THE MILITARY EXPERIENCE: PERCEPTIONS FROM
SENIOR MILITARY OFFICERS’ WIVES

by

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Abstract

Mass media offers daily news on the military personnel who are deployed into harm’s way to fight for freedom and protect and defend our country. Stories also report on the families and military spouses left behind, with recognition of the daily challenges and demands they face. Researchers have investigated various facets of the life of military wives in an attempt to gain knowledge and understanding of their struggles and needs. Studies have examined female military spouses in two general categories: enlisted wives and officers’ wives. There is another smaller population of women—senior officers’ wives—that has been ignored by scholars and their academic literature. Studies report data to support outcomes of depression, stress, coping, and skills of military wives in general, but little is known about the lives of senior officers’ wives. This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of 8 women married to some of the most senior officers in the U.S. military. The researcher presented the perceptions of these women in the identification of stress—both healthy and unhealthy—their roles, and the effect their roles as senior military officers’ wives play in the psychological impact of stress. In-depth interviews conducted with the participants provided a voice for senior officers’ wives who tirelessly, but often silently, perform numerous roles and responsibilities associated with their husbands’ positions in the military organization. This study identified the coping strategies employed by these women to manage stress and the level of success for each. Implications for interventions and prevention relevant to the stress experienced by senior officers’ wives are discussed.
Dedication

This work is dedicated to my parents, Steve and Theresa Skowronski, who through their example taught me how to love unselfishly, guide and support others, and to value what is truly important in life. By their demonstration, I have sought to instill these life lessons of values and beliefs in my children, who are now passing them on to their children.
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I am deeply indebted to the eight senior officers’ wives who participated in this research. I am honored that they welcomed me into their homes and had the courage to share their experiences honestly and wholly. These are eight truly remarkable women.

I want to thank my children, Christopher, Katie, Heather, Ben, and Emily, who listened patiently and encouraged me when I had doubts and believed that I could accomplish my goal. These are five amazing children who have their own inspiring stories to tell as children of a senior military officer.

To my husband, Rear Admiral Jack McGowan, a man of great integrity and personal character; he cheered me through this long and arduous journey, advising, inspiring, and helping me to maintain focus. Because of his dedication and accomplishments, he made it possible for me to live the life of a senior officer’s wife, a life that I loved and am very grateful to have experienced. Thank you to my husband for
giving so much during “my turn.” Lastly, I wish to thank God for my gifts and blessings while allowing me the vision to see and the courage to try.
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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the Problem

The climate of unrest in many parts of the world has drawn attention to the impact of war, as well as to our military organization, its culture, and its soldiers. In war or peacetime, military members live in an environment unknown to many people in the civilian world. The military community is a vast closed society with rules and regulations that determine the behavior and performance of military members as well as their spouses and families. While military life brings unique benefits and opportunities, military spouses face a number of issues and obstacles that are uniquely different than those of their civilian counterparts.

In this complex culture, a specific female population is presented with a multitude of obligatory unpaid responsibilities and duties that often go unnoticed by the military and civilian community. The role of this group, its subsequent demands, and their experiences are predicated on their husbands’ rank. These women—senior officers’ wives—are married to men who make up the highest echelon of military command. A key component for a successful mission of a military organization is the ability of a senior officer to perform his duties. A senior officer’s wife is challenged to provide inclusive support in order to maintain her husband’s involvement in the organization (Marriott, 1991) and to facilitate the success of his assignments.

Findings gathered during the Persian Gulf War showed the important and central role of senior officers’ wives during crises (Wenska, 1990). But even without the detrimental effect of war, a senior officer’s wife is often a rewarding but demanding
position in constant fluctuation. Challenges to mentor, organize, entertain, lead, and problem solve are but a few “voluntary” expectations she shoulders. The responsibility, contribution, and impact of a senior officer’s wife are potentially so significant that a high military official addressing an audience pointed out: “I regard you as part of the chain of command” (Snyder, 1978, p. 21). So numerous are the mandatory roles, tasks, and responsibilities required of most senior officers’ wives that that these expectations may initiate and elicit a variety of responses, both healthy and unhealthy.

Military families face difficult challenges and demands that are associated with the military’s unique lifestyle. The spouse of a senior officer carries additional responsibilities and stress (Segal, 1990). The women in this study, like their civilian counterparts, are wives, mothers, daughters, sisters, mentors, entertainers, and role models. Unlike their nonmilitary peers, senior military officers’ wives bring together and lend emotional support to spouses whose husbands are deployed, communicate information on their partners’ well-being, and are often expected to be concerned with the welfare of all spouses and families in their military community.

In times of military family crises, including death of a deployed spouse, the senior officer’s wife is often expected to be available to offer personal assistance to the family by assisting with organizing the military’s official support. Spousal obligations for senior officers’ wives include “the roles of escort, gracious hostess, regimental mother hen, trouble-shooter/problem-solver within the wives community, family support volunteer, charitable good works organizer, and socialite” (Harrison & Laliberte, 1994, p. 166).

Military members’ spouses have been of interest for some time. In the 17th and 18th centuries, they led very difficult and stressful lives, and even though the military
organization’s attitude and lifestyle evolved somewhat through the 21st century, the role of a military wife remains stressful (Alt & Stone, 1991). In the 17th and 18th centuries, the military discouraged marriage and preferred soldiers who were single (Williams, 1986). In his book, Williams, a former military officer, remarked in the chapter “Unhappy is She Who Takes a Soldier” that the military organization disapproved of military wives. The parents of daughters who entertained the notion of marriage to soldiers not only objected but were horrified that their daughters would even think of any association with military men. The bachelor-exclusive military of yesteryear has been replaced with personnel who are likely to be married. Although there has been progress for women wed to military men in the enhancement of their lifestyle and challenges, further improvements are needed. Due to world unrest, wives now more than ever are asked to remain emotionally strong, carry heavy burdens, and support their military spouses. Senior military officers’ wives shoulder added specific expectations and responsibilities associated with the rank of their military spouses.

Statement of the Problem

While significant challenges face all military spouses, officers’ wives deal with additional and more stringent demands than those faced by the wives of their enlisted counterparts (Segal, 1990). These demands often center on obligations and priorities determined by the spouse’s rank and position (Marriott, 1991). The question central to this study asked, “What is life like for women married to senior military officers?” “What is the essence and meaning of the lived experience for these women?” “What are the perceptions of their role, its subsequent demands and management of the challenges set
forth from the role for senior officers’ wives as they experience it?” Segal (1986) validated the existence of and unique demands placed on officers’ wives. This study was designed to gain some comprehension of the phenomena associated with this role, its demands, and how participants experience this life.

Existing literature provides some insight into the obligations and responsibilities, but tell us little of how these women feel and perceive their experiences as senior military officers’ wives (e.g., the spouses of senior military officers play an important role in the military, and their presence can impact the families, personnel, and goal of the organization; Marriot, 1991).

Research offers (Bey & Lange, 1974; Rosen, Carpenter, & Moghadam, 1989; Rosen & Moghadam, 1988) statistical analyses of stressors and their effect on the general psychological well-being of military spouses. Studies (Knapp & Newman, 1993; Olstad, Sexton, & Sogaard, 2001) report findings derived from these data to support specific behaviors and coping strategies for military spouses who are affected by depression, family stress, and parenting issues. A senior military officer’s wife advises, performs, mentors, leads, volunteers, relocates, and socializes. She is an extension of her husband in certain military obligations, and her performance can advance or damage his career. “The pressures on an officer’s wife never let up” (Alt & Stone, 1990, p. 5).

Mindful of these copious obligatory undertakings, stress—a specific automatic reaction—is likely to occur. Eustress is positive stress that acts as a driving force to help one achieve one’s goals. The results of negative stress, or distress, can be detrimental to one’s physical and mental well-being (Selye, 1974). Coping is an attempt to reduce or eliminate reaction to a stressful person–environment liaison. The manner in which these
women cope can reduce or eliminate negative stress. To be successful in their roles, these women must develop coping skills and mechanisms and apply them to the varied and unique challenges presented to them.

Although much has been written for and about military wives, in-depth knowledge and understanding from a personal perspective by specific groups of military spouses in their own voices on their experiences is markedly absent. While there was a literature base composed of studies on the experience of the spouses of various ranks of military personnel in general, there was little to no literature reporting senior officers’ wives’ descriptions of their own experiences. There are unique and substantial distinctions between the roles and responsibilities of enlisted spouses and those of officer and senior officer military spouses. For this reason, senior officer military spouses should be regarded, as research supports, independently; “women cannot be treated as a homogeneous group” (Rodin, 1991, p. viii). Regardless, there is far too little known of this experience, as reported by the participants.

This study was designed to address this gap in the literature by studying women who are married to high-ranking military officers. A phenomenological approach was employed to gain insight and detailed information to further the understanding of the structured experiences of these women related to their multiple roles and obligations as military wives. The participants’ own voices offered knowledge regarding the essence of their existence and the meaning of the experiences that frame their lives.
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of senior military officers’ wives. The intended goal of this research was to depict and portray the life of this unique group of women married to the highest ranking officers in the U.S. military. A phenomenological approach investigated, identified, and described the subjective experiences of the participants. Military and civilian readers are offered an in-depth look at senior officers’ wives regarding their thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and attitudes. Their perceptions have been heard through their own voices. It is by perceptions—the principal source of knowledge in a phenomenological study—that the true meaning of the experience under investigation is uncovered (Moustakas, 1994).

Research Questions

The questions central to this study asked, “What is life like for women married to senior military officers?” “What is the essence and meaning of the lived experience for these women?” “What are the perceptions of their role, its subsequent demands and management of the challenges set forth from the role for senior officers’ wives as they experience it?”

Significance of the Study

While researchers (Knapp & Newman, 1993; McCubbin et al., 1980) have set forth their studies germane to “both health-promoting and health-damaging effects” (Rodin, 1991, p. viii) regarding women’s demanding roles, critical questions still remain unanswered. Researchers must persist with studies that focus on women and their
physical and mental well-being. Studies are pivotal in identifying and legitimizing women’s increased duties and responsibilities and their resulting effects (Rodin), not only on women but on those individuals who are relevant in their lives.

This study will be significant in several areas and to various communities. Senior officers’ wives and their husbands, other women who share the experience of being married to a spouse with or are aspiring to a high-profile position, and the professional community of clinicians and counselors can benefit from a deeper understanding of the challenges these women face.

Senior military officers’ wives are an overlooked population that may fit this profile, although these women play a vital role in the military organization. Little is known in the military, and even less in the civilian community, about the expectations and responsibilities these spouses are obligated to meet and their relationship to the individual. This study presented an illuminative view into the world of these women. Readers have an opportunity to gain awareness about this group of women who silently and perhaps both consciously and unconsciously serve national needs in the shadows of their spouses.

Although eustress, or good stress, motivates individuals and makes life interesting and exciting, distress, negative stress, may cause serious damage to a person’s physical and mental health (Selye, 1974). These wives, by the very nature of their roles as spouses of senior military officers, experience high levels of stress (Segal, 1986). This research examined the psychological impact their roles and responsibilities impart on their lives. A major importance of this study and its potential findings lie in the understanding of these
roles, responsibilities, and the parts they play in the larger military system, in addition to their own families.

While most of the research that has been done to this point involved stress and stress management, the focus here was on the perceptions, feelings, and internal psychological, emotional, intellectual states of the subjects—whatever is revealed in the data collection.

The methodology of a phenomenological design of qualitative research acquires knowledge by asking questions. Rather than generalize and predict, this investigative method provides narrative and perceptive understanding of an investigation. While studying the context in which behavior occurs, patterns, themes, insights, and holistic concepts emerge from the collection of data. This contextual data includes observations in natural settings, document evaluations, and interviews (Thomas, 2006). The investigator employs in-depth, open-ended interviews to generate a wealth of understanding of an insider’s view of the studied phenomenon.

This research was interested in the phenomena of understanding the patterns of the marriage partnership and the roles of the women married to senior military officers as it is perceived and experienced by the women themselves. Stress and stress management may be a part of their experience, but it could not be determined until the research was complete. In phenomenological qualitative study, data emerges from the narrative of the subjective experience as described.

Knowledge and understanding gained from this study and the implementation of its findings could affect husbands—in this case, senior military men—in their relationships and emotional lives at home. This study will be significant to the field of
clinical and counseling psychology in that it sheds light on effective strategies of intervention and prevention that may enable military wives to deal more effectively with their emotional lives and those of their families. The learning that emerges here may lead to knowledge and comparative data to provide insights, ideas, and guidelines for professionals counseling other women. It may also benefit those women themselves and all wives married to men in high-powered, high-visibility positions, by discovering useful approaches to understanding and managing their lives and family responsibilities. This knowledge could contribute to developing new and more effective life-managing strategies.

In addition, literature other than revealing the effects of stress on this topic is scant, so little has been known about the life of a senior military officer’s wife. This study adds to the literature. Results are presented in order to help civilians, professionals, and organizations understand senior military officers’ wives’ complexities and the psychological impact of living and managing families and careers.

Research Design

A qualitative research design was most appropriate to understand and describe the quality of the experience of senior officers’ wives. Such a design is well established in phenomenological methodology. Phenomenological research gains knowledge and understanding derived from the perceptions of experts—those who have lived the phenomena under study. The defining element of a phenomenological design is the underlying theory that among the participants there exists a shared essence. It is by these
central meanings one comes to understand the reality of the experience. Reality can only be established by an individual’s perception of one’s own experiences (Patton, 2002).

Throughout the process of data collection and analysis, a researcher’s goal is “to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience” (Moustakas, 1994), and subsequently offer a detailed, thorough interpretation of his or her view. According to Giorgi (1997), the strength of a phenomenological research design is found in descriptions. Setting aside any presupposition, the researcher describes conceptual themes and patterns in the world of those who lived the experience.

Definition of Terms

To fully understand this study that sought to comprehend and realize the lived experiences of senior officers’ wives, it is important to define some terms in reference to a military organization:

*Commissioned officers.* The highest ranking officers in the military. These officers are commissioned by the President and their ranks must be confirmed by the U.S. Senate (U.S. Department of Defense [DoD], 2004).

*Lived experience.* “A class of significant or memorable events, whose true meaning is something we come to recognize in retrospect” (Burch, 2002, p. 133).

*Military base, or military post.* A facility owned and operated by a branch of the military services. A military base is used for various and numerous purposes such as training, performing operations, storing equipment or weapons, and shelter of military personnel and their families (DoD, 2004).

*Military services.* Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and the Coast Guard.
Phenomenology. A process by which knowledge and understanding is gained “by the habits of the natural world” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 41) or by information established by “everyday experience” (Moustakas, p. 41).

Role. A set of standards and behavioral expectations associated with a group or social status (Brehm, Kassin, & Fein, 2005).

Senior military officers. The most senior commissioned officers, also referred to as a general or flag officers, who have achieved the rank of a star. The number of stars worn by a senior officer is indicative of the level of rank of a general or flag officer. These levels of rank range from one star—Rear Admiral (Navy, Coast Guard) and Brigadier General (Army, Marine Corps, Air Force)—to four stars—Admiral (Navy, Coast Guard) and General (Army, Marine Corps, Air Force; DoD, 2004).

Senior military wives. For the purposes of this study, refers to women married to men who have achieved a rank of one star or above (i.e., Brigadier Generals or Rear Admirals in the U.S. military and above).

Assumptions

1. Senior officers’ wives’ perceptions of their own experiences influence their decisions, interactions, behaviors, and activities as they carry out their roles.

2. Senior officers’ wives, experiences may slightly vary among the five military branches (Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force and Coast Guard), although underlying common themes exist that describe their experiences as senior officers’ wives.

3. Senior officers’ wives candidly shared their lived experiences, if they were able to do so in a nonthreatening environment.
4. “The research questions [could] evolve and change during the study, a thought [that is] also consistent with the assumption of an emerging design” (Creswell, 1994, p. 71).

Limitations

1. Selection of the sample was based on purposeful sampling, that is, those who have lived the experiences of the inquiry, and therefore the researcher must be careful not to generalize or “extrapolate the findings to other situations” (Patton, 2002, p. 563).

2. While there are some male spouses of senior officers, this study only included female spouses of senior officers. Men who are married to female senior officers share some experiences with their female counterparts, but overall have different demands and challenges. For this reason, this study focused on female spouses.

3. There was a possibility of bias from participants (answers based on what the researcher wants to hear).

Researcher Biases for Consideration

Bracketing, or *epoche*, is a process in which the researcher sets aside all preconceptions, biases, and beliefs in regard to what is being experienced and described by the participants. Interpretations and meanings are not derived according to a researcher’s presuppositions but, rather, through the narrative perceptions of the participants (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). As this researcher has lived the experience of a senior officer’s wife, all preconceived ideas and beliefs regarding the experiences described by the participants were set aside. Reviews by the participants validated if the interviews and analysis captured their intended essence.
Organization of the Remainder of the Study

This phenomenological research study is organized into five chapters. This first chapter discussed the background of the study, statement of the study, purpose of the study and its significance, research design, research questions, assumptions and limitations of the study, definition of terms, and researcher biases for consideration. Chapter 2 is a comprehensive review of literature germane to this study. Chapter 3 describes the methodology of the study, which includes the research purpose and design, target population and participant selection, data collection procedures, data analyses, and expecting findings. In chapter 4, the data are presented including verbatim examples from the participants and the synthesis of meanings and essences of their experiences. The final chapter includes a summary, implications, and outcomes of the study.
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

A woman’s life is significantly affected by her role. Women often juggle multiple jobs to meet their expectations for what they view as their responsibility in fulfilling their role (Wortman, Biernat, & Lang, 1991). Researchers at The Cleveland Clinic (2007), a renowned medical facility, reported that it can be wearisome, frustrating, and stressful when women attempt to juggle multiple jobs to satisfy the demands of their roles. While at the onset of this research it could not be determined that stress results from the roles of the participants, literature reported that the wife of a senior military officer carries additional responsibilities, demands, and stress (Segal, 1990).

Stress is a factor of life, and not all stress is created equal. Some stress can be beneficial (eustress) because it motivates and inspires individuals to meet life’s challenges. However, negative stress (distress), when excessive, can harm one’s physical and/or mental well-being. Stress occurs when demands exceed one’s coping resources.

Pressure and demands on one’s energy and time that arise from various sources and situations initiate a specific reaction in the body. Stress is an automatic reaction to one’s personal assessment of the problem (Selye, 1976). The precise causes (etiology) of stress differ from one individual to the next. One person’s perception of a problem may lead to no stress or eustress, while another individual’s interpretation of the problem may cause distress. Stressors, the initiators of stress, are in the eyes of the beholder, though many people seem unaware of the stress they experience. The cognitive process of coping
is an attempt to manage or alter the stressor or reduce or eliminate the emotional response to the stressor (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Military men and women encounter challenges and stress unique to the military organization and so do their spouses. While all women married to military members face demands that are characteristic of the military’s lifestyle, Segal (1990) argued that the spouse of a senior military officer carries added responsibilities and stress—some recognized, some not.

The conceptual framework for this study was drawn from the literature on stress, stress management, and coping. The application of this framework was directed to the lives of senior military officers’ wives from their own perspectives. The three key analytical components of this research were stress, coping, and senior military officers’ wives. The first section of this chapter defines the concept of stress and coping used in this study. The second section focuses on literature identifying the challenges and responsibilities of women married to senior military officers. The third section considers additional populations of wives married to men with visible, high-powered careers, and the demands and stress they encounter. The fourth section comprises a review of the literature that delineates protective strategies of coping with stress. The fifth section concludes the chapter with a synthesis and evaluation of literature on what is known of coping strategies and their application for a senior military officer’s wife.

Theories of Stress

Hans Selye, recognized as one of the most influential researchers in the physiology of stress and who coined the term stress, described it as “the non-specific
response of the body to any demand made upon it” (1974, p. 27). Stress is not simply nervous tension but, rather, a phenomenon that plays a significant role in one’s social, physiological, and psychological well-being. Stress does not always cause harmful effects and cannot and should not be avoided. Selye remarked that to be completely “free of stress is death” (1976, p. 32).

The response to a demand or stressor resulting in the phenomenon of stress can produce eustress or distress. Distress is negative stress and can be detrimental to one’s physical and mental health. Eustress elicited by a demand constitutes positive stress that results in motivation and personal growth. The actual event or encounter does not necessarily determine distress or eustress but, rather, how the individual perceives the occurrence. For example, a $20 bill on the street may cause distress for one person (who lost the money) and eustress for another (who finds the money). Although stress is usually associated with negative experiences, pleasant experiences can also produce stress, that is, eustress.

Eustress is a healthy and appropriate stress as it releases norepinephrine, a stress hormone and neurotransmitter that affects the parts of the brain where attention and responding actions are controlled. It elevates mood and enables individuals to view problems as exciting challenges, while promoting resourceful thinking “that stimulates [one’s] brain to grow new connections with itself” (The Franklin Institute, 2004). Life would be quite boring without eustress. In fact, individuals have reaped the benefits of eustress (the promotion of energy and well-being) since their earliest existence.

It is in conjunction with stress that life begins and promotes well-being and survival. Hormones released during childbirth, in part due to the stress response,
stimulate the newborn, which promotes the mother-child bonding process, thus facilitating happiness, security, and life (Cordon, 1997). Stress is a necessary and continuous component in our lives. The body experiences some stress even when asleep. Both positive and negative stress cause an emotional arousal which then cause elevated levels of physiological stress. Joy and sorrow or bravery and fear, although opposites, both result in stress, that is, a nonspecific demand from an external stimulus or stressor that requires a reaction or response of the body (Lazarus, 1999; Selye, 1976).

