

The Experiences of Army Spouses Living Outside a Military Patch Community and the  
Implications on Wellbeing: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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## **Abstract**

While the majority of military families continue to relocate frequently and reside on an established military 'patch', there is a small but growing trend of families who prefer to remain stable in one location. These military families predominately live within their own homes, or private sector rentals amongst a civilian population often a considerable distance away from a military community. The introduction of MoD and government-led initiatives offering greater choice and stability suggests that a larger number of military families may become more geographically dispersed across the country in future. Despite the potential implications of such change, there is a lack of research on this topic area and little is known about those families who currently live in this way.

This thesis presents a phenomenological study, which explored the lived experiences of army spouses who were residing, or who had resided outside of a military patch community and the implications that this potentiated for spousal wellbeing.

The findings suggested that living outside a military patch community had both benefits and challenges that continuously needed to be balanced and re-evaluated. Benefits included stability and consistency, and a greater sense of autonomy and control. Challenges were particularly the impact of shorter but more frequent separations, and the experience of disconnection from the military community. Participants described a sense of loss to their military connections and that civilians lacked an understanding of the uniqueness of their lives. This resulted in feelings of isolation and loneliness. The military patch therefore became a place of multiple meanings, as interpreted by each participant. For many participants, a sense of suspension between two communities, neither of which they felt to be part of, was experienced. This potentiated a further loss in relation to their sense of place and purpose.

Recommendations from these findings included the need for increased connection, support and information about the realities of residing outside a patch and some distance away from a military community. From a counselling psychology perspective, this thesis highlighted the unique experiences and needs of military families. Practitioners may benefit from a greater understanding of the unique challenges that military spouses face, which may be exacerbated when transitioning from and living outside a military patch community.

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## CHAPTER ONE



## 1. Chapter One: Introduction

The British Military consists of three service branches: British Army, Royal Air Force (RAF) and the Royal Navy (including Royal Marines). According to the latest data, there are approximately 159 000 military personnel that make up the armed forces, with the highest proportion serving in the British Army (UK Parliament, 2021). There appears to be no definitive record of the number of military families that exist, but it is estimated that 67 000 military personnel are married or in a civil partnership, with an estimated 80% of families having one or more children (MoD, 2021a). Whilst these figures are derived from self-declarations by the serving personnel and therefore information may be under-reported, it does provide an indication of the potential number of military families that exist and the extent of the military community.

Families have always been connected to the military (Angelis and Segal, 2015). Yet, the traditional view of the nuclear military family, who were historically referred to as '*camp followers*' and those that '*followed the flag*', is changing (Selous, Walker, and Misca, 2020, p.13), and there currently exists no typical 'type' or definition of what constitutes a military family (Moelker *et al.* 2015). What makes military families unique from other families, however, is their potential to experience multiple stressors as a result of the obligations and demands of military life which put operational effectiveness and commitment to '*duty first*' a priority. This often means that the needs of military families become secondary to that of the military, which may compound these stressors further. The impact of military life is therefore far-reaching (Selous, Walker, and Misca, 2020), and research has suggested that the impact of these demands may have an adverse effect on the mental health and wellbeing of not only the serving personnel, but on other members of the family too, including spouses (Burrell *et al.* 2006; Eaton *et al.* 2008).

The tensions between military demands and family life have long been acknowledged (Segal, 1986). Arguably, these tensions have intensified in recent years in line with wider societal shifts and greater opportunities for women within the workforce and within the military itself (British Army, 2018). Potentially this makes military life more difficult to manage as military spouse's move away from their historical role as followers, and instead seek greater independence and stability of their own, for example in terms of employment (Dandeker *et al.* 2006). Moreover, spouses may also hold greater expectations that their partner, the

serving personnel, will contribute and engage in more home-life activities (Dandeker *et al.* 2006), further exacerbating the military – family tensions.

