never ___1=almost never ___2=sometimes ___3=fairly often ___4=very often

8. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were on top of things?
   
   ___0=never ___1=almost never ___2=sometimes ___3=fairly often ___4=very often
9. In the last month, how often have you been angered because of things that were outside of your control?

___0=never ___1=almost never ___2=sometimes ___3=fairly often ___4=very often

10. In the last month, how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?

___0=never ___1=almost never ___2=sometimes ___3=fairly often ___4=very often
Appendix C

(ENRICH: Marital Satisfaction- title will not appear in final survey. It appears here for IRB purposes only).

1. My partner and I understand each other perfectly.
   ___1=Strongly Disagree ___2=Moderately Disagree ___3=Neither Agree nor Disagree ___4=Moderately Agree ___5=Strongly Agree

2. I am not pleased with the personality characteristics and personal habits of my partner.
   ___1=Strongly Disagree ___2=Moderately Disagree ___3=Neither Agree nor Disagree ___4=Moderately Agree ___5=Strongly Agree

3. I am very happy with how we handle role responsibilities in our marriage.
   ___1=Strongly Disagree ___2=Moderately Disagree ___3=Neither Agree nor Disagree ___4=Moderately Agree ___5=Strongly Agree

4. My partner completely understands and sympathizes with my every mood.
   ___1=Strongly Disagree ___2=Moderately Disagree ___3=Neither Agree nor Disagree ___4=Moderately Agree ___5=Strongly Agree

5. I am not happy about our communication and feel my partner does not understand me.
   ___1=Strongly Disagree ___2=Moderately Disagree ___3=Neither Agree nor Disagree ___4=Moderately Agree ___5=Strongly Agree

6. Our relationship is a perfect success.
   ___1=Strongly Disagree ___2=Moderately Disagree ___3=Neither Agree nor Disagree ___4=Moderately Agree ___5=Strongly Agree

7. I am very happy about how we make decisions and resolve conflicts.
   ___1=Strongly Disagree ___2=Moderately Disagree ___3=Neither Agree nor Disagree ___4=Moderately Agree ___5=Strongly Agree

8. I am unhappy about our financial position and the way we make financial decisions.
   ___1=Strongly Disagree ___2=Moderately Disagree ___3=Neither Agree nor Disagree ___4=Moderately Agree ___5=Strongly Agree

9. I have some needs that are not being met by our relationship.
10. I am very happy with how we manage our leisure activities and the time we spend together.

11. I am very pleased about how we express affection and relate sexually.

12. I am not satisfied with the way we each handle our responsibilities as parents.

13. I have never regretted my relationship with my partner, not even for a moment.

14. I am dissatisfied about our relationship with my parents, in-laws, and/or friends.

15. I feel very good about how we each practice our religious beliefs and values.
Appendix D

1. Introduction and Background Information

You are invited to be in a research study investigating your current relationship satisfaction and your perceived stress experience. You were invited to participate because you are a current active duty soldier in the United States Air Force. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in this study.

This study is being conducted by Principal Investigator Lisette Wise, a graduate student in the School of Professional Psychology, at Pacific University, faculty advisor Lisa R. Christiansen, Psy.D., and Eric Oglesbee, Psy.D., Capt USAF. The purpose of this study is to gather information regarding active duty soldiers’ relationship satisfaction and overall perceived stress experience.

2. Study Location and Dates

The study is expected to begin August 2007, and to be completed by August 2008. The physical location of the study will be in Portland, Oregon; however, data will be collected online using Survey Monkey. The information will be viewed, analyzed, and stored on the Pacific University campus in Portland, Oregon, or in the home of the Principal Investigator, under password protection.

3. Procedures

If you agree to be in this study, we will ask you to answer and complete a demographic survey and two questionnaires. It is estimated that filling out these questionnaires will take approximately 15 to 20 minutes. You will be asked to fill out these questionnaires only once.

4. Participants and Exclusion

Only participants who meet the following conditions will be included in the study: (1) active duty soldiers in the United States Air Force and (2) active duty soldiers that give informed consent and that are 18 years of age or older. Participants who do not meet the above criteria will be excluded from the study.

5. Risks and Benefits

There are minimal risks to participating in this research. Possible risks include feelings of distress related to thinking about stressful experiences, and of current marital/relationship satisfaction. Some of the content of the questions may cause you to think about information that may be unpleasant related to stress and marital satisfaction. There is a possible risk of having your computer identified during electronic means of communication including, but not limited to, the use of electronic mail (e-mail) and use of the Internet. This could associate the computer user with this study, though the
principal investigator will not collect IP addresses as part of the survey. Additionally, multiple pieces of demographic information will be collected that risk individual identification. This risk will be minimized by presenting only group data in disseminated results and by limiting individual survey responses to the principal investigator who has no direct contact with the military, other than with the mentioned reader.

There are no direct benefits to participating in this study, though you may find it personally satisfying to contribute to academic research and knowledge about the military community with the information you provide.

6. Alternatives Advantageous to Participants

Not applicable.

7. Participant Payment

You will not receive payment or compensation for your participation.

8. Promise of Privacy

Due to the nature of the data collection method (Survey Monkey) there is always a remote chance that your answers on the survey will not be completely secure. Your participation is anonymous as you will not be asked to provide your name for participation in the study. Electronic data, once input for statistical analysis, will be kept on the password protected laptop of the Principal Investigator in a password protected file. The informed consent form must be agreed to before proceeding to the demographic survey and questionnaires. If a participant chooses, “I Do Not Accept,” then no further data will be collected. If the results of this study are to be presented or published, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you as an individual.

9. Voluntary Nature of the Study

Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Pacific University. The investigators are not authorities on what the United States Air Force does or does not want soldiers to discuss. The researchers encourage you to seek approval from the proper authority to participate in this study. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without prejudice or negative consequences.

10. Compensation and Medical Care

Not applicable
11. Contacts and Questions

The researcher(s) will be happy to answer any questions you may have at any time during the course of the study. Lisette Wise can be reached at (503) 886-9954 or at wise2274@pacificu.edu. Dr. Lisa Christiansen can be reached at (503) 352-2627 or at chri3142@pacificu.edu. Capt. Eric Oglesbee can be reached at eric.oglesbee@osan.af.mil. If you are not satisfied with the answers you receive, please call Pacific University’s Institutional Review Board, at (503) 352 – 2215 to discuss your questions or concerns further. All concerns and questions will be kept in confidence.

12. Statement of Consent

I have read and understand the above. All my questions have been answered. I am 18 years of age or over and agree to participate in the study. I may print out a copy of this form to keep for my records.

Participant’s Signature                                                                                             Date

Participant contact information:

Street address:    ______________________
                    ______________________
                    ______________________

Telephone:        ______________________
Email:            ______________________

This contact information is required in case any issues arise with the study and participants need to be notified and/or to provide participants with the results of the study if they wish.

Would you like to have a summary of the results after the study is completed? ___Yes ___No

Investigator’s Signature                                                                                       Date
Appendix E

Greetings!

You have been invited to participate in a research study involving relationship satisfaction and your perceived stress experience. Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose to participate your information will be anonymous. The study is in a survey format and will take approximately 15-20 minutes to complete.

If you would like to participate, please click on the web link that follows. If you have difficulty connecting to the link, please copy and paste it into the address box of your web browser.

http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/DKP7FWC

We understand that your time is valuable and would like to thank you very much for your participation.

Please feel free to contact any of us if you have any questions.

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