Selye, often called the Father of Stress, identified this natural response by the body to stressors as the General Adaptation Syndrome (G.A.S.). The G.A.S. explains a universal coordinated defense response by the body to a harmful stimulus. This orchestrated reaction includes alarm reaction, resistance or adaptation, and exhaustion. In this three-stage process, the body initially reacts with alarm by rallying all of its resources to defend itself against the threat. It launches adrenaline and other hormones into the bloodstream, while heart rate, blood pressure, and breathing increase. In the second stage, which Selye (1976) called resistance, stress hormones continue to be released, thus maintaining arousal and vigilance (Selye). Prolonged stress advances the body into the third stage, the exhaustion stage. During this stage the body suffers from “wear and tear” (Selye, p. 165), which is physical and mental strain. It is severe, chronic stress that thrusts individuals to this final stage.

Stress is an inevitable element in life, and while not all stress is detrimental, the results of distress can inflict harm on an individual’s physical and mental well-being. Chronic, severe stress has been cited (Howard, 2000; Lazarus, 1999) as a major contributor to depression and linked to mental disorders such as Adjustment Disorder,
Acute Stress Disorder, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and other emotional difficulties. Stress also has been linked to obesity, stroke, heart disease, premature aging, disease, and even death (Posen, 1995).

It is not necessary for individuals to experience all three stages of the G.A.S. In the course of a lifetime, one travels many times through the first stage of alarm and the second stage, resistance, in order to confront and adapt to perform the necessary tasks and face the demands one encounters. Whether the stressor one encounters is pleasant or unpleasant, the body reacts with the same type of response, which results in a physiological stress reaction (Selye, 1974).

While Selye’s General Adaptation Syndrome describes the process of stress and defines it on a physiological level, this explanation is limited to the physiological analysis of stress. Consequently, this definition is restricted in its ability to link stress to external and fluctuating stressors interpreted by the individual as harmful, that is, psychological stress. Psychological stress was a significant focus of this study. Therefore, in addition to Selye’s theory of stress, the theoretical framework of stress by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) was examined.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) defined *psychological stress* as “a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being” (p. 19). This definition focuses on stress as a subjective process in which the characteristics of the individual dictate the response to a stressor. Simply stated, what is stressful for one person may not be stressful for another. Lazarus and Folkman conceptualized stress as a result of an individuals’ appraisal of a stressor, as well as one’s perception of one’s
coping abilities to manage that stressor. This theoretical interpretation of stress is known as the transactional model. If the stressor is seen as challenging or positive rather than threatening, and individuals believe they possess sufficient coping skills, stress may not result from an impending stressor (Lazarus & Folkman).

Stress can be a source of strength and growth for some individuals. When a crisis or major stress event occurs, these individuals call upon coping resources they may not have known they possessed. They manage their stress by utilizing coping abilities they developed through life experiences. Learning coping skills early in life can be beneficial throughout one’s lifetime. Children shielded from certain kinds of stress may be vulnerable to stress in adulthood. They fail to learn vital coping skills during childhood and, as adults, may lack the ability to manage daily stress. Individuals of all ages experience stress when the cognitive appraisal of any event is determined to have strained or surpassed their adaptive resources. In their appraisal theory, a cornerstone of their previously mentioned transactional paradigm, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) made a clear distinction between two contrasting modes of appraisal. First, an appraisal can be intentional and conscious or, second, when assessing an event, it can be automatic, instinctive, and unconscious (Lazarus, 1999). By adulthood, if individuals have not been sheltered from dealing with stress, they often may have little need for reflection or new learning because they have had previous experience with the stress reaction and are able make a rapid cognitive evaluation.

It is individuals’ cognitive appraisals in conjunction with their vulnerability, sensitivity, and interpretations of an environment that produce psychological stress. This
cognitive judgment is a process involving three dimensions of categorization: primary appraisal, secondary appraisal, and reappraisal.

In primary appraisal, a person’s judgment of an experience falls into one of three types: “irrelevant, benign-positive, or stressful” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 53). A person cognitively appraises an encounter as irrelevant when it is viewed as of little or no importance concerning one’s well-being. A benign-positive appraisal is determined by an individual to the person-interaction or experience if it maintains or enhances one’s present or future well-being. A stressful appraisal will be perceived if an individual views an encounter or experience as having only negative or detrimental conditions. This stress appraisal focuses on one of three perceptional evaluations. First is harm/loss appraisal, a belief that damage (physical or emotional) has been already done. Second, threat appraisal is expected future harms and losses; and third, challenge appraisal focuses on the opportunity for positive gain, such as achievement, development, and growth. A threat appraisal evokes emotions such as anger, anxiety, and fear, whereas challenge appraisals induce positive emotions such as excitement, enthusiasm, and happiness. Although separate constructs, threat and challenge appraisals can occur simultaneously and fluctuate depending on the shift in an encounter. It is an individual’s cognitions and beliefs, and uniqueness of the situation that determines the primary appraisal (Lazarus & Folkman). For example, a first-time runner at the starting line may appraise the situation (competing in the race) as a threat after viewing the stiff competition. Once in the race, the runner may shift to a challenge appraisal (thinking about finishing, rather than placing in, the race).
Once a person judges in the initial appraisal that there is a threat or challenge, a secondary appraisal is salient regarding what could and should be done to cope with the stress. During this complex process, available coping options are scrutinized to determine the best possible strategies to effectively deal with the encounter of stress. Also in this process, one considers whether one can successfully execute these strategies. Once again using the runner as an example, the competitor may recall the hours of practice and conditioning preparing for the race, initiating or reinforcing the “I can do this” belief.

Bandura (1977, 1982) offered these two distinctive features in secondary appraisal as *outcome expectancy* and *efficacy expectation*. Outcome expectancy refers to a person’s belief that a specific behavior will lead to specific outcomes. Efficacy expectation is a person’s belief that he or she will implement the necessary behavior to bring about the desired outcome. Interaction between the primary appraisal and secondary appraisal of coping options determines the level of stress and strength, and traits of the emotional reaction (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Reappraisal, the third dimension in the appraisal process, occurs when a person encounters new information and reevaluates and changes a previous appraisal. This new knowledge is based on feedback from the environment or as a result of one’s behavior or response (Lazarus, 1991). For example, a normal relocation may be judged as benign-positive by a senior military wife since she has moved many times during her husband’s career and is well familiar with the benefits and disadvantages of moving. However, discovering that the move is for the military member only and will involve her husband’s being placed near the war zone may cause a reappraisal that could be evaluated as threatening. Conversely, when preparing to address a conference room filled with people,
a senior officer’s wife could initially appraise the environment as threatening, but after realizing that she has the necessary resources to cope, her reappraisal may result in benign-positive.

The two characteristics that are significant in determining an individual’s appraisal are commitment and beliefs (Nelson & Simmons, 2003). Do people believe they possess the necessary skills and resources to manage demands and challenges, and is this experience something people really care about? Initial appraisals that have been deemed stressful can be reappraised as positive. Positive reappraisals of stress can result from coping resources such as self-efficacy, social skills and support, existential or religious beliefs, material resources, good health, and problem-solving skills (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Women and Stress

There are many who would maintain that stress has been a constant companion for women in the United States. While challenging the male-dominated society, women have demanded higher pay, equal rights, and recognition at work, as well as in their home and social milieus. Pressures and demands that rest on the shoulders of women are often emotionally charged and are detrimental to their physical and mental health. Stress-related illness and stress-related disorders are the cause of 75–90% of all doctor visits. Most every system in the body can be negatively affected when individuals experience severe and chronic periods of stress. Major body functions, such as the digestive and immune systems, and mental capacity and development all may be damaged by stress (Posen, 1995). Stress increases the risk of obesity, which is a major risk factor in stroke
and heart disease. Research has shown that coronary heart disease has been the leading cause of death in the United States over the past several years and stress is a known link to cardiovascular disease (Brehm et al., 2005). Stress causes our bodies to age prematurely, drastically increases susceptibility to disease, and has a significant link even to death (Cohen & Herbert, 1993).

Until the 21st century, research devoted to women’s health issues was limited and thus created a large gap in knowledge and understanding regarding women’s health. In 1990, the U.S. National Institutes of Health delivered a compelling report on the lack of feminine research that resulted in a directive to include women participants in research or provide evidence why they were not included (Rodin, 1991). Many studies on health issues that affect both genders have been based on research of male subjects. In past years, researchers often adopted the policy of one-size-fits-all and treated women like “little men” (Kohn, 2002, p. 56). Now the limited but valiant voices who previously cried out for research on women’s mental and physical health issues have joined other researchers in exploring the differences in psychosocial factors that challenge women (Cordon, 1997).

In the last several years, researchers who have included female subjects have found significant evidence that demonstrates stressful demands cause a critical negative effect on woman’s health. Stress affects many parts of a woman’s body, especially her heart. The American Heart Association (AHA, 2006) reported heart disease is the number-one cause of death in women in the United States, while stroke is number three. Heart attacks and strokes are caused by a disruption of the body’s bloodstream. A heart attack occurs when there is a significant reduction in blood flow to the heart. Lack of
blood flow to the brain or bleeding in the brain causes a stroke (AHA). Mental stress exacerbates poor health in people suffering with coronary artery disease, a condition in which plaque build-up narrows the coronary arteries. It is these vital vessels that supply oxygen-rich blood to the heart muscle (Howard, 2000). Psychological stress adds an additional burden of further reduction of blood flow to the heart in blood vessels that are already compromised due to plaque, thus setting the stage for a heart attack (Villarosa, 1997). Early in a woman’s life, especially during the childbearing years, estrogen is a protective factor in the reduction of hypertension and heart disease. As menopause begins, many researchers contend that estrogen discontinues guarding women from heart disease (Domar & Dreher, 1997). Women’s risk to heart disease and stroke increases with age. Yearly, approximately 46,000 more women than men suffer from strokes, and 60% of stroke deaths happen in women (AHA, 2006).

Stress has also been found to suppress the reproductive system. This action, in women, can cause amenorrhea—cessation of menstruation and failure to ovulate (Davis, Eshelman, & McKay, 1995). Stress not only plays a critical role in women’s physical health but challenges their mental well-being as well.

Research (Howard, 2000) supports data that details the considerable negative effect of stress on, and its relationship to, mental health disorder. Stress has been reported as one of the single most significant contributors to depression. Persistent or chronic stress has the potential to put vulnerable individuals at a substantially increased risk of depression, anxiety, and many other emotional difficulties (Hankin & Abela, 2005). Stress has also been linked to mental disorders such as Adjustment Disorder, Acute Stress
Disorder, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (J. L. Wang, Lesage, Schmitz, & Drapeau, 2008).

Females are diagnosed with depression and anxiety disorders at twice the rate of males. Researchers (J. J. Wang et al., 2007) using fMRI (functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging), that is, brain imaging, found that men and women react differently when responding to psychological stress. In a study on stress with 16 male and 16 female participants, researchers found that stress activated dissimilar regions of the brain (in each category of subjects). Findings reported that women’s activity was located primarily in the areas of the brain that involve emotion. Although both genders continued to experience the activation long after the stress task ended, female responses were stronger, which may explain the higher occurrence of mood disorders in women (J. J. Wang et al.).

Biologically distinctive, men and women possess individual psychological traits and develop, mature, and socialize differently. The sexes experience different role demands surrounding family, work, and environment/society. One of the demands that have confronted women in the last century is the rapid change in the work field. Women are working in almost every field, challenging men in the workplace; “it is stressful because it requires more energy to take ground [woman’s role] than to defend ground [men’s role]” (Hobfoll, 1986, p. 5).

Women share unique job-related stress, take on many different roles, and deprive themselves of healthy practices in order to fulfill work commitments. In the life of many women, work outside the home is a necessity because it is their only source of income or a substantial contribution to their family’s economic status. These women face considerable stress struggling to complete their daily responsibilities at their own
personal expense. In a study (as cited in Howard, 2000), researchers at the University of North Carolina studied the health habits of women at eight factories in the state. Findings identified poor health habits of these women due to time and energy constraints placed on them in their roles as working mothers. One third of the women smoked, 70% ate all high-fat foods, 90% ate few fruits and vegetables, 53% said they did not have time to exercise, and 43% lacked the motivation to exercise (Howard).

In a parallel study (Wolfson & Carskadon, 1996) of 184 professional women, 92% of the respondents did not sleep well. The more hours women spent working at their jobs, the less they slept and earlier they rose. These same women recounted associated physical complaints and diminished alertness. In order to meet the challenges of work and family, women compromised their health and well-being (Howard, 2000).

Many women have been drawn to the “helping” professions by the very nature of their gender. The emotional responsiveness of women, that is, understanding and responding sensitively to other’s needs, often makes it difficult to leave work behind. Nursing, a female-dominated field, is one of the most stressful professions and has a high turnover. Staffing crises continuously surface, yet little is provided to help nurses deal with stress, other than appeals to their sense of loyalty and sacrifice (Llewelyn & Osborne, 1990).

Today, more women than ever juggle multiple roles in work, marriage, and parenting; this juggling often results in negative stress. There is little time, yet so much to do: striving to be a good worker, sister, daughter, wife, and mother. But even before parenting begins, stress can play a definitive (negative) role on mother and child. Researchers found that continued high levels of stress experienced by mothers during
their pregnancy had a significant effect on their baby’s development. Researchers have also discovered high cortisol in the amniotic fluid surrounding babies in the womb. This results in lower IQs at 18 months, and these children are more likely to be anxious and fearful. Of the 1 million children who were diagnosed with neurodevelopment problems, approximately 15% were attributed to antenatal stress (Glover & O’Connor, 2005).

Employed mothers with young children face numerous and various demands and pressures. When a woman finishes her assignments at the workplace, she then faces a barrage of parenting and household tasks at home. Marital stress and the lack of spousal support produce additional stress for women. Women not only experience personal stress but are adversely affected by the stressors of their husbands and children.

Studies of dual-career marriages report that even though there has been an increase of husband participation in household tasks and child care, wives still carry a disproportionate load of the responsibilities. While women appreciated the help they received from their husbands, they felt burdened and stressed by the perception that organization and management of the household fell solely on their shoulders. They resented the implication that child care and household tasks are solely women’s responsibilities and that they should be grateful for any assistance given by their husbands (Wortman et al., 1991). Dr. Yehuda, chief psychiatrist at New York’s Veteran’s Affairs Center and professor of psychiatry at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine, remarked on women and stress:

I think that the kinds of things that women are exposed to tend to be in more of a chronic or repeated nature. Men go to war and are exposed to combat stress. Men are exposed to more acts of random physical violence. The kinds of interpersonal violence that women are exposed to tend to be in domestic situations, by, unfortunately, parents or other family members, and they tend not to be one-shot
deals. The wear-and-tear that comes from these longer relationships can be quite devastating. (as cited in Soares, 2007)

A woman’s expected responsibilities and roles within the home and family may be greatly influenced by her culture. Mexican American women, based on specific gender roles, perform numerous tasks that are culturally defined. These multiple roles strain women’s resources, which leads to daily stress that is associated with depression (Aranda, Castaneda, Lee, & Sobel, 2001). This type of sex-role “gender subordination of women” is very stressful and places tremendous pressure on women of all ages, but particularly as they age (Hurtado, 1995, p. 50).

Roles, Stress, and Senior Military Officers’ Wives

While the challenges to and demands placed on senior officers’ wives are derived from numerous external sources, stress remains an issue of personal perception. Stress prevails when individuals believe they cannot satisfy the demands life requires of them (Lazarus, 1999). Thus, it follows axiomatically that stress results when a senior officer’s wife perceives she cannot meet the expectations of her role.

Stress is the emotional response in reaction to an individual’s feeling pressured or anxious due to challenges and demands, and identifying the conditions that cause stress must be one of the fundamental objectives in stress research (Lazarus, 1999). Selye (1976) confirmed that in order to cope effectively with stress, researchers must first know what it is that causes us stress, and quoted Matthew Arnold to emphasize this concept: “Resolve to be thyself; and know that he, who finds himself, loses his misery” (p. 405).
In order for senior officers’ wives to deal with stress, it is imperative to recognize the conditions and situations that cause their stress.

Demands put on a military spouse are rank-specific. As the service member’s military rank increases, so do the challenges to, and obligations placed on, the spouse (Alt & Stone, 1990). While it must be emphasized that the military’s expectations for all wives are lofty, the demands placed upon women married to senior officers are even more copious and unique (Segal, 1990).

In the case of women married to senior officers, a husband’s rank influences the amount and type of work his wife performs; the higher the rank, the more she is expected to volunteer and paid employment is generally discouraged (Hopkins, 1996). These women are, for the most part, mandatory volunteers and perform many roles for organizations providing services for military members and their families. Studies have established that multiple roles produce increased levels of stress (Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Wethington, 1990). A senior officer’s wife must often entertain not only military members but civilians as well. As a mentor for junior officers’ wives, senior officers’ wives are expected to set examples and support junior spouses when and as often as needed (Marriott, 1991; Segal, 1988). The military relies on the senior officer’s wife to assume all necessary support obligations in order for the commanding officer to focus on the military mission (Harrison & Laliberte, 1997).

The attitude and behavior of a senior officer’s wife plays a significant role in the advancement, or lack thereof, in her husband’s promotions. Pressure rests on a senior officer’s wife’s ability to realize the importance of her role as a partner in her husband’s career and to carry out the responsibilities expected of her (Gibbons, 1984). The way in
which she responds to the demands on her role as a commander’s wife can have a lasting effect on her husband’s military career. Wives who shirk these responsibilities often are ostracized and diminish their husbands’ advancement (Harrison & Laliberte, 1997).

The nation’s highest ranking military leaders face constant stress, and their reactions to job stress can have a negative effect on the emotional well-being of their wives (Rook, Dooley, & Catalano, 1991). Senior military officers make decisions and give orders that impact thousands of lives. In today’s world, with the war in Iraq and global unrest, flag officers face additional grave and extremely arduous responsibilities that increase their stress. The feelings of distress experienced by a spouse may significantly affect the other spouse and, as a result, cause considerable stress to that other spouse (Jones & Fletcher, 1993). For example, when a senior officer’s wife observes the constant demands and weighty responsibilities of her spouse, it is likely that she will share some of the concerns and stress of her spouse’s job. In addition, she will also worry and stress over the well-being of her husband. Cumulative stress can have a ripple effect, resulting in the loss of family cohesiveness: As the level of stress increases, families become susceptible to crises, which in turn produce more stress for the matriarch of the family (Eastman, Archer, & Ball, 1990).

Responsibilities of a senior officer’s wife are detailed in a manual provided by the United States Army War College (2006) called *The Company Commander’s Spouse Battle Book*. One hundred and forty-seven pages advise wives on the vast and various duties, protocol, and responsibilities they will confront in their roles as senior officers’ wives. In closing, the book imparts words of wisdom from an experienced spouse; she
counsels that although a commander’s wife is a very rewarding job, it is a stressful, demanding job and seemingly never ending.

During the many hours of fulfilling her duties, a senior officer’s wife is compelled to constantly look and act the part of a commander’s wife by being physically, emotionally, and socially astute. A senior officer’s wife is immersed in a community where she is evaluated by her husband’s rank, which in turn determines her friends and associates, and her lifestyle (Biank, 2006). Because of the challenges and demands a senior officer’s wife continually faces, her self-reliance and autonomy may suffer (Klein, Tatone, & Lindsay, 1989). Her life is governed by her husband’s rank, and the military views her as a “dependent.” A military dependent is a formal designation entitling people to medical, housing, and shopping privileges based on their relationship to the active-duty military member.

Wives of senior officers are assumed to have little or no problems (Snyder, 1978). When personal problems do surface, they are often ignored or placed last in a long list of priorities. First on the list is usually what must be done to assist the husband in his military responsibilities. Next is assistance for the community and other officers and enlisted wives who need help, guidance, and support. When senior wives face their own personal stressors, they are nonetheless expected to maintain their official duties and provide emotional support for others (Snyder, 1978) while often receiving limited support themselves.

These wives may find it troubling to share personal difficulties and ask for support if they feel that their problems and issues would not be held in confidence. Close friends and supporters are important in the lives of military spouses, and a senior officer’s
wife is obligated to support the wives and families of her husband’s command (Marriott, 1997), while often finding she has few or no confidants. Lazarus (1999) reported that one’s perception of poor social support increases stress and leaves one highly vulnerable to illness.

Senior officers’ wives are placed in a position of expected leadership, serving as a model and mentor for others. Brown (as cited in Hopkins, 1996) reported the junior officer’s wife seeks leadership and guidance from a senior officer’s wife, who is required to support and aid junior wives experiencing difficulties when their husbands are absent or deployed. This support is not limited to officers’ spouses; a senior officer’s wife should be concerned and supportive to all wives, including women married to enlisted men, who are great in number and vital to the military’s success. A commander’s wife must encourage and assist enlisted officers’ wives, their families, and the personnel of the commander’s unit. Senior officers’ wives are obligated to be many things to many people. Numerous studies have shown that women are more sensitive and giving in a relationship (Belle, 1982; Eisenberg & Lennon, 1983; Wheeler & Nezlock, 1977) and genuinely care about others (Kessler, McLeod, & Wethington, 1985). This concern for others also brings about a vulnerability to psychological worry and stress (Hobfoll, 1986).

Most people do not recognize the names of American soldiers killed in combat that are flashed across television screens or published in newspapers. But these names belong to men and women who were part of a unit and a command and are not unfamiliar to the commander or his wife. These soldiers are the husbands, wives, fathers, and mothers who make up the military family. Across the ranks, people truly care about one
another and have a sense of belonging to family (Alt & Stone, 1991). Personal significance and the continuity of trauma cause a stress reaction (Lazarus, 1999).

To some individuals in the military, the mention of a senior officer’s wife conjures images of a particular type of woman: a stereotypical female who wears her husband’s stars on her shoulder and is an intrusive “snob” (Dana, 2006, p. 118). Even though the perceptions may be erroneous, it is not uncommon for some military personnel or their wives to have a fixed opinion regarding senior officers’ wives (Alt & Stone, 1990). These women are judged, not on their merit but on preconceived notions. Often a senior officer’s wife may feel left out or uncomfortable among other military wives (Dana).

Military men and women lead a nomadic lifestyle. A DoD survey (2002) reported that half of all military members relocate every 2 years, and officers move even more frequently. Research reports (Lazarus, 1999) that a significant source of stress is caused by relocating from familiar surroundings to a foreign environment. A senior officer’s wife, in addition to assuming all of the domestic and family duties, also must seek new employment, if she is in the workforce, when military relocations occur. Most senior officers’ wives are highly educated but must settle for positions for which they are overly qualified (Hopkins, 1996) and often have to relinquish their careers entirely (Segal & Harris, 1993).

Senior officers’ wives face many responsibilities and challenges due to the numerous roles they are expected to fulfill as spouses of high-ranking officers. Personal perceptions are a vital component in the evaluation of a stressful environment. Some demands produce eustress, or positive stress, which can be a source of motivation,
strength, and growth for some individuals, while other problems induce distress, negative stress, which can produce detrimental results. There are additional groups of women who share some parallel life characteristics with women married to high-ranking military officers.

Contemporaries in Stress

Though they are the specific focus here, senior military officers’ wives are not alone in their struggle with stress associated with marriage. They share an alliance with women married to men with careers associated with power, prestige, and visibility. Athletes’ wives (Ortiz, 2002), corporate executives’ wives (Ammons, Nelson, & Wodarski, 1982), and clergy wives (Morris & Blanton, 1998) face similar stressful challenges and expectations such as social isolation, lack of support, and relocation issues. These women confront unique stressors placed upon them due to their husbands’ positions, while trying to effectively manage their multiple roles and responsibilities in the home, work, and social environment so the husbands can fully commit to the demands of their careers.

Many individuals, both young and old, consider the world of sports a central focus in their lives. The mass media assists this focus by raising the players onto a pedestal. All eyes are on the athlete to excel in the game, to make the right decisions, and to win. Not unlike those of military officers, athletes’ careers are intense, and many people rely on athletes to remain at the top of their public form and image. While the athlete is absorbed in his career, it is his wife who must manage the public and private life of their marriage and family. Research (Ortiz, 2002, 2003, 2004) studies have
identified numerous stressors, similar to those of senior officers’ wives, that athletes’
wives encounter. Relocation, due to seasonal moves, social isolation, and preconceived
ideas from others regarding their life and lack of support, often produces stress for the
wife of an athlete. Women remarked that their husbands’ celebrity status and being in the
highest echelon on the team led many people to believe they led idyllic lives free from all
stress and anxiety. Other athletes’ wives felt the strain of not being able to confide in
anyone who would understand the unique problems their husbands’ chosen career
brought to their marriage (Ortiz, 2004).

Many corporate wives are subjected to the same multiple relocations and
prolonged absences as their military counterparts. Some would argue that military wives
are better off than their corporate sisters. The monetary and material rewards are less, but
the military structure lends a sense of family and ready-made community to the new
environment (Knapp & Newman, 1993; Seidenberg; 1973). Research (Coates, 1996;
Seidenberg) indicates that it takes time for individuals to establish friendships and build a
support group. Developing trust over time enables individuals to share confidences that
solidify a relationship. In lives of constant flux, women need friendships and
conversations with friends to form and sustain their sense of self (Coates). When wives
are continuously relocating, there is little or no time to build relationships necessary to
sustain intimate friendships, which can result in stress. Women, when stressed, seek to
connect with others. This lack of affiliation with other women due to frequent moves can
result in a significant increase of stress (Taylor et al., 2000). When an executive is
transferred overseas, it is the role and responsibility of the wife to relocate the family to
the foreign country. While often women struggle with an alien environment while
attempting to fulfill their role as personal service providers for their families, the husbands’ work environments are similar to their offices back in the United States. The wife of an American businessman reported, “My life changed 80% but his changes only 20%” (Wederspahn, as cited in Ueda, 1986, p. 48).

Clergy wives are expected to maintain a significant supportive role in the parish, to suffer the disapproval of members of the congregation when their husbands follow an unpopular plan of action, and to be willing to accept the role of counselor (Coates, 1996). Clergy wives, rather than separate entities, are often seen as adjuncts of their husbands, holding the same theological education and clerical skills. Thrust into the role of counselor, these women are often unwilling and untrained and feel inadequate to fulfill the position. They become stressed when they perceive they are unable to meet these demands; they “do not want to be used as an alternative to their husbands” (Coates, p. 41).

Senior military officers’ wives, as well as athletes’, corporate executives’, and clergy wives, share a bond. This bond—being married to high-profile, powerful men—brings with it unique experiences. While many of these experiences may be positive and enjoyable, many others produce stress and anxiety.

Coping: Theory and Process

Coping, in the theoretical framework of Lazarus and Folkman (1984), is the managing process designed to meet the demands appraised as stressful in the person-environment relationship. Davis et al. (1995) purported that environment, social stressors, physiological causes, and thoughts are four basic sources that generate stress. The
environment inundates people with noise, traffic, pollution, and weather, forcing a continuum of adjustments. Social stressors include financial problems, job insecurity, loss of loved ones, and personal and professional demands on our energy and time. Aging, an unhealthy lifestyle of poor nutrition and lack of exercise, illness, and sleep problems challenge the body and can result in physiological stress. Physiological responses to stress include symptoms such as muscle tension, headaches, stomach and bladder upset, and feelings of anxiety. The fourth source of stress is a person’s thoughts, that is, the brain interprets one’s thoughts as a threat and sets off an alarm (Lovallo, 2005). Although various sources generate the stress that individuals experience throughout a lifetime, it is the response to and management of these stressors that dictate the severity and level of stress impact on their lives.

Coping is thus defined as a process that continuously alters thoughts and behaviors in an effort to diminish demands that have been appraised as draining to or surpassing one’s resources. Lazarus (1991) and Lazarus and Folkman (1984) viewed this process as having three components. First, an appraisal of a demand is evaluated as stressful. Second, cognitive and behavioral efforts are employed to manage this stressful demand; and third, these efforts are constantly changing. This unified and interconnected process generates positive coping and is directed by one’s personal significance to a stressor.

Personal significance also influences the way people cope. Different people cope in various ways. How a person copes is determined not only by means of one’s coping resources but also by personal and environmental constraints that mitigate the use of one’s resources. Personal constraints, such as internalized values and beliefs, are based
on one’s culture, direct behaviors, and emotions, while environmental constraints are defined as more than one demand battling for identical resources. Constraints impair the coping process by negating the effective use of coping resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Coping facilitates two functions to assist an individual deal with stress: problem-focused coping and emotional-focused coping. Problem-focused coping is the modification or management of the stressor that has resulted in distress, and emotion-focused coping is the adjustment or controlling of the distress emotional response to the stressor (Lazarus, 1991). When individuals perceive they have the ability to alter their source of stress, they use constructive means (problem-focused coping) with which to deal with the stress. In problem-focused coping, an individual gathers information about the stressor that may pertain to one’s self or one’s environment and then takes action to change the situation (Lazarus, 1999). For example, if someone is stressed due to lack of or impolite communication by one’s physician, one would then find another competent doctor with an amicable bedside manner. Not all stressors can be managed with a problem-focused function; hence, emotion-focused coping is needed.

While problem-focused coping is directed towards action, emotion-focused coping involves one’s thought process. In emotion-focused coping, individuals believe the stressor cannot be altered or solved and they attempt to minimize or manage the stress. Rather than altering or taking action on the person-environment relationship, an individual may use emotion-focused coping in an attempt to control or adjust the emotions driving the stress (Lazarus, 1999).
According to Aspinwall and Taylor (1997) in their model of proactive coping, by planning ahead and accruing resources, an individual can ward off or modify the onset of a stressful event. In this model of coping, prevention is the key to coping with stress rather than lying in wait for life’s daily stressors and then reacting to it. Proactive coping is a multistep process of accumulating resources as a preventive measure in coping with stress.

In their cognitive-oriented theory of stress, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) deemed that individuals could cope and manage their stress by drawing on two means that facilitate the coping process: problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Aspinwall and Taylor (1977), however, theorized that prevention, in the form of building a reserve of resources, is central to successfully cope with stress. Both models of coping attempt to manage or negate one’s response to a stressful encounter and underscore the importance of the individual’s interpretation of the event. A person’s perceptions and choice of coping sources and strategies are decisive in reducing or eliminating stress. When one copes with stress using resources and effective skills, the level of stress is reduced (Greenberg, 2002).

In an attempt to gain insight into whether a specific characteristic held by an individual influenced his or her encounter of stressful life events, researchers (Ouellette [Kobasa], 1979, 1982, 1993) found hardiness to be a significant attribute in the evaluation and coping response to stress. Hardiness is viewed as a key quality that not only facilitates an individual to survive and thrive when faced with stress, but enhances functioning, mood, and mental and physical well-being. It is a hardy individual who
approaches life with a deep sense of commitment, “meaningfulness and an internal locus of control” (Ouellette [Kobasa], 1979, p. 1).

Coping Strategies for Stress Management

Stress is part of life, experienced by many people for a variety of reasons. How a person deals with stress determines one’s physical, mental, and emotional well-being. When one copes with stress using effective skills, the level of stress is reduced (Greenberg, 2002). Women can reduce and manage their level of stress by identifying and using effective coping strategies.

While the reality of a stressful situation remains the same, an individual’s appraisal of the stressors can substantially impact one’s reaction. The meaning and importance one assigns to a situation is one of the most significant factors in determining a stress response (Lazarus, 1999). By forming an altered rational meaning to a situation, that is, reappraising the stressor, one can regulate one’s stress. For example, when a senior officer’s wife is scheduled to speak at a military spouse’s luncheon, she may find herself severely stressed. But by viewing this engagement as an opportunity to share her understanding and practical knowledge with women who have encountered some of the same challenges she has previously experienced, talking to them may not seem so traumatic. The focus and importance of this situation shifted from her, to imparting knowledge to assist other wives cope with military life.

Stress is drawn from a variety of sources and situations, and there are various ways one can manage stress (Rose & Veiga, 1984). A review of stress management studies (Greenberg, 2002) confirms the effectiveness of problem-focused coping and
emotion-focused coping, and further studies (Girdano, Everly, & Dusek, 1993; Mitchell & Bray, 1990) highlight basic categories of coping (Mitchell & Everly, 1997). These stress management techniques are divided into “four strategies:

1. Avoiding Stressors
2. Cognitive Reinterpretation
3. Reducing Arousal
4. Ventilating the Stress Response” (Mitchell & Everly, p. 26).

One of the most effective strategies of coping with stress is by avoiding or reducing contact with the stressor; techniques include time management and problem solving. Cognitive reinterpretation requires reappraisal of the stressor (Mitchell & Everly, 1997), which is reframing the situation and interpreting the stressor in a more positive way. Research (Greenberg, 2002; Mitchell & Everly) has shown that relaxation techniques such as meditation, abdominal breathing, self-hypnosis, and progressive relaxation (contracting and relaxing one’s muscles) reduces arousal to stress and improves mental and physical health. Two effective means of releasing or venting stress is by exercising and catharsis (Mitchell & Everly). Exercise reduces the body’s reaction to stress and promotes good health (Girdano et al., 1993; Greenberg; Maron, 2000; Mason, 2001; Mitchell & Everly). Catharsis is beneficial since “verbally expressing [one’s] emotions helps resolve trauma and reduce stress” (Mitchell & Everly, p. 28).

Stress Management for Senior Military Officers’ Wives

Identification of the sources of stress and coping skills may not be sufficient to negate the stress response for a senior officer’s wife. She may need to apply coping
strategies that are specific to her particular stressors to ensure efficacy in stress reduction. Finding pertinent stress management techniques is a vital component in the reduction of stress (Deffenbacher & McKinley, 2006).

Determining which coping strategy—problem-focused coping or emotion-focused coping—would best fit the resolution to alter stress may prove difficult for a senior officer’s wife. Due to the unique demands and responsibilities placed upon her, problem-solving focus (taking action to change the situation) and avoiding the stressor may be difficult at best. It may even perpetuate additional stress. Persons who attempt to utilize just problem solving, when the condition could not be altered or solved, had significant levels of higher stress than those who accepted the situation as rigid and moved on to emotion-focusing (Lazarus, 1999, p. 124).

The self-appraisal of a senior officer’s wife regarding the performance of her duties and demands is a key component in the reduction of stress. The application of coping is most effective when one first appraises the situation or stressor, then implements positive actions while perceiving the situation in a propitious manner (Lazarus, 1999). By employing an emotion-focused coping technique, that is, restructuring or reframing how she views her stressors, a senior officer’s wife can positively impact her stress level. For example, instead of stressing over orders to relocate to a new post and dwelling on all the hassles involved, she can reinterpret her thoughts by perceiving a move as an exciting adventure with an opportunity to meet new people and view a different part of the world.

Humor makes people feel better and can improve a senior officer’s mental and physical health. The use of humor has been shown (Girdano et al., 1993; Greenberg,
2002) to be emotionally therapeutic; it relieves tension and stress. Humor lessens the consequences of a stressful condition; seeing the humorous aspects of a situation enables one to manage stress more effectively and reduce its negative results (Greenberg). Laughter can result in physiological changes in a senior officer’s wife. Effects include positive adjustment of heart rate, blood pressure, respiration, and an increase in the number of immune cells (Howard, 2000).

A senior officer’s wife may need to make a concerted effort to reintroduce humor into her life. Studies report (Greenberg, 2002) young teens laugh every 4 minutes, and by the time they reach adulthood, laughter dwindles to 15 times a day. A cross-cultural study (Goodwin & Tang, 1991) reported that humor was one of the most important qualities respondents coveted in relationships, and they enjoyed the time when they associated with individuals who used humor appropriately. The use of humor by a senior officer’s wife may dispel the negative misconceptions of those regarding her as the stereotypical woman. The results of coping humor are healthy changes, offering a senior officer’s wife an improved and relaxed body and mind.

The “natural antithesis of stress” (Mitchell & Everly, 1997, p. 27) is when the body relaxes and, rather than negatively reacting to the stressor, the body responds by moving toward a decrease in its reaction to stress. This reduction of stress arousal is engendered by a multitude of relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, progressive relaxation, meditation, and visualization (Greenberg, 2002). Listening to relaxation tapes, journaling, and reading are all instrumental in reducing stress (Greenberg; Mason, 2001). These kinds of stress management techniques offer a senior officer’s wife a selection of relaxation strategies from which to choose to suit her personal needs and allow her to
practice and develop these techniques in the privacy of her home. Personal stress management relaxation techniques significantly lower the body’s response to stress (Greenberg; Mason).

One of the simplest techniques to reduce stress is exercise. Swimming, bicycling, walking, jogging, weight training, skiing, golfing, dancing, yoga, and tai chi (developed in China using focused and rhythmic movement) all function to release natural chemical substances into the body (Greenberg, 2002). The two beneficial chemicals, produced by the body during exercise, are endorphins, which produce feelings of well-being, and dopamine, which is thought to be an antidepressant and to “arouse sexual feelings” (Greenberg, p. 214). In addition to reducing a senior officer’s wife’s stress, exercise will improve both her appearance and health. Exercise improves posture, successfully battles fatigue and insomnia, and increases muscular strength, flexibility, and endurance (Greenberg; Mason, 2001). Overall, exercise is the most effective way to reduce stress; exercise is an excellent technique to improve both mental and physical well-being (Greenberg; Mason).

A senior officer’s wife may find it difficult to discuss her anxieties and stress with other military wives for she is expected to be a leader, a mentor, and have little or no problems (Snyder, 1978). Counseling offers unbiased, confidential support to those in distress, while encouraging tranquility and self-efficacy (Posen, 1995). With the aid of a counselor, senior officers’ wives can develop and practice coping skills, build on their strengths, and explore new stress management techniques such as hypnosis, biofeedback, and autogenics (a strategy that programs the body and mind to relax), and gain a safe haven for emotional release (Greenberg, 2002; Mason, 2001).
Life in the U.S. military imparts specific challenges and stress for the men and women who serve this country, as well as their spouses. Whether a spouse is married to an enlisted or officer military member, she encounters the demands that are characteristic of the military’s lifestyle. Although all military spouses shoulder challenges unique due to their alliance with military life, research (Segal, 1990) acknowledges that the spouse of a senior military officer carries additional roles, responsibilities, and stress. The conceptual framework for this study was drawn from the literature on stress, stress management, and coping. The application of this framework is directed to the lives of senior military officers’ wives from their own perspectives; hence, the methodology is phenomenological.
CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

Purpose of the Study

As described previously in chapter 1, the purpose of this study was to investigate the life experiences of senior military officers’ wives. A qualitative phenomenological approach examined the thoughts, feelings, challenges, and coping techniques in the lives of this particular population of military wives. It was through this research method that the researcher constructed a detailed depiction of the meaning and essence of their lives while answering the question: “What is the lived experience of a senior military officer’s wife?” A phenomenological study was appropriate to gain in-depth knowledge and an understanding of core concepts from an insider’s viewpoint (Moustakas, 1994).

The literature, for the most part, provided ample quantitative data for and about military wives as a group. Due to global strife, new, but scant, qualitative data have emerged regarding a spouse’s experience when the other spouse is ordered to a war zone, although literature provided little to no understanding of what a senior officer’s wife experiences in the military community. This study will contribute to the deficiency in the literature and offer illumination and knowledge generated from the women’s unique experiences.

Research Design

The purpose of phenomenology is to gain an in-depth understanding of the essence and meaning of what it is like to have experienced the phenomenon being studied, in this case, perceptions, feelings, perspectives about their lives, the role of the
senior military wife, her stress, adjustment, and sense of self. Therefore, a phenomenological research design was essential and appropriate for this study as the researcher sought to gain holistic knowledge of the meaning and perceptions of what it is like to live this experience directly from the senior military officers’ wives. The choice of a research design initiates with a subject area and a paradigm, that is, a worldview of how one reaches the truth. It is the framework of principles and techniques that shapes the research under investigation. Phenomenology, a representative methodology in qualitative research, is shaped by the paradigm framework of ontology, epistemology, philosophy, and methodology (Joniak, 2002).

The Qualitative Paradigm

Qualitative research, labeled as constructivism, is a valid and rigorous methodological approach for conducting research (Creswell, 1994). This form of research serves as an indispensable tool in analyzing, determining, and interpreting information. The choice of a qualitative phenomenological research design was based on the ontology and epistemology of reality and the nature of the reality that can be studied.

Ontology is the study of the nature of reality. An ontological question attempts to answer what is the nature of truth or the fundamental entity that a particular assumption suggests. This study of the nature of reality investigates and explains what is held true by a theory and what constitutes proof or confirmation of that truth (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). In a phenomenological design, qualitative researchers offer that valid reality and acceptable evidence of the phenomenon under study are found in the perceptions of those
experiencing it. A researcher dedicated to a specific ontology may also adhere to a specific epistemology.

Epistemology is the examination of the philosophical beliefs and methods of inquiry to gain knowledge (Proctor & Capaldi, 2006). Epistemology is interested in the origination and construction of knowledge. In an epistemological inquiry, researchers seek to find the relationship between the “knower, or one that will know” (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p. 3) and the knowledge, that is, “what is known” (Maykut & Morehouse, p. 3). Researchers’ ontological and epistemological suppositions will guide and direct their acquisition of knowledge.

The worldview or ontological assumptions of qualitative research lie in the perception that the nature of truth can be found in internal reality (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000), reality that is based upon one’s perception of one’s experiences. Individuals’ perceptions are unique unto themselves, so each individual experiences reality differently. Qualitative investigators report phenomenological understanding with rich and detailed interpretations of the participants’ reality and emphasize the significance of individual experiences (Proctor & Capaldi, 2006).

These researchers work under the epistemological assumption that phenomena must be studied as a whole and viewed in their context to achieve a sound understanding. Studies must be investigated within their social context “to document the articulation and emergence of meaning in rich detail as it unfolds” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000, p. 33). Qualitative researchers seek to discover the insider’s viewpoint with reality provided by people’s perceptions rather than viewing only a section of a truth that they assert is provided by quantitative analysis, knowledge through statistical analyses (Patton, 2002).
In order to present a detailed examination of this epistemological approach, research (Waller, Johnston, & Milton, 2006) states that three questions must be answered: “What can be known?” “What is the relationship between the knower and the known?” “How do we find things out?” (p. 3).

In qualitative research, the known will be rich in details and descriptive of the studied phenomenon. Knowledge will be based on answering the “how” and “what” of the exploratory investigation rather than proving an expressed hypothesis. Understanding of the known is derived from the perspective of the participants who perceive the phenomenon from their direct experience. Investigations made in a natural setting collect data of the insider’s viewpoint of reality, reality being defined by each participant’s own perception. Reality is dynamic, corresponding to the adjustments of subjects’ perceptions (Creswell, 1994). The purpose of an inductive qualitative research and analysis is discovery and insightful understanding and generation of theories and hypotheses through a contextual data collection process. Knowledge and reality is not objective, fixed, and measurable based on statistical relationships and analytical categories as in quantitative research. Rather, knowledge derived through flexible qualitative methods is the outcome of an abundance of detailed information. This knowledge, from those who have firsthand experience, offers a view, deep in understanding and rich insights, into an individual’s thoughts, actions, attitudes, and motivations (Thomas, 2006). The power of this constructive method lies in its ability to provide an in-depth and perceptive understanding about a relatively small number of people and cases.

Qualitative researchers believe that researchers, participants, and knowledge influence each other, that is, they are interdependent. In this method of inquiry, the
researcher is the measurement instrument (Proctor & Capaldi, 2006). Qualitative investigators rely on the skill, competence, and thoroughness of the researcher, the principal instrument in the inquiry, to maintain and sustain credibility.

Constructivists as qualitative researchers recognize that they and all investigative researchers, regardless of their assumptions, are biased by their unique perceptions (Trochim, 2006). They acknowledge the prejudices of their analysis and apply techniques to correct and validate their findings. External auditing, participant validation, triangulation (the use of various investigators and sources of data or methods) are used to ensure qualitative research validity (Breakwell, Hammond, Fife-Schaw, & Smith, 2006).

**Phenomenology**

A qualitative research design is influenced by the purpose of the inquiry, which in this case was to examine the lives of senior military officers’ wives and offer their perceptions, feelings, thoughts, and perspectives about their role and its demands and the managing of those demands, as they experienced it. Data can be collected via three kinds of information collection: in-depth interviews, direct observation, and written documents (Patton, 2002). Qualitative investigators choose one of five common methodology designs to research a study. One design of qualitative research is phenomenology; researchers by applying this method seek to understand a situation through the eyes of those who have experienced it (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). Polkinghorne (1989) described phenomenological research as unique and unlike other descriptive and qualitative approaches.
Because its focus is on the subject’s experienced meaning instead of on description of their overt actions or behavior. Phenomenology maintains the critical distinction between what presents itself as part of a person’s awareness and what might exist as a reality “outside” of our experience. (p. 44)

The methodology of a phenomenological design of qualitative research acquires knowledge by asking questions. Rather than generalize and predict, this investigative method provides narrative and perceptive understanding of an investigation. While studying the context in which behavior occurs, patterns, themes, insights, and holistic concepts emerge from the collection of data. This contextual data include observations in natural settings, document evaluations, and interviews (Thomas, 2006). An investigator employs in-depth, open-ended interviews to generate a wealth of understanding of an insider’s view of the studied phenomenon.

Quality in-depth, open-ended interviews are contingent upon the skills of the interviewer. Rigorous techniques and an empathic interest are vital in collecting data. The three types of interview approaches are informal conversational interviews, guided-approach interviews, and standardized open-ended interviews. The conversational interviewer goes with the flow of an interchange with a participant without a predetermined set of questions and actively enters into the discussion. The strength of a highly interactive conversational exchange lies in its flexibility and spontaneity and builds on the experience. The guided-approach interview provides participants with issues and a focus for exploration. The interviewer directs and facilitates the discussion with individuals or focus groups as they listen and respond to one another. The standardized open-ended interview requires structured, predetermined questions that each interviewee receives in the exact same manner to increase comparability of the
participants’ responses. This interview structure aids in organization and analysis of the information (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005).

The questions to be answered and the rationale of a study and target audience should determine the choice of the qualitative research design, that is, which method will best meet the requirements and produce worthy results. A phenomenology research study searches to discover and understand the meaning and essence of the participants’ lived experiences. A researcher employs this type of qualitative design method to seek insights into the events and behaviors as well as the influence of participants’ perceptions on their behavior. Researchers methodically record the participants’ narratives to capture the experience in order to gain a deep, rich understanding of the phenomenon under study (Maxwell, 1996).

Sample size and selection is intentionally nonrandom in a phenomenological approach. It is specifically purposeful in selecting participants who are knowledgeable about the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2002). Appropriate sampling, relevant focus, and creditable questions can provide qualitative researchers with a plethora of information by which to answer the questions put forth in their research.

The work of a researcher is to examine and consider the processes of perception, thought, and descriptions (Giorgi, 1997). It is by these descriptions that knowledge is revealed from first-person accounts. Moustakas (1994) stated a phenomenological study is a justifiable and applicable means of securing knowledge, knowledge that will capture the sense and core of the experience. This methodology—phenomenology—was selected as the research design most fitting to explore and assimilate this investigation of senior officers’ wives.
The purposeful sample consisted of 8 senior military officers’ wives who were selected because they lived the experience under investigation. The size of a focused sample was based on the purpose and the rationale of the phenomenon under study (Patton, 2002). The number of participants selected was relative to the intention and logic of this study. Prior to participant selection and contact, ethical considerations were addressed.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues are a concern when conducting psychological research with humans. Institutional Review Boards, informed consent, and confidentiality safeguard the people who partake in research studies. The purpose of an Institution Review Board (IRB) is to protect the rights and welfare of participants involved in the research. These internal committees review and approve research proposals to ensure compliance with ethical rules and regulations governing treatment of human participants in research (Stanley, Sieber, & Melton, 1996). Permission to conduct this study was requested from each participant’s military service, as well as the IRB at Capella University.

A signed informed consent by the partakers under investigation is an essential part of maintaining good ethical practices. Researchers (Brody, Gluck, & Aragon, 1997; Faden & Beauchamp, 1986) have argued that information obtained by an investigator from subjects in that research ultimately belongs to the participants rather than the researcher. Therefore, it is vital that all participants read, understand, and sign an informed consent that furnishes all pertinent information regarding their involvement in
the research. All senior officers’ wives involved in this research scrutinized and fully understood what they could expect as participants in this study.

Procedures were strictly followed that safeguarded and maintained all participants’ confidentiality. For identification, labels from P1–P8 replaced participants’ names. Subsequently, the participants were identified only by the numbered label. Demographic information also carried the corresponding number of the participant. Names, addresses, phone numbers, and e-mails were filed on a computer that was only accessible to the author. A hardcopy of this information was stored in the author’s home office. All information, such as audio recordings, transcriptions, and researcher’s notes, were exclusively identified by the corresponding participant’s number.

Data Collection

Data collection for this research study consisted of observations, in-depth semistructured interviews, and journaling and audiotapes from a purposeful sampling (i.e., the women who have lived the phenomenon under study). According to experts, researchers conducting qualitative studies are limited only by their “open-mindedness and creativity” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005, p. 143). Consequently, forms of data such as electronic documents (e.g., e-mail and Web sites) were included in data collection in addition to interviews and observations.

Observations

Observations afforded this qualitative researcher the flexibility to obtain information that may not have been anticipated. Unstructured and free-flowing observations allow focus to shift when another object or event appears significant to the
study (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). Individuals’ actions can provide a researcher with information regarding situations, rules, and relationships in which the participants are involved (Breakwell et al., 2006). To ensure data are not distorted or overlooked, it is vital for the researcher to note observations as soon as time permits.

**Interviews**

Interviews provided data concerning the thoughts, feelings, perspectives, and present and past behaviors (i.e., coping strategies) of the lived experiences of senior officers’ wives. Caution was noted (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005) that unstructured interviews may direct the phenomenon of study into a direction that may not be significant to the intended topic. Participants were given the opportunity to freely discuss their experiences, although semistructured, face-to-face interviews provided some formation to gain sufficient data for the focus of the study. Interviews were limited to 90 minutes. In order to identify themes and patterns common to the interviewees, the researcher prepared questions designed to facilitate continued dialogue and focus on relevant and specific topics.

**Audiotapes**

Audiotapes ensured permanent and accurate recording of data. This data collection also provided a means of verification by other researchers (Breakwell et al., 2006). To safeguard confidentiality, subjects were identified on the tape by their assigned numbers.

**Journal Entries**

This researched used journal entries to record her experiences in regard to personal feelings, observations, experiences, and interpretation of the interviews and their
process, and the phenomena under study. Memoing, a form of journaling by researchers, is a procedure that describes what is heard, seen, and experienced as it emerges throughout the collecting and reflecting process of the investigation. Miles and Huberman (1984) emphasized that researchers should be aware and so note the distinction between their descriptive and reflective notes (Groenewald, 2004). These memos evoke the thoughts and ideas of the researcher at the recorded date and time of the process. This information, if pertinent, can be correlated with the data at a later date.

The basis of this data analysis consisted of identifying categories, recurrent themes, ideas, and belief systems that were shared between research participants (spouses) and settings (military life). Consequently, data received from the focused open-ended questions provided variables and categories that presented “context-bound” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005, p. 147) themes and patterns to facilitate understanding of the lived experiences of senior officers’ wives.

Target Population and Participant Selection

Women married to men in the military experience unique circumstances and responsibilities. While significant challenges face all military wives, officers’ wives deal with additional and more stringent demands than those faced by enlisted wives (Segal, 1990). These demands often center on obligations and priorities determined by the spouse’s rank and position. One of the most significant factors in selection of participants is that they have experienced the phenomenon being investigated (Creswell, 2007). Consequently, the participants were women who had experienced the life of a senior military officer’s wife.
All participants (senior officers’ wives) in this study were female and married to men who have achieved the rank of one star or above (i.e., Brigadier Generals or Rear Admirals in the U.S. military and above). Eight women were selected who are presently experiencing life as a senior officer’s wife. Male spouses married to female senior officers, while sharing some experiences with their female counterparts, differ in their overall demands and responsibilities. Therefore, this study focused only on female spouses.

The size of a purposeful sample is based on the reason and the rationale of the phenomenon under study (Patton, 2002). It may not be feasible to arrive at a definitive reality for research to be reliable and valuable (Schram, 2003, p. 97), due to the relatively small number of officers who have achieved a senior grade rank (Generals or Admirals). Names of potential participants were provided by a senior officer’s wife. The author shared with this female spouse the experience of having lived the life of senior officer’s wife but not a personal relationship. An e-mail was sent to each possible participant explaining the topic of the study and all ethical issues involved.

The power of sampling is drawn from participants who have personal experience with the phenomenon; and from this personal familiarity, knowledge is gained about the issues significant to the purpose of the study. The sampling procedure was based on judgment sampling, defined as deciding on the intention the research wants the sample to serve and then proceeding to find individuals to fulfill the requirement (Patton, 2002).
Procedures

In this qualitative research design—a phenomenological study—the researcher searched to discover and understand the essential meaning and essence of the lived experiences for senior officers’ wives. Through qualitative analysis, an investigator seeks focus and insight into the physical events and behaviors, as well as how the participants’ perceptions influence their behavior (Maxwell, 1996). This type of qualitative analysis describes how participants perceive, explain, feel about, and make sense of a phenomenon.

Researchers methodically record the narrative to thoroughly capture the experience in order to gain a deeper and richer understanding of the meaning of a specific phenomenon. A literature review was initially performed to gain further understanding of this phenomenon. Two descriptive levels delineate the empirical phenomenological model.

In the first level, data collection is obtained through open-ended, semistructured questions and dialogue. A researcher using semistructured interviewing regards participants as experts in the matter under investigation. In the interview, senior military officers’ wives were guided rather than dictated to by the posed questions. In the second level, the researcher articulates and communicates the structures of the experience ascertained from reflective study and interpretation of the subjects’ narratives.

The basis of data analysis consisted of identifying categories, recurrent themes, ideas, and belief systems that were shared across research participants (spouses) and settings (military life). This phenomenological research employed the use of codes to generate themes and emphasize the progressive process of coding—arrangement of the
data into major categories, categorization of data within each arrangement, such as creating subcodes and placing the various groups of data into a meaningful sequence or inter-related patterns. Patton (2002) cautioned that this process must be done with considerable thought, in order to prevent evaluators from generating categories from what they think is, rather than what is, reality.

Codes develop from two different typologies—indigenous typology and analyst-constructed typology—which are classification systems that separate and label what participants have said. Indigenous typologies are categories, previously established, that derive from the language of the group of people who are being researched. Analyst-constructed typology is implemented when “pre-existing labels” (Patton, 2002, p. 459) for categories do not correspond to the qualitative data, or other new labels emerge that are a better fit. Indigenous typology will initially guide the coding, although researchers must be cognizant that this preexisting framework may not be most appropriate for compiling data. In this instance, analyst-constructed typology, if more suitable for coding, was used to label the categories.

The preparation and organization of phenomenological data is a significant step in qualitative research (Kostere & Percy, 2006). The collection of the raw data was accomplished by interviews, observations, and audiotapes. Audiotapes were transcribed by the researcher.

Organization of the data (i.e., index cards, a filing system, highlighter pens, sticky notes, and creating a computer base) assisted in arrangement and classification. Word-processing programs also allowed the researcher to retain data in raw form and to cut-and-paste meaningful narrative into independent documents for “deeper analysis and
comparison” (Kostere & Percy, 2006, p. 19). Oka and Shaw (2003) suggested that inexperienced researchers often concentrate on the part rather than the whole and must be aware of the context in which “the fragment is located” (p. 7). These authors also reported that data analysis should be conducted simultaneously with data collection.

Validity and Reliability

Validity in a study is defined as precision in measuring what was intended to be measured, while reliability is predicated on the level of replicability (Creswell, 1998). Qualitative researchers (Creswell; Guba & Lincoln, 1981) have asserted the words credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability better reflect the criteria for judging accuracy and dependability in qualitative research. Credibility requires corroboration from the participants.

According to Stainback and Stainback (1988), qualitative researchers utilize corroboration to support and increase credibility and worth in their studies. Corroboration is employed to ensure that the findings validate the participants’ perceptions. This concept was used in this investigation to substantiate that the data collected reflected the senior officers’ wives’ insights. The female participants were requested to review and comment on this researcher’s interpretations of the data compilation for accuracy in capturing their lived experiences. Examination and assessment from the participants can assure researchers that they have correctly interpreted conclusions (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997).

Transferability is characterized as the level to which the results of a study can be transferred to another. This criterion was established by the researcher’s comprehensive
and methodical task in reporting the phenomena and premises central to the study. Rich descriptive data allow transferability judgments for those interested in conveying the results to another context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

By the very nature of qualitative research in which context is evolving and altering, it is the responsibility of the researcher to describe these inevitable changes. Dependability involves an explanation of these changes and the effect it has on the researcher’s approach to the study. There are two techniques to augment confirmability, that is, the level at which the study findings could be confirmed by other researchers. One, the researcher provides evidence of the practice for persistently checking the data during the research. Two, at the conclusion of the study, the researcher scrutinizes the data collection and analysis for possible prejudice or misrepresentation (Guba & Lincoln, 1981).

Role of the Researcher

In order to conduct a productive interview, the researcher should develop a plan or guidelines. Consequently, this researcher (a) proposed the interview question that has been identified; (b) ensured that the participants were representative of the group under study—all women are married to one-star (or above) military officers; (c) decided on an appropriate location—for most women this was the privacy of their home; (d) collected a signed consent form explaining the investigation verified their participation in the study; (e) established a bond that would continue throughout the relationship; (f) focused on facts, thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of the women participants; (g) listened to rather than guided the participants’ words; (h) captured the words the participants used to
explain their experiences—a tape recorder was used for this purpose after consent was given; (i) maintained facial expressions, keeping obvious feelings confidential; (j) kept in mind that the spouses were relating their perceptions, and treated the information as such (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005).

Knowledge that qualified this researcher to perform the data collection included participation in and passing Capella University’s course in Qualitative Analysis, experience as a licensed mental health counselor, and working as a reporter and columnist for a newspaper in Virginia. This researcher has had the opportunity to interview numerous clients over the years in various agencies and private practice. During the clinical internship—a requirement for completion in a master’s program—an interviewing techniques were emphasized in many of the courses. A bimonthly column in a local newspaper afforded opportunities to interview individuals on a regular basis.

To gain additional experience and feel more confident in the collection of data, this researcher practiced bracketing. This is a process in which the researcher sets aside all preconceptions, biases, and beliefs in regard to what is being experienced and described by the participants. Recent attendance and participation in an instructional session held at colloquia was beneficial by providing a hands-on experience of epoche. Examination and review of other phenomenological inquiries helped familiarize this researcher with the process of how researchers identify and define themes and patterns. Consultation with this researcher’s mentor also was helpful in determining if a necessary skill was lacking or needed improvement.
Research Question

The questions central to this study asked, “What is life like for women married to senior military officers?” “What is the essence and meaning of the lived experience for these women?” and “What are the perceptions of their role, its subsequent demands and management of the challenges set forth from the role for senior officers’ wives as they experience it?”

Data Analysis

According to Creswell (1998), the Stevick–Colaizzi–Keen method is a commonly used appropriate means to analyze data in a phenomenological research study. This method was employed to analyze the data collected in this study. The Stevick–Colaizzi–Keen consists of four steps. First, the researcher sets aside any personal suppositions, to allow an unobstructed new view of the phenomena unfold through the thoughts, words, and perceptions of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). This phenomenological procedure that addresses the inevitable challenge researchers must face to silence their conscious reality is achieved in epoche, a process in which the researcher sets aside all preconceptions, biases, and beliefs in regard to what is being experienced and described by the participants. Consequently, this researcher freed herself of the preconception based on the literature that stated the life of a senior military officer’s wife is stressful (Segal, 1990), and came to know the phenomena as they appeared and evolved. Knowledge must transpire and emerge from the voices of the participants “not only in terms of the external object but also the internal act of consciousness, the experience as such, the rhythm and relationship between phenomenon and self” (Moustakas, p. 90). A straightforward focus
must remain on the perceived experience of the participants, rather than presuppositions or expectations by the researcher, that a specific issue or analytical pattern will emerge.

Secondly, researchers rigorously examine the transcripts to capture the meaning of the experience from the participants’ statements. Phenomenological reduction is a task by which the participants relate their views of the phenomenon in terms of external and internal cognitions and of the connection between the phenomenon of study and self. The researcher considers the relevance of all statements collected, eliminates redundancies, and notes all important statements of the participants. The researcher elaborates on the meaningful units and relates them to one another by categorizing them into themes. Direct quotes and verbatim narrative from the participants are included to describe the varying intensities within an experiential context.

In the third step, defined as imaginative variation, the researcher seeks to answer the question of “how” this phenomenon came to be, that is, what it is and how it was experienced. Divergent perspectives, different frames of reference, and imagination give rise to possible meanings of the experience.

Lastly, all relevant data are synthesized and common themes that have emerged will be offered to describe the essence of the experience of the phenomenon of study for the participants (Kostere & Percy, 2006).

Expected Findings

It was expected that small samples would allow a sharp focus to gather in-depth data to understand the lived experiences of senior officers’ wives. Face-to-face probing interviews, observations, and audiotaping were expected to provide insightful knowledge
that would reveal patterns and themes that describe the life of senior military officers’
wives. While generalization is not an expectation of a purposeful sample, rich responses
and data from participants offered important information on the phenomenon under
analysis. It was anticipated that the narratives of the participants would provide an
insider’s view of this unique population to the readers of the study. Literature on wives of
senior military officers was limited, and with this phenomenological study, the research
researcher expected to increase the body of literature on this topic.
CHAPTER 4. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Introduction

Although all spouses encounter challenges that are characteristic of the military’s lifestyle, it has been noted (Segal, 1990) that the spouse of a senior military officer shoulders multiple additional responsibilities.

The goal of this phenomenological research was to examine the lives of senior military officers’ wives, their perceptions, thoughts, and feelings about their role, and its demands as they lived it. More to point, the purpose of this study was to listen to the voices of 8 senior officers’ wives who described their roles, demands, and experiences as they perceived them. The essence of the experience of these women who are married to military men of the highest echelon was presented with their own words, in narrative form.

Data Analysis

In accordance with the Stevick–Colaizzi–Keen method of data analysis, the initial step in a phenomenological research study is to refrain from judgments and any personal suppositions of the phenomena under investigation. The researcher, by means of epoche, sets aside all biases, beliefs, and preconceived assumptions regarding the experience described by the participants. To ensure and maintain presuppositions would be set aside, the researcher soundlessly and repeatedly verbalized the phrase, “This is not about me, listen and let them tell their story.” This researcher also included the phrase on the notebook brought to the interviews and displayed on the office wall where the analysis
was conducted. At the onset, the researcher established a friendly relationship with most of the participants and instilled a trust that their words would be accurately heard. Epoche processes allowed this researcher to quiet conscious reality and hopefully examine with a clear view the thoughts, insights, and perceptions of the 8 participants.

Six of the interviews were conducted in the privacy and comfort of the participants’ living rooms. One of the interviews was held in a coffee shop, at the request of the participant. The setting allowed sufficient privacy to preserve confidentiality. The last interview was conducted via telephone due to a distant military relocation. All interviews were documented on a digital voice recorder.

Before the interviews were conducted, an e-mail was sent to each participant who had expressed an interest in participating in the study, requesting a means of communication in order to further discuss the study. Participants furnished phone numbers and times when they could be reached to address various aspects of the research and interview. Two or three preliminary telephone conversations were held with each of the women. All 8 of the women consented to participate in the study, and a mutually agreed-upon time, place, and date were established for each interview.

Phenomenological research is basically a tool for assessing intrapsychic states, feelings, and perceptions of the participants, and draws on interviews to collect data to provide knowledge about the essence of how the participants experience the phenomenon under investigation. Semistructured interviews with open-ended questions to elicit responses were conducted to impart some focus of consensus, as well as to allow thematic information to emerge (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Before each interview, the researcher actively sought to suspend preconceptions by being mindful that each person
holds personal perceptions that make her life and views unique. This study therefore sought to view this phenomenon through their eyes and not those of the researcher.

The researcher attentively listened as each participant described her perceptions of her life experiences, her roles, and the demands as a senior officer’s wife. At the end of the interview, the participants were offered an opportunity to voice any additional information they felt was relevant to the study and/or that they would like the reader to know about what it is like to be a senior officer’s wife. All 8 of the participants provided additional thoughts and offered advice.

After each interview, and at a later time, the researcher repeatedly listened to each of the tapes to achieve a clear understanding of the interviews. The researcher engaged a transcriber to convert the taped interviews into written documents. A copy of the interviews was transferred to a CD. All identifying information was deleted from the tapes before it was given to the transcriber. The interviews were labeled according to the order in which they were conducted, and identifiers such as P1, P2 were assigned. The researcher noted the names of the participants with their corresponding interview order.

In keeping with the second step of the Stevick–Colaizzi–Keen method of phenomenological data analysis, the researcher meticulously examined the transcription of each interview to attain the general sense and meaning of the experience from the remarks of the 8 senior officers’ wives. In the next step of analysis, that is, phenomenological reduction, the researcher considered line by line each statement, comment, and phrase voiced by the participants. In the process of horizontalizing, the researcher initially regarded every statement equally and later eliminated repetitive and overlapping statements. Employment of this method allowed only the textual meaning of
the phenomenon, that is, the *horizons*, to remain (Moustakas, 1994). These remaining statements represent “the invariant horizons or meaning units of the experience” (Moustakas, p. 122).

After statements and redundant comments were eliminated, detailed consideration was applied to content, the number of times a particular meaning was stated, and the manner in which it was stated (Moustakas, 1994). Each participant’s interview document was highlighted in a different color. Epoche was consciously employed during this initial analytical period when subjective judgments may take place regarding what is meaningful and what is not, epoche to avert inappropriate judgments due to personal assumptions and biases (Groenewald, 2004).

The researcher made note of the significant statements of the senior officers’ wives after considering the relevance of all the statements collected and the elimination of repetition and redundancy. Through a process of sorting and comparing, the researcher clustered and related the meaningful units to one another by categorizing them into emergent themes. Verbatim narratives and direct quotes offered documentation, depth, and richness to the account of the participants’ experiences as they related to the emerging themes. The resultant themes were then employed to describe the structure of how the participants experienced the phenomenon that was their role and related demands as senior officers’ wives.

As outlined by Stevick–Colaizzi–Keen, the third step in data analysis is imaginative variation. At this point, the researcher focused on what the phenomenon is and how it was experienced, that is, “how” this phenomenon came to be. This included multiple aspects of the interview data such as various and distinctive perspectives, a
particular frame of reference, and a particular way of thinking form intuition that is imaginative rather than empirical.

The outlook shift to interpretive intuition offered the researcher various and alternative possibilities for capturing the essence of the participants’ experiences, thus emphasizing that the path to truth is not singular but rather has many possibilities that are closely linked with the essences and meanings of an experience. Through this process of imaginative variation, rigorous reflection, and analysis, the researcher developed and delineated structural themes extracted from the textural descriptions. By means of this process, the researcher was able to accurately derive the true meaning of the participants’ experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

Finally, all relevant data provided by the participants were synthesized and the textural and structural descriptions were generated, providing a narrative of the essence of the experiences extracted from the interviewees and analysis, and ascribed to the 8 participants.

Credibility

The analysis included participant validation of the data to strengthen credibility to ensure that the document captured the participants’ thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of their experiences and how they perceived their experiences. Each participant was sent a copy of their text and requested to review it carefully for its meaning, discrepancies, and any additions deemed beneficial or thoughtful. Each participant validated that the transcribed documents reflected their perspectives.
Instrument

The initial semistructured interview began with the vital question, “What is it like to be a senior officer’s wife?” Additional open-ended probing questions guided rather than dictated participants to elaborate and candidly describe their experience. In addition to the research and interview questions, each participant was asked, “Is there something I have not asked that you would want readers of this study to know?” The description of the study was introduced in the initial contact with the participants. Additionally, the question was asked, “Is there anything else you would like to add?”

Demographics

All 8 participants answered questions regarding age, years married, education, number and ages of children, housing, and the number of relocations due to the spouse reaching the rank of a senior military officer. Additional demographics included employment status, occupation, children serving in the U.S. military, and personal previous military service. While some phenomenological studies include a full description of the participants, this study only offers demographics of the senior officers’ wives. This researcher believed any further personal information regarding the 8 participants would jeopardize confidentially and violate ethical standards.

A demographic overview of the 8 senior officers’ wives who participated in the study is shown in Table 1.
Table 1. Demographic Overview of the Participant Senior Officers’ Wives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ages of women</td>
<td>Participants ranged in age from 45 to 58 years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>All participants held college degrees and 4 held additional graduate degrees.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years married</td>
<td>One participant has been married under 15 years, while the remaining had been married between 20 to 40 years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>All participants were mothers of children whose ages ranged between 14 to 36 years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>Seven participants lived on base housing. One lived in a civilian community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of moves since spouse became a senior officer</td>
<td>Two participants had moved only 1 to 2 times since their spouses had just achieved Flag rank. The others had relocated between 4 and 27 times.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment status</td>
<td>Two of the participants held jobs outside the home. The remaining participants were not employed outside the home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>Both working participants were employed as professionals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children serving in the military</td>
<td>Six children of the participants were serving in the U.S. military.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military service</td>
<td>Two of the participants had prior military service.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Description of Themes

The eight transcripts were highlighted in different colors. Meaning units from each of the transcripts were reassembled into one separate document. This process allowed the data to be viewed thematically and themes to emerge from the data. The
highlighted text enabled the researcher to identify the individual participants’ narratives. Initially, six minor themes became apparent: new military lifestyle, challenges, techniques, lessons learned, costs, and rewards. With further analysis, three major conceptual themes emerged: emotional strain, management methods, and returns. Meaning units taken from the transcripts, from which the three themes emerged, as well as the initial six minor themes, are shown in Table 2.

Findings

After the researcher repeatedly reviewed the transcripts and assigned the initial coding, they were set aside, in keeping with the premise that consistency in coding is enhanced when recoding data ensues after a period of time has transpired (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). When reviewing the transcribed interviews, a number of meaning units emerged that were descriptive of the phenomenon. The documented interviews were then reviewed at a later time and recoded. Both the initial and subsequent coding of meaning units was compared and found to be identical, suggesting reliability.

Themes developed from clusters of what Moustakas (1994) labeled as invariant meaning units of the experience. After a subsequent analysis of the data, it appeared that the initial themes were minor themes, so the participants’ transcribed interviews were again reviewed. The major themes that emerged from the data were not clearly evident during the first reviews of the transcripts but rather developed through a gradual and deliberate metamorphosis. This process of analysis revealed the major significant themes that represented the essence and meaning of the phenomenon.
Table 2. Meaning Units and Emergent Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotional strain</th>
<th>Management methods</th>
<th>Returns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New military lifestyle</td>
<td>Challenges</td>
<td>Techniques</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jobs and expectations</td>
<td>Military housing</td>
<td>Taking control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rank and position</td>
<td>Family issues</td>
<td>Friendships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse’s assignment</td>
<td>Child rearing</td>
<td>Exercise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serving their country</td>
<td>Lack of confidants</td>
<td>Attitude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparing for their role</td>
<td>Jealousy</td>
<td>Humor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Constant scrutiny</td>
<td>Counseling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Isolation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Identity issues</td>
<td>Civilians</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. Meaning Units and Emergent Themes (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotional strain</th>
<th>Management methods</th>
<th>Returns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New military lifestyle</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparing for their role</td>
<td>Marital relationships</td>
<td>Quality of life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Meeting expectations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of control</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Physical and mental health</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>War</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Retirement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Suppositions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wearing his stars</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Having it all</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The military and its wives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
New Military Lifestyle

When the participants were asked what was their experience as a senior officer’s wife, they separately but jointly reflected that their lives changed when their husbands were awarded their first star. Although these women had been immersed in a military environment for many years, the promotion of their husbands to a new rank, position, and assignment thrust them into a unique military way of life. This new military lifestyle obligated them to serve their country, through numerous tasks, responsibilities, and expectations now placed upon them. While a few of the participants mentioned that the military organization was deficient in imparting the knowledge that would have made the adjustment to this new life easier, some women found mentors to emulate, while another participant told a different story in preparing for her role in this new military lifestyle.

Rank and position. All of the participants’ responses revealed strong agreement that the demands placed upon them were predicated on the rank of their spouses and the consistent belief that it was their duty and obligation to meet the challenges faced because of the husband’s position. One woman stated, “This is not my job, there’s no job title . . . but it’s just that notion of needing to do these things, and yet it’s just because of who you’re married to.” To augment the aspect that rank and position affected their obligations, one woman explained

For the work you’re doing, there’s huge expectations and big social expectations which I feel probably come from the community, from what they’re used to. From my husband’s role, there will be receptions to go to, things to host at the house, parades to go to, and a lot of “go to” kind of things.

A participant offered that due to her husband’s rank and position her schedule for each week was packed to capacity. “I have a press conference, two speeches to give, a
conference tomorrow, and I still have to work. I have people every night this weekend for
dinner; I have 35 people tonight and more people on Thursday.”

*Spouse’s assignment.* This participant explained that her husband was in
command of thousands of soldiers and, depending on a particular assignment, her
responsibilities could and did shift from an even pace of activity to tasks that are
continuous, immediate, and demanding. “When my husband was first promoted, he was
in a job at the Pentagon that didn’t require me to do much. Now with this job,
expectations are higher.”

*Serving their country.* Many participants spoke about their sense of duty in
serving their country through the role they embraced as a senior officer’s wife. In regard
to dedication and the military, one woman remarked that she shared her husband’s point
of view: “His strongest position with anyone that will listen is the need for selfless
service, and I have bought into that belief.” Due to her strong sense of duty, she often
viewed her role as an extension of her husband’s position. One woman explained that she
often would work in partnership with her husband:

> My husband and I have always operated as a team. He looked to me and expected
> me to be his eyes and ears in a whole lot of venues around the installation he
> knew he’d never hear stuff about. He trusted me to not bring him information that
> wasn’t credible. So, I was really his solid partner.

Another woman also spoke about the alliance both she and her husband shared
regarding their commitment to their military obligations:

> In a lot of what my husband does, I feel that very same sense of duty, and many
times we just simply do it; our plate will be full and we’ll just look at each other
knowing full well that we’re going to go do whatever it is needed we will do. It’s
the right thing to do.
One participant spoke directly to her dedication and loyalty to our country: “I made a very, very conscious decision at one point in our marriage to embrace the same commitment to the community and to the nation that my husband did.” One woman’s statement seemed to sum up the feelings of the participants regarding their commitment and dedication to country, “I have a high sense of duty. That’s the only way I could do all of this, and I am proud and happy to do it.”

*Jobs and expectations.* The women in this study were asked to identify the responsibilities, if any, they had from the time their husbands became flag officers. All 8 participants offered that the life of a senior officer’s wife is filled with many demands and responsibilities placed upon them by the military organization as well as personal expectations that they strove to meet. One woman explained, “It feels like a job. I did feel I had a lot of big responsibilities, high expectations.” There was agreement among the responses regarding the numerous expectations of their role when married to a senior officer:

There are certain expectations; I think the expectations come from different sides. I think that there are probably the expectations of you being connected to the service, continue to see people and do a lot of travel, show up at bases and posts around the world and meet with families, and see things and do things. I think there are those levels of expectations, but I think there are other expectations because everybody wants a piece of you. Everybody—stuff comes at you fast and furious and you don’t have a clue a lot of times; is it a legitimate organization or not a legitimate organization? And people want your name attached to absolutely everything. So in this job, more so than in a lot of others, people are looking for you to be places and do things, interacting with the families and setting the tone. People are looking at you for direction, in advisory capacities and mentoring people.

Another woman commented on her role as an educator, teaching others through example. She proudly related that “the nicest compliment I ever got was from a Colonel’s
wife. She said, ‘I learned more by watching you handle that situation than I’ve learned in 25 years.’”

Many of the women identified that one of their most important responsibilities was to assist the families of the men and women who serve our country. A senior officer’s wife needs to be aware of resources and where families can receive the help they need, “so that if someone does call you and says, ‘I need to do this and I don’t know where to go,’ you can either direct them or you know who to call to direct them.” The participant continued to elaborate on this concept. She spoke on the importance of getting to know firsthand the families of the military personnel and improving their welfare: “I felt my work and my biggest responsibility was to meet people, listen, and find out what we can be doing better.”

While several participants commented on the numerous expectations that are initiated by the military organization, one woman felt her expectations were mainly self-imposed:

I think, when your husband becomes a general officer, I don’t think there’s anything expected of you, I think it’s what you put on yourself. I think you’re a mentor, a cheerleader; they [military wives] need someone that they can come and ask questions and talk to.

Another woman felt she was not given an option on whether she accepted the responsibilities that rested on her shoulders:

We still use the word choice a whole lot, but sometimes we don’t really mean it because we really want people, we really expect people, to step up to the plate and be the leader of the volunteer community, to be the chief hostess on the entertainment committee, to be the chief diplomat within the community outside the gates.
There was some agreement among the responses regarding the military’s
expectations and lack of choice. “The institution and the community expected that I
would be a leader of some sort; a leader and a helpmate to my husband.” One woman
explained the need for women to take on the role as a senior officer’s wife: “A lot of
expectations but they [the military] cannot do it without you, they really can’t.”

Two women believed they did have options, and when they made the decision to
assume the responsibilities and role of a senior officer’s wife, they were fulfilling, in a
unique way, a patriotic duty in serving their country. One said, “Because I had to make a
very conscious decision that this would be a silent and selfless way to serve, and I did.”

One woman remarked, about the responsibilities many senior officers’ wives face
that are directly associated with the war:

You go to all the memorials, which are the most difficult thing. It’s very
emotional. You go to all the Family Readiness Group meetings that you can do to
kind of set the tone for how things are going to run in the Division while they’re
[spouses] gone, work with the Rear Detachment Commander. If there is some
issue with a senior officer’s family or something that’s going to keep him [the
spouse] from being able to do his job over in Iraq, you help—you’re kind of the
eyes and ears.

Preparing for the role. The question was asked if and how the participants had
prepared for the life they lead. Three participants mentioned they had received
informational sessions that they perceived to be inadequate to prepare them for their roles
as senior officers’ wives. “They gave us an overview of the military, but not much that I
could take away and use for daily practical purposes.”

For one woman the transition to a senior officer’s spouse was quite easy; she saw
early on in her life what life was like for a senior officer’s wife: She grew up in a military
family, and spent 5 years on active duty and many more in the reserves. Consequently,
she felt she had an advantage. “There are some nuances or subtleties about the military that’s already ingrained in me; they wouldn’t have been ingrained in somebody else. To me it wasn’t a big question mark; it was the norm.”

Others spoke about their mentors, senior officers’ wives who have supported and set examples for them to emulate. “I would say every step of the way, I always had the most wonderful mentors. I would just learn so much and I thought, ‘If I’m ever a senior officer’s wife, that’s how I’ll be.’”

Another point of view regarding mentors came from a spouse who spoke not only of her experience but of other wives who may have seen their mentors in a different perspective. Her words emphasized the importance, as a senior officer’s spouse, of being a supportive and worthy mentor:

I never had a really bad experience, but one reason so many women have such a bad taste in their mouth about this whole lifestyle is if you’re in your 20s or 30s and have a really nasty mentor; that undermines your confidence for the rest of your life. I’ve got a lot of friends who had somebody do or say something [negative] in the budding time when you’re making up your mind about if you like this whole life or not, and it [the hurt] never goes away. It’s like getting dumped by a boyfriend or something. It just never goes away.

Challenges

It was very important to all of the participants that people in the military community and civilians understand that although they are married to the highest ranking officers in the U.S. military, they have certain obligatory challenges in addition to managing the trials and tribulations of daily military life. The women were then asked what they considered to be the unique challenges of living in the military community as a senior military officer’s wife. They were asked what aspects of the military lifestyle seemed most challenging or demanding. The participants identified living on a military
base, family issues, child rearing, lack of confidants, jealousy, constant scrutiny, isolation and identity issues, career, marital relationships, meeting expectations, lack of control, physical and mental health, the war, and retirement. An additional challenge experienced by most of the participants was dealing with people’s preconceived opinions, suppositions, and assumptions of who they are and their life as senior officers’ wives.

One woman spoke about the endless tasks that required her attention and the accompanying exhaustion:

You’re tapped out because you feel that this is something that has to be done so you just add more to your plate. Even looking around at these general officers’ wives who are clearly showing stress and strain and they’re all doing a lot of work for the most part, there aren’t too many that say, “That’s it . . . I’m not doing anything.”

Another spouse agreed: “I think the stressors are the people that come to you with all of their issues and all of their problems and expect you to have the answers.” Another wife, in agreement, stated, “People use you to get things done because you live with the man in charge.”

**Military housing.** Living and working with neighbors can be an arduous challenge, as one woman conveyed:

I think it’s very stressful to live around the people you work with. On base, this one guy knew where we were going to be applying to—our next duty station—and told my young son, “Your dad is going to be stationed in Korea.” Later, we had a horrible situation where everybody was basically applying for the same job. It was hard. It doesn’t bring out the best in people.

**Family issues.** The spouses of these participants have critical and key positions as senior officers in the military, and family life often cannot be given top priority. One woman attested to this:
When he was running the Army Operation Center, they work from 5:00 in the morning until about 9 or 10:00 at night. It's an absolutely horrible job and it should come with a sympathy card. It’s a terrible job. There are other times when family life becomes very difficult, and for the continued well-being of that family, help is needed. A wife explained that she was constantly caring for a seriously ill child and found it challenging to get her husband’s secretary to put her calls through: “The healthy, happy family piece is probably the part that was the genesis of this stress because it was so very important to both of us.”

After being trapped in the house for 10 days after a blizzard, she called her husband:

He was at the White House all the time and I called him and I said, “I don’t care if the President himself has you in his office, you tell him you have got to come home,” and he did. That created enormous stress in his life, I’m sure. It was so important to both of us that we keep life balanced and that we keep our family intact. There were influences and stressors in our lives that nobody else had that came with my daughter. It just snowballs the higher they go.

**Child rearing.** Raising children is a wonderful but exhausting and sometimes difficult experience, and military men and women are often absent from the home, leaving one parent to struggle alone. Senior officers are not exempt from this situation, and one woman boldly stated, “Yes, we are single parents.”

The participants identified that raising children on a military base can be a challenging environment, especially for those children of senior officers. One woman spoke with sadness as she disclosed her account:

Children are treated differently. My adolescent has a job on post; her boss—whose husband is enlisted in the military—discriminates against my daughter—behind her back—saying she “doesn’t know how to take care of herself because she is a spoiled, rich, general’s daughter”—my daughter has never called in sick or been late to work and is praised by customers.
Another woman shared her sentiments on rearing children in the military community:

It was enormously difficult and heartbreaking. Parents wouldn’t let their kids come and play with my child or let my child play at their house because they were afraid of what the kids would say or do and the repercussion of that. They kept this child at arm’s length, as a 7-year-old.

Even in school, it was difficult for mothers to have to watch the repercussions their children experienced because of their father’s rank. One mother mentioned her son, who was in high school, had trouble because classmates discovered he was the general’s son. Another mother tried to be proactive with the problems her son faced due to his father’s rank:

I got to the point where I would very specifically ask coaches, and teachers, “Please don’t tell anybody who his parents are. Don’t tell them who his daddy is,” because my son needed an opportunity to make it on his own before they figured it out, because they would eventually always figure it out. But it bought him some time to make friends and find his own way, until everyone found out and then the hassles started.

One participant addressed the issue on moving and its effect on children when they do not reside at home full-time. When an adolescent leaves home for college, they usually depart from a familiar place with friends. Then the family moves to a new house, new surroundings, and new people; upon the child’s return, home is not recognizable and old friends are gone. One mother explained:

You know, when the kids were young and you’re moving them around, there’s a huge stressor. Pack up and move these kids again. To me that was a stressor. Then the kids grow up, and I remember the first time we moved without them it was less stressful, but it was like the first time the kids come home and you’re in a new place . . . . My son said, “Mom, how do you think I feel? I’m going to come home and you’re going to be in a different place.” I’ll make it home again. It’s weird that even at this age, even the married one will say it because they don’t have what everybody else has when they come back home.
Lack of confidants. Participants commented that as senior officers’ wives, it was not always easy to find someone to speak openly to and feel secure in the knowledge that it would be held in confidence. One woman stated, “I think we hold our cards so closely because we don’t trust what somebody else is going to do with the information we give them.” A similar sentiment was expressed by another participant: “The whole lonely-at-the-top thing is very true; it is very lonely at the top and you can’t talk.”

Some wives viewed their role as a senior officer’s wife as a “contest,” one participant mentioned; this role was seen as the reason for not sharing private information. “There is a competition with some of the other wives. They repeat things; so you don’t say things you don’t want repeated; so I am careful. I am a trusting person, but I must watch what I say.” One participant offered that she spoke with care and caution, and advised others to do likewise:

I learned to think before I talk. I tell the spouses, “You do have to be more careful and choose your words because people do listen and they’re also sometimes watching to see if you mess up.” As he’s [husband] gone up higher and higher, I would have to say that at this point I’m very guarded with a lot of people around here.

Jealousy. Another participant spoke of feelings from some individuals in the military community that she had not anticipated:

Jealousy was not something I expected. There are people who really want to see your husband fail. Not all. I was in the military, I was a junior officer; I’ve never had those feelings. Some of the time it is people who really count on you; and because you have achieved that level, they really want to see him [husband] walk right off and fail.

When her husband pinned on his first star, a participant remembered one blatant remark from an unexpected source: “There was one Major’s wife who approached and asked, ‘Has anyone started sucking up to you now that your husband’s a General?’”
Constant scrutiny. Some women commented on the challenge they face daily to know that no matter what they do, no matter where they go, people are paying attention to what they say and how they act. One woman stated, “I think one of the surprises has been is there are people that are interested in your lives and what you’re doing. They’re always watching, everybody’s watching, and you don’t even know they’re watching and, believe me, they’re watching.” Another participant imparted words of caution to other wives: “I tell people, ‘You will be surprised, but understand that people are watching. They’re watching you, they’re watching how you behave, and they’re watching how you treat people.’”

Isolation. Most of the women expressed that they had experienced times of isolation and loneliness as a senior officer’s wife, and one wife cautioned, “It’s so easy to get isolated. There is an element of loneliness that I didn’t expect. I always heard the more senior you get; the lonelier it gets at the top.” Another participant observed

I never expected the level of isolation. I felt isolated almost immediately. I don’t think I changed, but I do feel like people that I had known or people within the community did change the way they looked at us and the way they treated us. People energize me. I love being around them and I’ve always been very fortunate to have a wonderful circle of friends, but I did find that the more my husband was promoted, the more isolated I became. People would assume that you were too busy, so they wouldn’t call or they wouldn’t come over or they wouldn’t invite you. I really resented that because girlfriends are one of the joys of our lives; they are who help us raise our kids, survive the tears, and share the joys with us, and so finding out that some people I thought were really my close friends weren’t really as close. There was a lot of isolation that I just didn’t expect.

One participant spoke about friendships and her experience with what the military labels “fraternizing” and discourages interactions with subordinates of her spouse:

My husband was the highest ranking guy, so our house was set apart from all the others. I was so lonely. Luckily, I was very close to my husband’s Chief of Staff and his wife; he was a Colonel. We were as close as we could be to them. We
always had to walk that fine line of not showing favoritism. I think that was hard for me. It can be very lonely at the top.

Identity issues. In the military, family members who are not active-duty personnel are called “dependents.” It is the active-duty military member’s social security number that bears value, while often the dependent’s number is insignificant. While these aspects of military life may affect the identity of all military families, one senior officer’s wife spoke about the lack of appreciation for her role and said that her identity was derived from her husband. She explained, “Had I needed recognition, had I needed acknowledgment, had I needed some kind of separate identity from him, I probably wouldn’t have spent the life that I’ve spent.” Another participant added her sentiments: “I was really stunned at how I felt. It was very much a loss of identity.”

One senior officer’s wife felt that treatment by other military personnel was problematic:

Identity issues; that’s a part of those days I got my nose out of joint. I hate being talked down to and I hate being treated like I’m stupid. It was usually on a day like that when somebody had diminished, in some way, the role that families and spouses play. There’s nothing like having a GS [civilian employee], whatever, look you in the face and say, “Lady . . . .” It diminished the role, my identity.

Marital relationships. One woman explained her perspective on what she felt causes the most stress in the lives of senior officers’ wives:

The biggest stress comes from the kind of relationship a wife has with her husband. I think some military spouses feel they don’t get enough support by that military member because he is constantly in military support roles. It is like you say to your husband, “Okay, I’m supporting you. What about me over here?” If you’ve been married a long time, it really depends on your relationship; if it’s a give-and-take kind of supportive relationship you’re fine; if not, it can be very stressful in this lifestyle.
Another woman shared that often it is not easy being married to a senior military officer, and although they have always been very much in love, at one time “the marital toll it [his job] took with us was significant.”

Meeting expectations. Whether expectations initiate from internal or external sources, all the participants strove to meet the demands placed upon them. Stress can occur when these expectations cannot be fulfilled. One participant was distressed when her spouse was promoted and assigned a new position, but his replacement remained on base. Due to this unique situation, she could not meet those expectations:

I was in Europe with no responsibilities except that everybody knew I had come to fulfill the responsibilities of the wife of the senior military person and it didn’t happen; someone else was doing it. I think they [military spouses] just thought I was a nice lady that lived on base but they couldn’t figure out why I was there. I was first told I’d be attending meetings, running things, but it didn’t happen. I had no responsibilities, nothing, which takes a little getting used to in that you are not into anything; it’s kind of abrupt to have had so much [to do], then nothing.

One woman remarked that meeting expectations also included physical appearance. Senior officers’ wives need to always look their best: “Heaven forbid you run to the commissary [grocery store] without makeup on or not be perfectly dressed.”

Lack of control. The participants, as senior officers’ wives, spoke about their mandatory attendance on a schedule that was perpetually expanding, that included official functions, meetings, luncheons, and lectures. One woman voiced that “you can be somebody that goes to a lot of things and feel absolutely isolated, and it’s because you feel the lack of control; it’s not having that control over your own life.” Another participant talked about her feelings in regard to the lack of control:

One of the things about being a military spouse and being a more senior military spouse is, I feel the longer we stay in [the military], the less control we have. I know I have expectations for myself to support a lot of things, so I do a lot of
those things, and there are times that I feel like I have no control over what I want
to do because there are times that I want to do other things. Truth be told, there
are times I get tired or I have a headache and I just want to do other things.

**Physical and mental health.** Although none of the women felt depression was an
issue for them, one participant reflected on other senior officers’ wives who have had
problems with clinical depression. She verbalized her concern for them: “This lifestyle is
so hard on you. I have friends that are clearly stressed; they look fine, but every day is a
struggle with depression. It is a terrible struggle.” The participant also commented on the
physical health demands placed on many of the women: “On top of depression, you’re
just 50-something, and along with this challenging role, you’re facing menopause.”

**War.** The war was a subject on which many of the wives commented. With so
many soldiers deployed and families separated, they felt it was essential to speak about
this subject and their feelings. One participant felt “so responsible to the wives because
my husband was the one over there responsible for their husbands.” Most military wives
are stressed and anxious when their spouses are stationed in a war zone, and although it
may not be common knowledge, senior officers are also deployed in Iraq and
Afghanistan. “My husband recently came out of Iraq. They kept extending him. You’re
supposed to go for a year and he came back 32 months later.” Reflecting back to her
spouse’s war deployment, a participant remembered her concern that he would worry
about her when he was fighting the war; she wanted to be supportive and strong through
his extended stay in Iraq. She spoke about the strain and toll his deployment had on her:
“I had said to him many times during that time, ‘I’m doing okay, I’m doing okay,’” but
she silently wondered if she was “going to implode when he came home. Right after he
came home, I got sick and was in bed for a week. I never had that happen in my whole life. I think it was probably just letting go.”

Another participant related her perceptions of the toll the war has taken on some senior officers’ wives:

I see a lot of really tired Generals’ wives. They just seem tired and, again, we’ve been at war for 6 years; there’s a tremendous amount of stress. Six years ago, my husband was leading a brigade into Iraq and he had just come out of Afghanistan 8 months earlier, so this generation or those of us coming in have been through a lot, and then for the real senior folks, the three- and four-star wives, they seem nice and pleasant, but really, really tired.

Some of the participants had adult children who were fighting or had plans to fight for our country. One mother voiced concerns about her older child’s future plans:

“My oldest is at college on an ROTC scholarship and I have mixed emotions about that. It’s one thing to send your husband off to a war; it’s a whole different thing to have your children do that.”

One participant had carried the additional burden and worry of having her grown children as well as her husband fight in the war zones:

They started deploying to Afghanistan and Iraq; both our kids were deployed at that time. My husband had gone over there, and now we were going through it as parents. We’ve spent a lot of Christmases and birthdays without a family member because of the war.

The last interviewed participant reflected on the war and its far-reaching and future effects:

We have a force that is stretched and stressed. We’ve been in Afghanistan for 7 years, and 5 years into Iraq, and there are some people on their fourth deployment. Their families are also severely affected. Because it’s all cumulative, we really don’t know what the long-term effects of all this will be, especially in their children, who I worry about the most.
Retirement. While not all the participants reflected on the stress and anxiety that can accompany retirement, for some senior officers’ wives it was an emotional and imminent reality. One participant shared her thoughts of uncertainty as retirement from the military draws near:

It’s very difficult to retire. That is a huge stress right now. Will we pick the town, the right neighborhood? It’s just going through that whole feeling of being the new kid on the block. I’ve done that 50 times. Everywhere we go it’s like, “Oh, you’re retiring. Isn’t that exciting? You must be so excited.” Well, no, part of me isn’t. I thought there would be a few more years.

Another participant spoke about her emotional connection to the military community and the difficulties she will soon face:

It’s [retirement] bittersweet. I kind of had to work through it and wrap our arms around the whole concept, because a year or two ago we thought it was going to turn out different, so we’ve had to readjust. I don’t want anybody to think that I ever expected something more because it would sound greedy, it would sound envious, because we have been very fortunate. It’s more than we ever expected. Yet when it’s time to think about going, it’s hard. We have been so immersed in this culture and this community. It’s not just a job. We’ve been doing it for 30+ years.

One participant spoke of the support and camaraderie she experienced with other spouses in the military community:

I was worried that when my husband retired I would miss it more than he did because that’s my whole social life. All my support systems are other military spouses. That’s my network of friends. I met my best friend because her husband was in the same brigade as mine. Military wives; that’s been my whole support system.

Individuals have taken for granted and accepted as true certain beliefs about senior officers’ wives. The participants spoke about the many assumptions and presumptions—some true, others not—that the military community, as well as the civilian community, hold regarding the life of a senior military officer’s wife. One
participant recalled that a General’s wife was so frustrated about the misconceptions other military wives had about senior officers’ wives that she told a group of women that she cleaned the toilet just like everyone else. The participant believed that all of the senior wives whom she “has been fortunate to be around, wouldn’t ask you to do something they wouldn’t do themselves. They’re wonderful, down-to-earth women.”

Suppositions. One participant recalled the frustration she experienced when confronted with differences of opinion. “I always have the best of intentions. But in the same day, I was criticized for not being involved enough and then for being involved too much. Perceptions, they’re just unbelievable!”

Wearing his stars. A participant communicated a misconception that surfaced during a deployment when her husband’s unit went to Iraq:

Sometimes people think you know a lot more than you do. No matter how straightforward about what I knew and what I didn’t know, there was still this notion that I knew something and I was withholding information. I thought that was just me but after talking with other wives whose husbands were general officers; they had experienced the same thing. Everybody thought, “They [senior officers’ wives] have to know something—they talk to their husbands.”

Another participant’s statement confirmed that some senior officers’ wives talk with their husbands about their jobs and know specific information, but this assumption was misleading. Although her husband often talked with her about his work, the subjects of the conversations were limited:

The higher up you are, the more you do know. But at the same time, you’re not the one in the military. I’m really close to my husband and he does talk to me. I am his primary sounding board—but they’re definitely not operational things.

Another participant shared her views on the behavior of some military wives that may have led to negative judgments:
I think there are a lot of women in the military who spend their time promoting their spouse. Get a press agent, for god’s sake. You can always tell which, the ones who are constantly promoting. I think at the end of the day—what happens when they get out and there’s nothing more to promote?

There are assumptions that senior officers’ wives act as if they wear the stars in the family, and some do; one participate concurred: “They get married with visions of status and they want that. Those are the ones that think they’re going to get a tiara at the [spouse’s] promotion.” Another participant believed some senior officers’ wives’ attitudes are based on entitlement. She felt that these women always held this point of view, this sense of privilege, but it was more evident now that these women were in the spotlight as wives of senior officers. A participant believed that this attitude was not exclusive to senior military wives: “Those people who had a strong sense of entitlement, you know, as a flag officer’s spouse, that holier-than-thou attitude. They always have. It’s just not senior officers’ wives, though; it’s corporate wives; it’s all over.” She was also quick to point out of that most senior officers’ wives are not like that and they have had to work hard to dispel that image:

Some wives have these assumptions that flag officers’ wives are not very nice. They meet you with these preconceived notions and you have to prove to them that you are nice because they “know” you are not. It’s as if your husband gets promoted and you completely change. If I’m a jerk as a senior officer’s spouse, I was probably a jerk as a Lieutenant’s spouse, and just because I am a senior spouse’s wife does not make me one.

Another participant shared her feelings about her treatment and loss of friendships due to her husband’s position:

At one time I wasn’t the boss’s wife; I was one of the girls. He left that job and went to another job and came back and ended up commanding that battalion. Some of the people were still there who had been there during our earlier assignment, and they treated me totally different because now I was the boss’s wife. I was the same person; nothing changed except their perception of me.
Having it all. One participant wanted to dispel the misconception that when your husband becomes a senior officer, life is perfect:

Everybody thinks it’s all so rosy because some of the draping looks so enticing; it’s not all it’s cracked up to be. It’s the old grass-is-greener kind of thing. People kind of have the thought that, “If my husband was a senior officer, if I just had more money, life would be wonderful. I wouldn’t have to worry.” It’s not true. Your worries may not be the same as when you’re poor, but they’re different kinds of worries. Our lives really aren’t different, just the expectations are different.

There is an assumption that “everything is done for you,” remarked one participant. While there may be some domestic assistance depending on the husband’s position, “No one is doing for me, they do for my husband.” She commented that there is a misconception that she has people to clean and cook; she cooks and cleans unless she pays someone to do it. She wanted to dispel the assumption of who does the housework: “It’s me, it’s me. They said, ‘Oh you have maids to clean the house,’ and I said, ‘No, I have Tony and Marie; I hired them; they clean my house and I pay them well.’”

One participant remarked that some people assume

We are exempt from taxes and get everything free. People say, “My tax dollars are paying for . . . .” I say, “Yeah, mine too.” They say, “You pay taxes?” People just don’t know the military, they don’t understand it.

The military and its wives. Another participant did not fault individuals for their erroneous assumptions and lack of understanding, but, rather, felt that “we [the military] haven’t done a good job educating them.” She continued, “You don’t even have to go outside the gate. People within the military make those assumptions too.” A senior officer’s wife spoke of an incident that took place at the movie theater on the military base. She regularly went to the movies with a friend, and one night a conversation ensued: “We were just sitting and talking, and the manager of the movie said to me, ‘Is
your husband a General?’ I said, ‘Yeah.’ She said, ‘You don’t act like a General’s wife.’ And, what does that mean?’

One participant spoke frankly about an age-old problem of some military wives labeling one another and the need to overcome this problem. She explained, ‘Officers’ spouses think enlisted spouses are stupid, uneducated. Enlisted spouses think that officers’ spouses are snobs, above it all. It’s those kinds of stereotypes that you fight, and must, all the time. We’ve been fighting this for years.’

One woman felt it was important to point out that even though her husband was thought of as omnipotent by some, he was not without faults and, as a husband, was not exempt from making occasional misjudgments about her. She discussed the method she used to divest her husband from specific suppositions:

We did have one big blowup last year. It was about me feeling pressured to have to do things that I didn’t necessarily want to go to, didn’t necessarily think I needed to go to, and what my priorities were of what I wanted to do. He was making some assumptions. Once we came to an understanding, it was great.

*Techniques*

The responsibilities and expectations shouldered by senior military officers’ wives are unique and copious, and while they listed many, all participants were quick to add that they met these challenges by drawing on specific means. Consequently, the logical next step in the conversation seemed to be to ask the participants how they managed their often demanding and hectic lives. While each participant relied on different techniques applicable to individual situations, they all agreed that one should not relinquish but rather take control of one’s life. If a situation could not be averted, they used various methods to deal with their problems.
While a few participants found exercise very helpful, one did not. For the most part, the participants felt that developing and maintaining friendships, keeping a positive attitude, along with a good sense of humor, helped them manage their challenges. One participant replied, “You just keep moving. You figure it out. I don’t know. You just keep going and sometimes you just have to take one thing at a time.”

Taking control. One participant managed her demands by occasionally saying no. The question was then asked, “Can you say no?” One participant carefully “picks and chooses” what commitments she can fulfill. Elaborating on this form of management, she replied, “Yes, you can and you have to. There are certain things I say no to all the time. And then there are others I probably should say no to and I don’t. Some are too important so you don’t.” One other participant’s statements were in agreement. She learned to be “efficient and effective, and prioritizes, prioritizes, prioritizes, and let the rest go.”

Recalling her experience when one junior officer’s wife replied no to her request, one participant explained that although she was initially taken aback, she welcomed the honest refusal:

I had approached each of the unit commanders’ spouses and invited them to be the leader of their Family Support Group, and one told me “no” in very colorful and interesting terms. I was shocked, but also grateful that she felt like she could refuse. So I reached out to somebody else to do that. Everyone needs to take control of their life, doing what they can and refusing what they cannot.

Another participant pointed out that she did not let her role as a senior officer’s wife define who she was. She believed that knowing oneself really helps one stay in control of one’s life. While another participant stated that wisdom comes with age, she was able to be assertive and not waver from her decisions when she had to decline an invitation: “When I was young, I was maybe walked on a little too much. But now that I
am older and wiser, I have the ability to be able to get my point across without being a pushover.”

In addition to being older and wiser, one participant spoke on the subject of cognitive reinterpretation to manage her stress:

I’ve matured so much that I know which stresses to give in to and which ones not to waste my energy on, whereas when you’re young it’s like everything is a big issue and you think you have to act on it or obsess about it. As you get older you mellow or maybe learn from experience and the old stressors don’t affect you as much. There are challenges and stresses, but you have to change your way of thinking.

Another participant believed it was a personal characteristic that helped her take control of her life and cope with all of the demands and challenges she faced on a daily basis. She felt she dealt with her overloaded schedule by being “resilient; it gets me through my week.”

Reflecting on her method of coping and eliciting some semblance of control of her life, one participant replied, “Whatever makes me feel like I have control over things, even for a short time. If I can say, ‘Okay, I’m in control of these 3 hours,’ [that] makes me feel good.”

Another participant spoke of her thoughts of an additional way of coping used by a few senior officers’ wives: “I think what happens is, we play nice with one another, usually, but there are others who have been really mean and nasty; maybe that was their way of coping.”

Friendships. Participants’ statements were in agreement: friendships were very important in their life. Conversations with trusted allies were one of the prime ways in
which they were able to de-stress and cope. Friends who could be trusted were a
tremendous asset, as one participant explained:

You have good friends; you get it out of your system. If your conversation doesn’t travel, that’s such a blessing to have somebody like that that you can say, “Listen, thanks, okay, it’s over, it’s done, let’s go on to something else,” and knowing it’ll stop right there. Once I talk about it, then it seems like it was not that important.

Participants were divided as to which cohort in which they could confide. One participant felt that other senior military officers’ spouses had a better understanding of
the challenges she faced:

I tend to go to my military friends because they would get it, they would understand and there wouldn’t be any need to draw pictures for them. I have a particular group of women who are all senior spouses themselves, so they understand. They’re all services. The cultures are not very different between the services and they likely had a similar experience, so they understood it.

Another participant found her confidants in a group of military spouses who were
stationed together overseas and became friends long before her husband was a senior officer:

We go back to those old days which were a huge adventure for all of us, and we laugh a lot about it. I think we all crave that, just a close-knit group of friends, a nice group that you can just sound off to. It’s hard to have that once you leave home, once your husband becomes an officer.

One participant, a graduate from a U.S. military academy, said that her cadet classmates remained some of her best friends: “I have a couple of girlfriends who are academy graduates, so we have a strong bond. When you go through something like a military academy, you’re pretty close.”

Another participant reflected that she derived her close friends from a variety of
sources. The participant perceived she would find it difficult if she were limited in her choice of cohorts:
You have different support systems, depending on the different levels and places you’re in that you can turn to for assistance. I think most of it still comes from those people you can scream with. I have family, I have some military spouses, and I also have civilian friends. It’s for me a real mixed bag, which is good because it would be bad if it was only military people. That in itself can be isolating.

*Exercise.* Exercise has been noted as an effective technique to reduce stress, and many of the participants attested that they used this method to lower their level of stress. One participant said that she had to “exercise a lot; keeps things in perspective,” while another participant recalled that she began an exercise regime long ago: “I started to walk a lot when I was younger and I worked out a lot. I think having a manageable workout routine, whether it’s going to the gym or walking, is essential for sanity.”

Another participant spoke about the obstacles she had to overcome to get to the gym:

I knew I was on a slippery slope [emotionally]. I moved to a really wintry climate in January; I’m sending my husband off to war, and he had only been home for 6 months since his last deployment. All that was very stressful. I called someone who was big on exercising to accompany me. We put on four layers of clothes just to get out the door in 10°. It was so cold, but we did it.

One participant did not share her comrades’ enthusiasm for physical exercise; she used mental exercises to cope with her stress:

My P.E. in high school was collecting attendance slips for the office. I’m a sewer and reader. Sewing is a very stress-reducing thing for me to do, so I sewed a lot. I read a lot, and I’ll be honest with you that there were some days that I just needed to sleep, so that was my stress reducer.

*Attitude.* While the stressor remains the same, a stress response can be reduced or eliminated by reappraising and assigning an altered meaning to the situation. One participant believed that making a conscious choice to see the positive in situations and being flexible was very instrumental in helping her cope:
Go with the flow. I think it’s a very good personality trait you need to have. Your husband says, “We’re not going to get orders for 2 years,” and he walks in the next day with orders. You can have a miserable life and say, “Well, you said . . .” or you can say, “Okay, well, where am I going?”

Another participant addressed her attitude when military orders assigned them to relocate to an unfavorable duty station far away from family and friends. She stated, “Regardless of where we went, I could choose to be unhappy for 2 years or I could choose to be happy.”

Another participant’s approach to managing stress was not to sit around and dwell on the situation but rather to help someone in need, and in turn she helped herself:

There really is a way to help yourself. Sometimes you just get in these funks. You cannot stand your own life, so you just go flat out and do something for somebody else. Make a casserole and take it across the street; if you know somebody is sick take them chicken soup. It’s easy and it works. It’s amazing; and so very simple.

Personal significance influenced the way one participant coped with her role as a senior officer’s wife. She said, “I know that I am only a volunteer and I can walk away from this anytime. I don’t lose sleep over volunteer things. I will do what I can to help, but refuse to get stressed about it.”

Another participant’s attitude was that the role of a senior officer’s wife did not define who she is: “This is a role; it is just not what I am about. I think the ability to cope, for me, was being able to have another life. That really helped.”

Humor. Humor reduces stress and offers a different perspective on the problems one faces. If an individual perceives a situation as humorous, it becomes nonthreatening and does not elicit a stress response. One participant, when explaining how she copes with stress, stated, “I think that, overall, a sense of humor helps me cope. If you don’t have a sense of humor, it ain’t happening; it’s just not.” Another participant spoke about
her thoughts on humor. “I think something that has served me well is, I’ve always had a really good sense of humor my whole life. It helps me see things in a positive way; a sense of humor, oh yeah, it’s essential.”

Another participant found humor in an unpleasant situation:

We had a dinner party one night and while I’m getting ready I heard water running. I check and there’s nothing on. But in the bedroom, from the ceiling upstairs, water is gushing—all over my carpet, all over my bed. I get this plastic bin, phone for help, and then join my guests. During this big formal dinner I’m running up and down the stairs. I could have stressed out or laughed. The ability to laugh at oneself is a wonderful thing.

Counseling. Counseling can offer individuals unbiased and confidential support and help with difficult issues that impact the well-being of their lives. The goal of counseling is to assist the client in identifying her issues and offering her options and techniques to deal with problems. For one participant, this was a recent objective: “I was just talking to a neighbor about going to see someone, an objective person who you can help you sort thing out.”

One participant explained that assumptions based on outward appearances can sometimes be erroneous, and counseling is needed. She felt that people judged that, “You’ve been a part of the success if you’re a married couple and you are obviously squared away. In many regards that’s true, but in some regards it’s not true.”

One participant spoke about her experience:

It was a really rough time for us, so we went to marriage counseling, and it helped tremendously. I haven’t had the need to go again, but if I did, I absolutely would go. The mental health issue for me is very important. It’s vital that we not drive ourselves into the ground and pay this huge, huge price.

Another participant spoke about the need for senior officers and people in general to cope effectively with stress:
I think the general officers are a highly stressed group of people, and some handle their stress better than others. It’s not that you have to be in the military to be stressed, it’s an everyday thing and it’s a matter of dealing with it effectively. That should be everybody’s pursuit. You know, finding that effective way of dealing with it.

A participant recalled a horrific fatal crash that had a ripple effect on members of a participant’s family and the military community as a whole. She explained:

There was a tremendous plane accident in which many people died and I was devastated. I needed to talk to someone. There was just so much stress. I noticed our oldest child was having some problems—acting out and angry—every time my husband went out to fly or went to the field. We all went for counseling and found that I had a fear too, same as my child, that something was going to happen to my husband. I was trying to be everything to my children; counseling helped all of us.

She continued to see the counselor:

We talked about my expectations as an Army wife. At one point I did say, “I never thought it was going to be like this. I didn’t realize how hard it was going to be and that we were going to lose friends.” It really helped. That was all I needed. I needed to talk to someone other than another Army wife who was grieving along with me. It made a huge difference.

**Lessons Learned**

All of the participants believed that, as military wives, they had acquired valuable knowledge and insights that would benefit others. They were adamant that women who may come to experience life as senior officers’ wives learn from what they have realized. Most all of the participants felt a strong sense of duty, as well as a moral obligation to share in this knowledge, to make life a little easier for those who may follow in their footsteps. Reflections included what they learned regarding marital relationships and friends, and one participant found it compelling to caution women when forming judgments. Another participant felt it important to warn about the aspect of envy that can materialize, though not often, among officers. Several of the participants believed that it
was imperative to nourish oneself and maintain a sense of self-identity. Most all of the participants ascertained that the U.S. military needed to act on various issues. Several of the participants saw the need to share their advice to the military organization and information to the civilian communities.

*Marital relationships.* Many participants revealed their thoughts on marriage and the bond they shared with their senior military officer husbands. One participant felt that it was her job to keep her spouse’s ego in check. She elaborated, “I think it is very important for us wives to help keep our husbands humble. Being a General and always being told how important you are tends to make the Generals think they really are that important,” while another participant pointed out her husband acts differently at home and “takes out the garbage just like everyone else, but he did not get selected because he was laid back but because he was strong.” She believed that strength is one of the qualities needed to advance and become a senior officer. “He is laid back at home; not controlling, but he is balanced with a strong personality.”

Another participant felt open communication is imperative in a marital relationship, especially when trying to deal with family and military issues. She advised others to explain their thoughts and feelings: “Let him know.” Family is her top priority:

I don’t need to put the cocktail dress on and not be home when my daughter is home from college. We all have had to deal with this; we’re trying to manage family and the demands of the military. We have to tell our husbands how we feel.

For one participant, her husband’s recognition of her sacrifices and challenges provided her with a sense of control:

For a very long time now I have held the trump card because he has said to me “Look, I’ve put you through a lot, you have given up a lot, and anytime you’ve
had enough, just tell me and I’ll walk away. I have no problems walking away.”
So, that gives you a lot of power and I think it has you look at things differently.

Another participant spoke to one of the secrets of longevity for a marriage and
being able to fulfill the role of a senior officer’s wife. She remarked that “we never even
dreamed we’d stay in the military, but early on I learned that we were a good team, and
stayed.” She believes her duties and responsibilities were achievable because of her
choice in a husband. “Marrying the right person is clearly the first thing. I mean, if you’re
doing all this with a stinker . . . !”

Friends. A participant offered that relationships with true friends were essential in
her life as a senior officer’s wife:

I can’t overstate the importance of friendships and how quickly the numbers
diminish as your spouse is promoted. I would say to young senior officers’ wives.
“Grab a hold of your really good friends; hang on to them and nurture the
friendship because they will become increasingly important to you.”

Judgments. Several participants’ statements were in agreement that no matter
what you do, you can’t please everybody and somebody will criticize you, and one
spouse felt an important lesson should be learned from these judgments. She believed it
was important to impart to new senior officers’ wives a warning not to critique or judge
others by your personal standards:

I always tell the younger wives that everybody should do what they want to do
and how much they want to do. I always advise them, “Never ever judge anyone.”
Everybody does what they can handle. If someone doesn’t do exactly what you
think they should do, that’s not their problem; it’s yours. I always tell people that
they do need to lighten up, not judge people, and let everybody do what they can.

Envy. One spouse felt the need to alert and caution women on the very real
presence of envy and resentment in the military community. Outward jealousy among the
ranks is not common, explained this participant, but she had witnessed it twice as a
military spouse, and learned that the consequences can be shocking and painful. The researcher, unsure to whom she was referring, asked, “Could you explain this a bit more? Are you speaking about jealousy in the military ranks, the officers themselves?” The participant clarified, “Absolutely; we’ve seen it.” An outcome resulting from one jealous person “might even be a major investigation and it has nothing to do with the person [senior officer]; it really has to do with the jealousy of the rank that they’ve [senior officer] achieved.”

_Nourishing oneself._ All the participants thought it essential that wives have their own identity and not live life based on their husbands’ positions. One participant remembered a few women who “wore their husbands’ shoulder boards, so when their shoulder boards were gone so was their life.” She remembers one woman in particular who did not know what she was going to do when her husband retired; her life completely revolved around her role as a senior officer’s wife. When the woman’s husband retired, she felt her life and everything was gone. The participant declared, “I’m like, ‘Oh my gosh; I don’t want that to happen to me.’ I’m sure I’ll be sad when this life is over and some of the things are gone, but I don’t want this to define me.” The participant rendered advice: “A long time ago I decided that I needed something for me. Something. I try to tell other spouses too, ‘It doesn’t have to be work; it can be anything; but you’ve got to find something that’s for you.’”

One participant spoke of one of the first lessons she learned as a senior officer’s wife: to find enjoyment and acceptance in, if not all, then some part of the role:

When my husband was being promoted to General, it became very obvious that there were spouses that weren’t willing or eager to be leaders. So choice became very much a part of the conversation between us, my husband and me. I made that
choice to serve and felt very strongly that it had to be something that you
embraced because you enjoyed it; because otherwise, I learned, you wouldn’t be
any good at it and you were going to be a bad role model for people coming in.

Maintain self-identity. One participant reflected on what she learned about her
view on life after her husband retires from active duty:

When he leaves this job, no one is going to be looking for me. I’m needed
because I am the wife of the senior military person. Which is fine, but you better
be pretty clear on why everybody is knocking on your door. Because when the
knocking stops, if you’re not clear on that, it’s going to be quite a rude
awakening.

She spoke of some military members and their spouses who have retired, and
wanted to caution women to maintain an identity other than their position in the military
community:

I’ve had a couple friends that didn’t realize that this military life was ending; they
somehow thought it was going to go on even though you retired. But then all of a
sudden you’re not in the military anymore, and unless you have your head
straightened on you, it’s hard because you’re used to certain things, and unless
you try to remember who you really are once you leave the military, you’re lost.

The military organization. All of the participants felt it was a privilege to serve
their country in their role as a wife of a senior officer. Although they were proud of the
U.S. military, several of the women strongly believed the organization had work to do,
and offered words of advice regarding this position.

One participant perceived that people outside the military did not understand
many aspects of the military, and the military needs to get the word out that “there’s so
much more to the military than just fighting. There’re wonderful people in the military.”
She spoke about her perceptions of senior officers:

They’re talented, they’re extremely well-educated. It has only been since Dave
Petraeus has become the Washington Post headline that we as a nation have
begun to realize how many well-educated men and women are among the senior
leaders of our military. This is a well-educated, talented group of people that just happen not to work for money.

A participant shared her views on the wives of senior officers:

I think it’s no less true of the senior officer spouses. You are witness to that. I mean, only in this nation would we have a senior military officer’s spouse portrayed as a Ph.D., I mean, come on. You’re living a dream that none of them have ever even thought of would be the case for us. I want to throw the doors open and let people see the wonderfulness that it is, the military community and senior spouses are right there leading the way in most cases.

Another participant felt that the military “needs to recognize that it’s a changing world” and should rid itself of the antiquated ideas regarding women working outside the home. The military needs to implement these changes within the military community structure. During her travels, she had spoken to various groups of military spouses, and was taken aback by the wives’ reactions when she talked about her work and career.

“They said, ‘My god, we are so glad you work.’ It’s like it gives them permission. We still have this stigma within the military that you shouldn’t be working. We’ve [the military] got to get past that.”

Another participant perceived that when she became a senior officer’s wife, “there would be a lot more sharing of ideas of how do we continually make things better.” She thought there would be a meeting of the minds, getting together to support, encourage, and learn from other senior wives. Speaking directly to the military, one participant spoke candidly concerning senior officers’ wives, need for support and communication with one another:

I would say to the institution that they really should nurture the senior officers’ spouses by creating opportunities for them to be together. I think all the services have these gatherings of general officers or flag officers, but this doesn’t happen all that often. When you are the only general officer on an installation or you’re one of one or two, you just don’t have that many opportunities for peer interaction
unless the institution supports and nurtures it. I would suggest that the institution needs to do a better job, especially if they’re going to continue to have the expectation that we are going to be leaders, we are going to stay involved, and that we are going to kind of man the fort while our spouses are gone . . . . The objective right now is support for the tough jobs and more grueling than at any time that I can remember.

Thoughts regarding the need for support for the senior officers’ wives continued with the words of one participant:

We were never treated as poorly as we have been since my husband has been a General. In terms of housing, movement, assignments, you know, all of those official kinds of things. Yes, you’re treated very nicely by the staff and you’ve got all of this support for the general officer, but if the expectation is going to be the general officers’ spouses are going to be taking on these leadership roles, and there needs to be an equal amount of institutional support of the activities as well as nurturing their souls and psyches a little bit.

A participant shared her admiration for the military’s support for the troops “at Fort Benning, where you can see the huge impact the war effort has had on people and their families.” She believed that the Army was doing a good job, and was adamant that the military continue to reinforce concern and appreciation for the men and women who serve our country and their families. Taking care of not only the military member but their families as well impacts the soldier’s state of mind. “If people perceive that the leadership is caring, not just for the soldier but for the family, and they [the military] understand how important family is, that’s huge. It’s forceful. It allows the troops to do better overseas.”

Another participant cautioned that no military member or family member should be neglected:

The Army pushes family support heavily and we’ve got lots of research, and serious research, from the early 90s after Desert Storm that tells us that when families are supported, soldiers can focus on mission and readiness. General officers and their spouses are going to require the same sort of nurturing and
support that we have already identified through our research that all families need. That means doing family-friendly things, looking at policies and procedures and assignments, and all of that kind of thing.

_Civilians._ Half of the participants identified that they learned that most civilians, due to a lack of knowledge, were not aware of many worthy aspects of the military, its members, and the society as a whole. One participant reflected, “Our community is so worthy of emulation in so many areas, and I would just like the people we’ve all served to understand and appreciate that.” Another participant imparted some directives:

If civilian people are going to read this and begin to advise DoD on things, I think it’s really important that they understand and connect the dots with the social experiment that the military has been for the nation in a lot of ways. I’m focused on family programming. The nation, and Congress in particular, oftentimes start things in the military that they think that in 20 years they are going to want to do for the nation. They want to test this; we’re the test bed for some of the social stuff. I think the leadership in the military has oftentimes envisioned a better world and a way of getting there, and have led the nation on some of this social stuff. I’d like people to be able to connect the dots on some of that. It really is upsetting to me that there is so little known about the goodness in our communities and the talent. For example, civilians can see an Airborne Ranger as someone who eats snakes, rips off a chicken’s head—that kind of guy—and . . . he is so much more than that.

Some civilians, another participant revealed, did see the military up close and personal, and these people as a community rallied around and supported the soldiers:

The last 6 years during the war we have seen communities [civilian] so supportive of these Army posts, and the average American doesn’t realize that. Because they don’t have a lot of military and posts around them, civilians don’t realize that the American people do support our soldiers regardless of what it is; whether it’s war or peacekeeping missions. These communities around large posts like Fort Hood and Fort Campbell and Fort Stewart, I know from personal experience that people like in these surrounding communities always just “did” for the soldiers and their families. Now it’s grown even a closer relationship, and the average American doesn’t realize that.

Communities surrounding military installations are able to interact with and form an opinion of the military community based on firsthand observations and interactions.
One participant asked a rhetorical question: “How does the average American perceive some of the highest senior officers in the United States military?” and then attempted to answer it:

> During this war where there is so much media coverage of George Casey, Dave Petraeus, and all these guys [senior officers], does everybody ever look at that them and think, say, “Who really is this man and does he have a family? Is he married or does he have grandchildren?” I mean, there’s so much about the World War II; Eisenhower, MacArthur, they were real people with problems, normal people. What do the American people think of these people, let alone their wives? We used to joke among the wives and say, “Let’s do what everybody thinks we do; let’s go play bridge, smoke, and drink wine coolers all afternoon. Let’s just try it and see what it’s like.” I don’t know what anybody’s image is. Some of these women [senior officers’ wives] have wonderful careers and others are wonderful full-time stay-at-home moms. I’m very grateful I could [stay home], and I’m very proud; we have great kids. But . . . I do wonder. That’s why I was so happy to help with this study and get the word out. What do people think, or do they at all? The role of a senior officer’s wife is a demanding job. My son calls it a “dry cleaner job”: that you don’t know it’s done unless it’s not done.

**Costs**

There are certain costs for a woman when she becomes a senior military officer’s wife. While giving up an opportunity to pursue a career was something many of these wives did not see as a cost, 2 of the participants did. Many of these women experienced not being able to have a normal family life due to their husbands’ ranks, the effect the husbands’ positions had on their children, lack of trusted friendships, and lack of privacy as sacrifices they had to make.

**Career.** While most of the women in the study said they were happy to stay home and raise their children, one woman reflected on career decisions that some of her friends had made: putting their career aside or on hold for the sake of the husband’s career. “They have their own careers; if you think about it, if you’re the same age approximately [as your husband] and you’ve had a career, your career is just starting to take off when
his is starting to take off.” Another woman reflected that it can be a stressful decision: “I put my career on hold. I’ve worked on and off, mostly only part-time.” One participant had a degree in elementary education, but due to frequent moves could only find work as a substitute teacher.

_Family life._ All military wives must confront deployment, constant moving, stress, and single parenting. Although it is difficult to for all spouses when a husband or wife is a member of the Armed Forces, it was important to most of the participants to express the additional costs they and their children encountered as members of a senior military officer’s family.

One woman commented that trying to lead a normal life was difficult under these circumstances:

_Raising children and creating a healthy, happy family in the middle of a fishbowl, all the while you’re trying to cheer for and lead a community, and with added responsibilities, and more people involved in our lives—just became more stressful._

For one participant, costs were shared by her son:

_He wasn’t allowed to be a child. Everything that he did that was stupid, that every kid does or says, they [other wives] would share with me over the table at an OWC [Officer’s Wives Club] luncheon or dinner somewhere. I was just so torn, feeling so heartbroken for him that he just wasn’t allowed to make some of the same mistakes that other kids make. Everybody in town knew him and he never knew who was watching him._

_Trusted friends._ Another participant told of the price she paid regarding close friends. She had no one “to vent to,” and said this was the case often experienced by many other senior officers’ wives: not having someone to confide in or having one’s words misconstrued. She remarked, “Sometimes I didn’t want to talk to other women because it would be like, ‘Oh, she is not happy.’”
Lack of privacy. Another participant believed that there is a prevailing misconception that certain provisions provided for some senior-ranking officers are always pleasant and enjoyable, and wanted it known that perks did not come without a cost:

Some people will say, “Isn’t it fun having people working in your house or people driving your husband?” All of that comes with the loss of the privacy; that’s a trade-off. That’s not that much fun. Perks and privileges all come with a price. To me it would never be about that. It was about that people looked up to us and would come to us with problems, and we could make changes that made a difference.

Benefits

Although most of these participants reported on the costs and sacrifices they made, all of the participants wanted to speak about the advantages and benefits of their lives as senior military officers’ wives. The advantages most mentioned by the participants were their ability to help others, outreach, family growth, personal satisfaction, and travel. A few other participants added having the opportunity to be a military ambassador, learning lifelong lessons, making new friends, and the good quality of life to the list of advantages.

Ability to help others. All the participants in this study articulated the joy and sense of accomplishment they felt in their ability to help others. Although schedules were often demanding, these spouses were motivated to strive to reach their altruistic goals.

I spend 40 hours a week in the community doing volunteer work or whatever, but it was for the reward of knowing that one soldier or one family, one somebody, was better off, happier, better served, because I spent the time doing what I was doing. That sounds really hokey, but I do believe it. I think that’s one of the joys and burdens of being married to a senior officer. You do have an opportunity to influence and make things happen. Sometimes it can be very hectic, but the rewards are great; because when it’s over, it’s over, and you have lost a moment in time.
Military outreach. The participants spoke of the resources that became readily available when their husbands became senior military officers. These resources enabled some participants to become acquainted with military personnel and their families, and facilitate and expedite assistance for them. One woman explained

I found out people need help, and I feel I can make a difference. The flag officer’s spouse gets work done at a much higher level. It gives you entrance into getting to spend time and speak with and being able to listen to young family members, which you wouldn’t necessarily have; really getting to know who the young military is and the families. They really need to be listened to because things are very different now; things are really, really different now.

Another participant reiterated similar thoughts:

Our last assignment was a really, really busy place. The thing I enjoyed about what my husband’s position allowed me to have was access to the younger folks. The folks who need to be told “Thank you” and “I appreciate what you are doing; what you do is valuable on a daily basis even though you don’t feel like it is.” I like being able to do that.

Family benefits. Military life can be stressful and challenging for all members of the family, but it can also result in rewards and benefits. One senior officer’s wife explained how life in the military has been mutually beneficial for both her spouse and his military organization:

The demands of the military are huge. At the same time, they’re very, very wonderful in a way. My husband loves what he does, he thrives, he’s good for the military and it’s good for him, and I know I want to be a part of that.

Another senior officer’s wife spoke about her feelings regarding the opportunities available for her children as a result of their frequent relocations:

Yes, it was challenging, but I wouldn’t trade it. I love what my kids have been able to see and do. Some people have done the same vacation every year of their lives, gone to the same family reunion every Labor Day, and they’re 2 miles from their house. I think that’s too bad.
For some adolescents, choosing a college often is predicated on where their friends attend. Parents often hear, “I want to go to the same college where so-and-so goes,” said one mother. But for her children, this was not so; “going to school where their buddies were going was not a factor for my children. They didn’t even consider it. What they did consider was, ‘Does this school have the major I want? Do I like this campus?’” Because their family had moved often, her sons were accustomed to meeting people and making new friends. “My boys know that they can make friends wherever they go.”

Another mother viewed relocation as a chance for her children to interact with people and gain experiences that may not have been possible if their father was not a senior military officer:

My boys know that if they’re introduced to someone, that they are to stand up, shake their hand. When we entertained, we made sure they came down, said hello. They met some wonderful regular people as well as high-ranking officials, senators, dignitaries, and they’re comfortable. They know how to behave; they have manners and are at ease meeting and speaking with adults. They’ve had these experiences ever since they were quite young.

*Personal satisfaction.* While many participants felt that they received a sense of accomplishment in their lives as senior officers’ wives, one participant spoke about her role and the enjoyment and feeling of fulfillment when she accomplished her objectives:

It energizes me and people energize me. My motto is: “If you want it done, give it to a busy person.” I thrive on having a full plate, having to sort through how to get it all done. I believe you can change the world one person at a time, and that was really the motivation and a whole lot of what I involved myself in.

One participant thought it important to share the emotions she and her spouse experienced when they initially regarded the importance and heavy responsibilities that come with the rank of a senior military officer and the realization that later came:
At first it is scary and intimidating because you think the very next day your life is going to change. You know, like after he pins on the first star and you think, “Wow.” I remember we looked at each other after the ceremony and he said, “What if I can’t do it?” I know; what if I can’t? We felt like kids. They’ve [the military] given us this, and now what do we do? I think once I got used to it I realized that I could; I could make a difference. I now had a voice because people would listen. You know, even as a one-star’s wife you saw a need for something; it was great for both of us to think that we could see something that needed to be fixed and we could make things better.

Travel. Several women spoke of the opportunity to travel they had because they were married to senior military officers. They talked about the excitement of visiting various military installations and different countries, and meeting people they otherwise would never have had the chance to meet if it had not had been for their roles as senior officers’ wives. One woman, with a huge smile on her face, beamed, “I was amazed of opportunities that have availed themselves to us. It’s been unbelievable when you think about where you’ve been, what you’ve done, who you’ve met.”

Goodwill ambassador. Although continuous entertaining can be arduous and exhausting, one senior officer’s wife explained her thoughts and feelings about this aspect of her role and how it enabled her to offer civilians a glimpse into military life:

I loved the interface with the civilian community. I loved the opportunity to show this [military] community that I loved dearly to those that knew nothing about it. I loved the opportunity to open the gates and have these folks into the house and into the installation.

Learning experience. One participant spoke about new insights she gained, even though it was difficult, when struggling to meet her challenges:

A lot of military wives struggle with it [the demands]; they don’t want to do this or that. Sometimes I would complain, “Do we have to do another function? Do we have to do this? Do we have to make those phone calls?” but every time I ever complained about having to do something, those are the times I really learned something about myself or other people.
Another participant felt it was important to share that part of the knowledge she learned through her experiences as a senior officer’s wife that will be put to practical use in the civilian world:

A great life for me, but not for everybody. You can never say “I’m bored”—would never change it. I try not to complain about the military because I know I have a great life. All of the programs, conferences, meetings that I attend, etc., are good learning experiences and I know I will be able to apply it to the “real world” when I can get out there in the work force.

New friends. Relocating to a new home can lead to distress, but one participant viewed this frequent occurrence in the military lifestyle as an occasion to meet people:

I love the opportunity to meet people. I like the fact that I’m 57 years old and I’m still making all these great new friends. Every place I’ve gone the last 3 or 4 moves, it’s wonderful. I find other women that age are so happy to make a new acquaintance. They think you’re interesting, and you think they’re interesting.

Good life. Moving can be difficult for military families—for adults and especially children. It is never easy saying good-bye to friends or family and it takes time to develop friendships and break into long-established circles. But military transfers are not all unpleasant; they have many benefits, despite what some people might think. Participants reflected on the positive outcome they believe resulted from their nomadic lifestyle. One participant explained

My sister-in-law was feeling so sorry because my boys had to move so often. I said, “No, you don’t understand, it’s a good life. We move a lot, they know friends and, yes, they have to learn to cope, but it does not harm them one bit.” It was sort of annoying that people would sort of look down on our life and feel sorry that we were moving constantly, that your husband was gone or something. I think it’s been a good life. I have enjoyed it. We’ve had a good time.

Another participant with high enthusiasm wanted readers to know that, “We have never been any place that I didn’t have a ball. I loved it. We’re getting ready to retire. I enjoyed everything we’ve done in it. It’s been a good life.”
One participant summed up her thoughts on the benefits and advantages of her life as a senior military officer’s wife: “If I had to do it all over again, I’d do it. I wouldn’t trade it for any other life.”
CHAPTER 5. RESULTS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this research was to answer the central question that delineated this study: “What are the perceptions of senior military officers’ wives regarding their lived experience, their role, its demands and the management of those demands?”

Moustakas (1994) argued that in order for a researcher to achieve a pure and accurate understanding of a phenomenon under study, a researcher must seek experts, individuals who have experienced the phenomenon. Creswell (2007) observed that an understudied population initially must begin with a phenomenological inquiry to construct a framework. Therefore, a phenomenological research design was deemed the logical choice for securing awareness and an understanding of this little-known population of senior officers’ wives. In-depth interviews with selected women in these roles generated knowledge of the meanings and perceptions of what it is like to live the life of a senior officer’s wife by the very women who experienced it.

The 8 participants, women married to some of the most senior officers in the U.S. military, shared their perceptions of their life experiences. The participants’ thoughts, feelings, and perspectives on their role and its demands offered insights into a better understanding of the essence of their existence and the meaning of the experiences that structured and shaped their lives.
Summary of Research Findings

The 8 participants in this study were women married to officers in the highest echelon of the U.S. military. Challenged to process the raw data, that is, the participants’ interviews, the researcher sorted the responses into significant and logical themes. Initially, each statement was scrutinized and meaningful elements identified. The researcher classified these as “horizontal” and consequently invariant meaning units into several emergent themes: new military lifestyle, challenges, techniques, lessons learned, as well as costs and benefits. Further consideration of the findings established that these six themes appeared to be secondary in nature to larger patterns of meaning, and they were reordered into three more universal and central themes: emotional strain, life and emotional management value perceptions, and emotional and tangible returns, as illustrated earlier in Table 2.

The essence of the participants’ role, feelings, and perceptions was reported and supported by verbatim quotes in chapter 4. Drawing from and integrating the structural descriptions, that is, how the experience was reported and textural descriptions of the experiences of the participants and descriptions of their lived experiences, the researcher constructed a universal description of the group’s experiences.

This group acknowledged and identified numerous tasks and responsibilities that consistently and repetitively defined their roles as senior officers’ wives: problem solver, mentor, advisor, cheerleader, hostess, community liaison, coach, facilitator, and leader. These women disclosed the personal and military expectations and their feelings about these expectations that accompanied what appeared to be voluntary tasks, but in reality, as experienced by the women, were mandatory and expected tasks.
The participants agreed that the role of a wife of a senior U.S. military officer was predicated on her husband’s rank and position and not determined on her own merit. While senior officers’ wives received some formal training from the military organization to familiarize them with their new roles, most of the wives felt this approach was inadequate to properly prepare them for what lay ahead. One participant reflected that, “Panel discussion groups were available, ‘charm school capstone’ and other things, but I feel that I learned mostly by living it—being in the situation.”

Most felt that life in the military often was difficult and stressful due to common problems exacerbated by the military lifestyle and by being married to a senior officer. Such elements as living on a military base, being under constant scrutiny, and trying to maintain normalcy while bringing up children were deemed as being highly stressful. Many wives felt that it was challenging and problematic to sustain a sense of identity beyond that of the perceived role of a senior officer’s wife. These women found it challenging to trust that personal conversations and disclosures would be held in confidence by friends and even family, which led to intensified feelings of isolation and loneliness. One participant summed up her feelings, which were shared by many others, regarding the lack of confidants: “I was at the top, so I didn’t have any peers [to speak with], which made it a bit lonely those years.” Another participant warned, “I caution new wives to watch what and to whom they speak.”

The participants experienced additional stress when they felt that they were not supported in their marital relationships. Difficulties arose when the duty and responsibility of their husbands’ jobs left little time and support for them. One of the participants spoke directly to this issue: “There were times I really needed him, but how
could I ask? He was taking care of 9,000 troops. So I could choose between feeling guilty and ask, or silently, resentfully working though it alone.” These wives noted that a significant focal point of their lives was centered on their husbands and their husbands’ careers, in which these women were wholly invested. As a consequence, they often felt they had little or no control over many aspects of their lives. One participant felt she had little option: “We still use the word choice, but we don’t really mean it because expectations are to step up to the plate and do the job.”

Many participants spoke about the stress that occurred when they believed that the military’s or their personal expectations that they associated with their roles as senior officers’ wives were not or could not be met. The extent of this stress was highlighted by the sense some of the women perceived that the demands that senior military wives face may have had a profound negative effect on their or their peers’ physical and mental well-being. When faced with their loved ones’ deployment and the war, these women told of the additional stress and anxiety that ensued. One spouse wanted civilians and military to know that her husband did deploy and was presently serving in a war zone: “I don’t think people in general realize senior military officers serve extended tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. It’s upsetting when perceptions are that they don’t deploy; they can’t lead the war from Washington,” while another participant reflected on the stress related to her husband’s position in the war: “My husband is responsible for the safety and well-being of thousands of military personnel. It’s a heavy burden, and I share this concern for the military men and women and their families, as well as my husband.”

Most of the participants appeared to be able to manage and cope with the high demands of their role and even, though cautious about trusting others, felt that a few
supportive and trusted friends could make a difference. Many wives spoke about their positive feelings when they perceived that they had the ability to own a sense of control over their lives. Physical and mental exercise was frequently cited as an important means by which to manage the stress. Overall, however, these findings suggest that these participants were more likely to cope with stressors by having or developing a positive attitude and cultivating and maintaining a sense of humor. Humor was frequently mentioned as a key element. A smaller number of participants felt that they were better equipped to handle the demands they shouldered by attending counseling sessions.

In the arena of self- and other’s perceptions, a striking conclusion emerged as a number of the senior officers’ wives noted that that they were concerned about and perceived that they were more likely to be judged by members of the civilian and military community due to their spouses’ rank and responsibilities. Although most wives offered examples of the positive qualities found in their “sister-wives,” some wives acknowledged that a few women held a sense of entitlement as the wife of a senior officer. The women perceived that some people felt that senior officers and their wives led idyllic lives and that they were either criticized or at best misunderstood. In the positive reflective perspective, the women felt that they gained valuable knowledge during their journey as senior officers’ wives, which could be beneficial to civilians, military members, and their spouses. They also perceived that the military organization itself could benefit from knowing more of their experiences, and many shared the wish that their views be passed along to others and to decision makers.

Participants were not reticent to discuss the perceived sacrifices senior officers’ wives make as a result of career, personal, and family issues. However, most of the
women felt it was important to discuss the benefits as well as the costs they experienced in their military spousal roles. Participants spoke of the many times their challenges resulted in positive and productive experiences with wonderful rewards. Even though they led hectic lives, many of the participants’ responsibilities involved supporting and helping other members of the military community. These wives felt that they had been motivated by the pressure to strive to accomplish goals on behalf of others. There was a clear sense of self-satisfaction taken and expressed by many of the participants.

Most of the wives expressed that due to their husband’s positions, their travels took them to unique places and offered them the opportunity to meet and befriend many diverse individuals from the military and civilian communities. Most of the wives expressed pleasure at being able to show the goodness of the military and its members to the civilian world. They believed their military lifestyle provided them with an ability to gain insights about themselves as well as others. They felt that the experience they gained through the multiple moves, due to their husbands’ positions, was beneficial to their children—to see the world and learn life lessons from the military and foreign communities. All of the participants expressed a belief that their lives have been enhanced due to the unique life in the military. Not unsurprisingly, participants spoke about their concern of leaving the military because some would soon be faced with retirement. After many years of life in the military community, some women felt they would struggle to become part of the civilian community. These women spoke with bittersweet feelings of their thoughts pending retirement and the stress that resulted as they approached this life-changing event.
Discussion of the Results

Senior officers’ wives and the roles they must assume are seldom discussed or written about, as attested to by the deficiency in the present literature. While some existing literature provides statistical analysis of stressors, depression, and family and parenting issues for military spouses, there is negligible knowledge offered regarding how senior officers’ wives perceive their role, its subsequent demands, and the management of their lives.

While all military wives encounter daily demands, senior officers’ wives, owing to their roles driven by their husbands’ position and rank, must deal with additional and more rigorous challenges (Marriott, 1991). Segal’s (1990) research suggested that women married to military members encounter numerous problems that accompany the military lifestyle, and the higher spousal rank, the greater the demands. The experiences of the participants agreed with Segal’s findings and are also consistent with the research of Alt and Stone (1990) that has shown spousal responsibilities are rank-specific. In order for the husband to concentrate on his military duty, the military organization counts on the senior officer’s wife to perform all necessary obligations (Harrison & Laliberte, 1997). In the present study, the participants acknowledged the various and copious obligations and demands they faced.

General research findings have established that emotional strain or stress is a consequence of multiple jobs and responsibilities (Bolger et al., 1990). Participants reported that although challenges were demanding, some problems motivated them to strive and make every effort to achieve success. Positive stress promotes energy and
enables individuals to see problems as exciting while promoting resourceful thinking that triggers brain growth (The Franklin Institute, 2004).

When this study’s female participants perceived stress, they met the challenge outright, took action, and solved the problem or adjusted by means of longstanding coping techniques and new management lessons learned as senior officers’ wives. This is consistent with research that has shown effective coping is managed by problem-focused coping, emotional-focused coping, and being proactive rather than reactive (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997; Lazarus, 1999). The study’s participants employed specific management methods to cope with their challenging roles. They believed these techniques, specific to their military lifestyle, were effective, which corresponds to the research of Deffenbacher and McKinley (2006) that pertinent stress management techniques are vital to reduce stress.

The 8 participants spoke of the concessions they made being married to the highest ranking officers in the military. This perception is in agreement with current research that reported the position of a senior officer determines the wife’s friends, associates, and lifestyle (Biank, 2006), and the personal sacrifices made in an effort to remain loyal to the military (Harrison & Laliberte, 1994). While there are costs, all 8 of the participants agreed wholeheartedly that their military experiences were not without advantages and benefits. These findings concur with the research of Klein et al. (1989) that suggested that military life has specific opportunities and benefits that correlate to life satisfaction among military wives.

The significance of this study is germane to several diverse communities: senior officers’ wives and their husbands, as well as to women married to men with high-profile
positions in the civilian and corporate environments. The insights presented can benefit husbands with a clearer understanding of their wives’ thoughts and feelings living this experience and, hopefully, for all these women to better understand themselves. The medical and psychological communities can profit from the results of this inquiry by an increased awareness and comprehension of the demands these women encounter, thus enabling professionals to better serve these women and their civilian counterparts. The military organization, its personnel and community, as well as civilians are offered knowledge to realize and appreciate the intricacies in the lives of senior officers’ wives and the value of these women in their work and dedication.

The 8 participants, all married to senior military officers, contributed their views, opinions, and feelings regarding their experiences, their role, and the subsequent effect of their role. When asked to describe their lives, these military wives voiced in solidarity that their experiences were stressful due to the numerous demands responsibilities of military life. Research (Bey & Lange, 1974) has established that challenges resulting from a military lifestyle produce stress. Alt and Stone (1990) reported that stress and strain increase for military wives as their husbands rise in rank.

During this study’s interviews, some unique aspects became apparent that seem to set these women and their roles apart, such as the tasks, expectations, and responsibilities of their roles, the stress surfacing from a distinctive military lifestyle, and their personal coping skills. The perceptions of all 8 participants reflected accord in their statements that life was often stressful for them as wives married to the highest ranking military officers. This stress resulted from various expectations that were role-specific as defined by the spouse’s rank of general officer. While their civilian counterparts might be able to sit
back and enjoy the laurels that come about as a result of years of hard work and sacrifice, these women are expected to meet increasingly higher demands and challenges because of the success their husbands have achieved.

While these wives shoulder numerous responsibilities, they often have little control, as the military takes top priority, dictating where they live and what they do to provide service and support to their spouses, the organization, its members, and their families. Each participant, as a senior officer’s wife, advised, performed, mentored, led, volunteered, relocated, socialized, supported, and problem-solved. The demands placed on them were not voluntary, but obvious expectations emanate from the military, their associations, junior and enlisted wives, their spouses, and themselves. The actions of these women are often judged not on their merit but on the preconceived notions of others for how they meet the expectations or “functions” of their roles. They assume all home and family obligations so that her husbands can carry out their military assignments. Additionally, they are expected to assist in any way to promote the assignment’s successful outcome. Each participant was an extension of her husband in certain military obligations and her performance could advance or damage his career. Where the husbands spoke from positions of power, it was only by association that these women exerted any authority in attempting to meet the expectations of their roles.

While the stress they experienced was not powerful enough to result in depression for these participants, several of them cited knowledge of others who suffered poor mental health resulting from the expectations and pressures senior officers’ wives encounter. For many of the women interviewed, receiving adequate mental health care, if needed, would be problematic. Several of these wives noted that it would be difficult to
share intimate details of their lives with professionals (military doctors) who would be encountered in a mutual social circle or in the chain of command of their husbands’ assignments.

Although these women’s lives were frequently stressful, their experiences were not all negative, and often, hectic times resulted in high rewards. Military commitments are demanding and taken seriously as an oath and allegiance by the senior officers and, in essence, by their wives. Eustress motivated these wives as they invested much of themselves in performing their roles and, by doing so, serving our country, the military organization, its members, and their families.

Clearly, the women felt that the military organization benefits greatly from the work these women perform and could not function as well without them. In the military organization, the focus centers on their husbands’ rank and position, so their lives are directed by this circumstance. The balance between the weight of responsibility and lack of control remains a constant struggle. Even though these participants were not in the driver’s seat, they did not take a back seat in their lives. Have no doubt, these were strong and resilient women, who chose various problem-focused and emotional-focused coping skills with which to manage and cope with their stress. When a stressful situation could not be avoided, humor and a positive attitude helped reframe how they viewed a stressor. The participants interviewed also were often proactive in coping with stress. They accumulated and employed resources as a preventive measure to manage stress, including physical exercise and securing and maintaining supportive friendships, although defining a friend, competitor or confidant was often a difficult task.
The participants were self-reliant, problem-solving women who ventured beyond their roles as senior officers’ wives and initiated and chose additional ways by which to define themselves to further enhance their sense of self. The participants spoke of a need to be understood by the military and by the civilian community, to dispel assumptions and presumptions that members of these two communities might have regarding the participants and other military members. All the participants expressed a desire to share the experience, knowledge, and skills they felt they had acquired over the years so others could learn from their experiences. Lastly, each participant in her own words asserted that while there were costs associated with their roles, the rewards were great and, for these senior officers’ wives, there was no other life like it.

Limitations

The researcher’s choices determined some of the limits of this study. Principal among these was the selection of a specific military service environment and the number and gender of the participants. The military environment chosen was the U.S. Army. There were 8 participants, all female volunteers and all married to Army Generals. While the participants’ time constraints limited the number of interviews, a subsequent interview might well have rendered additional valuable data that may have further enriched this study.

The fundamental selection criterion for the participants was the fact that they had lived the experience of the phenomena under study. Since the choice of the sample was based on purposeful sampling, an appropriate method in qualitative research, the research results cannot be generalized to a larger population. This carefully selected sample
produced a rich, in-depth account that contributes to the foundations of knowledge and inspires future research on this topic. In lieu of generalizing, this method of inquiry adds understanding to the literature of the role senior officers’ wives presented in narrative account by 8 women of the targeted population.

Conclusions

Life is about choices; some we get to make and others are made for us, and so it is in the lives of these participants as senior officers’ wives. The military dictates when and where they will move and where they will call home. The military organization and its unique service environment make specific demands on their time and effort, which seldom leaves them little choice regarding fulfillment of these expectations. The roles of these senior officers’ wives require numerous challenges, which produce both negative and positive stress. The participants clearly understood that their own choice of how they react to and manage these challenges determined whether stress or eustress was produced. They consciously and continually made decisions on what to bring into their life as important and what to leave behind as not. These were educated and sensitive women dedicated and loyal, but not submissive, to the military system. Rather, they took responsibility for their own happiness and the preservation of their own sense of self while fulfilling their role and coping with the stress that emanates from that role. One participant’s final comments appeared to encapsulate the feelings of all of the participants: “I would want you to leave with an overwhelming impression that I absolutely love it, that it is fun and that it is exhilarating, and that it is very rewarding, but I will not diminish the challenge of it.”
Recommendations for Future Study

Several recommendations are presented to various factions and for future investigation. Since all participants were married to Generals in the U.S. Army, future studies may allow for expansion on this topic to include senior wives of the other military services. While all the participants were female spouses, further qualitative research may focus on males who are married to senior female military officers. Quantitative researchers can also build upon this research by conducting investigations to obtain data that can be generalized for what this population perceives is most stressful about their roles and what they believe to be the most effective coping skills.

As one participant stated, “The institution needs to do a better job,” and so there must be a change. These wives of senior officers were not seeking monetary rewards or flowery accolades, but recognition and respect for all they accomplished in the form of support. Senior officers’ wives are in need of support if they are to continue to meet the expectations they shoulder and in order to begin the process of change. This research was designed to shed light on and raise consciousness in this small but vital population that silently serves our country so that those in power to make changes will do so. It is in the military organization’s interest to explore ways to improve support if the expectation is that these women continue to effectively fulfill their role. Formal training, as it stands now, to prepare women for these roles requires review and restructuring. Training for senior officers’ spouses in the form of presentations focusing on the real-life encounters and practical information they will need when faced with daily living should be considered. Medical doctors and counseling professionals must be made available to this population, outside the military realm, with whom senior officers’ wives can speak.
confidentially and without reservation. This research should serve as a springboard for military policymakers to commence a dialogue that will build a foundation for a structured system of support for these women.

Dedication and commitment to the military and its goals will remain the priority of senior officers—at times, to the detriment of their spouses. These high-ranking military men need to remain aware of the challenges their wives face due to their positions and develop a better understanding of what these women experience. Senior officers must develop open communication, encouragement of personal growth, and reiteration of worth, which should result in the improvement of the relationship with and the lives of their spouses.

Wives of senior officers need to continue to be proactive in their efforts and could benefit from increased contact with their peers. They should consider implementing a process that brings together senior wives from not only their own military branch but all military services. This confluence of thoughts and intellect should be employed to identify support systems among their peers, and thus help all military wives realize the choices they have to direct their own lives while fulfilling their role.

While there is little doubt that stress plays a major role in the life of a senior officer’s wife, there are additional women who must face similar pressures and demands. These women are corporate, clergy, and athletes’ wives. Identifying and combating stress with effective coping skills, such as those described for senior officers’ wives in chapter 2, can relieve distress for many women faced with similar unique obligations of marital roles.
The life of a senior officer’s wife is stressful, and this research identified her stressors, explored valuable coping strategies, and analyzed and evaluated coping techniques that would be most effective in coping with stress and thus improving her well-being. Consistently and to a woman, the participants spoke about their sense of duty and how they strongly identified with the self-perception that they “served their country” through the role they had taken on as the wife of a senior U.S. military officer. One participant seemed to sum up the sentiments that these women felt: “I firmly believe that I serve every bit as much as he did. I serve in a very different way and I am honored to do so.”

While listening to the 8 participants, it was evident that these senior officers’ wives held three principles steadfast: commitment, control, and challenge. Ouellette [Kobasa]’s (1979, 1982, 1993) research in health psychology described these three principles as the primary components of a concept termed hardiness. Hardy women are flexible, persistent, have a clear vision of their values, goals, and abilities, and positively respond to stressful life events utilizing their personal resources to bring about change (Ouellette [Kobasa], 1982).

These women’s sense of commitment directed them in their role to serve their country. Their attitude toward control of their lives allowed them to make choices in response to negative and positive stress and subsequently call upon a repertoire of appropriate coping skills. Their attitude of challenge empowered them to influence outcomes to promote positive change. It may be that their attitudes of commitment, control, and challenges identifying these women as hardy helped create the adaptive and
proactive methods to handle stress and manage their lives to achieve satisfaction from their experiences.
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APPENDIX. DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

1. How long have you and your spouse been together?
2. Was he a senior officer before you were married?
3. Do you have children (dependent/independent)? What is their age range? Do they live in the area?
4. What type of housing do you live in (on base or off)?
5. How many times have you moved since your husband was promoted to a Flag Officer?
6. Do you currently work outside of the home? If so, what type of work do you do?
7. Have you worked in the past? If so, what type of work did you do?
8. Are any of your children in the military?
10. How much education have you completed?