Despite the changes that have occurred, for many military families continuing to ‘follow’ the service personnel by relocating frequently (usually every 2 years), and living with an established military community or ‘patch’ as it is often referred to, remains the norm. This is particularly the case for army families, who are the most mobile of all service families (MoD, No Date; 2021a). Yet, there is beginning to be a small but growing trend of military families, including army families that are beginning to choose a different way of life. That is, some families are choosing or have expressed a preference for greater stability by living within their own homes, or private sector rentals within local civilian communities (MoD, 2021a). Moreover, this change in trend is also occurring against the backdrop of MoD and government-led policies and initiatives, such as the Families Accommodation Model (FAM; MoD, 2021b) and the Forces Help to Buy Scheme (MoD, 2014).

Such initiatives are intended to offer more choice to military families about where and how they want to live, and to support those that wish to obtain greater stability, usually in one geographic location, as opposed to remaining mobile and relocating often. For example, the Family Accommodation Model (FAM) is a pilot scheme that seeks to move military families out of specific housing on an established military patch (Service Family Accommodation; SFA), encouraging greater home ownership or uptake on private rentals in local civilian towns. In addition, the Forces Help to Buy Scheme offers financial support to the serving personnel and their family in order to buy, and then reside within their own property. In many ways, these initiatives could be seen as recognising the changing needs and role of the military family. Potentially, they are also the beginnings of addressing some of the challenges that spouse’s face by being part of such a mobile population. Many of these challenges have been highlighted by military charities, such as the AFF (AFF, 2017), and within other research (Blakely *et al.* 2014; Dandeker, French and Thomas, 2005). These difficulties continue – for example, in 2020, one in four military spouses reported that they had difficulty in finding and obtaining employment opportunities (MoD, 2020), likely because spouses who relocate tend not to be able to commit to being in one location for more than a certain period of time (usually two years). Indeed, these challenges can impact negatively on the wellbeing of military spouses (Gribble *et al.* 2019b), thus, opting to become geographically stable potentially negates some of the difficulties experienced by spouses, particularly in relation to obtaining and maintaining employment.

It is therefore likely that greater numbers of military families will in future begin to take advantage of the perceived benefits that these initiatives appear to offer. Consequently then, army families will in future become more dispersed across the country, and will begin residing outside of, and potentially a considerable distance away from military patch communities. Instead, they will be more likely to reside within a location of their choice amongst a civilian neighbourhood. This will be a considerable change in how, and where army families will live in future.

It has already been highlighted that little is known about the experiences and needs of military families that are living dispersed and outside a military patch community (Verey and Fossey, 2013). This study aims to address this gap. To date, most research conducted in the UK on military families, particularly in relation to military spouses, have focused on exploring the impact of operational deployments on spousal wellbeing (Dandeker *et al.* 2006; Higate and Cameron, 2004; Keeling *et al.* 2015a; Thandi *et al.* 2017), whilst other research has focused on the relocation experience during accompanied postings (Blakely *et al.* 2014; Gribble *et al.* 2019b; Jervis, 2011;). This research, the majority of it qualitative, has been important for understanding these specific experiences and the implications that this potentiates for the wellbeing of military spouses. However, there are currently fewer active operational deployments and therefore military families are less likely to experience the lengthy separations and associated worries as a result. Similarly, with more families displaying a preference for, and indeed being encouraged to opt towards stability within their own homes instead of relocating frequently through MoD and government-led initiatives, the experiences of relocation and accompanied postings may not be as relevant for future military families and spouses. Instead, as outlined above, it is likely that more families will be transitioning and readjusting into local civilian environments away from military communities, indeed reflecting a change in how families wish to live, and possibly in their relationship between themselves and the military as an institution. Arguably, these changes will be considerable, potentiate greater tensions between work-family life and have implications for the entire military family. Yet, according to Selous, Walker, and Misca (2020) these have yet to be fully considered and understood. It is therefore necessary, and timely to further explore what this may mean for future military families, especially spouses, whose needs often come secondary to that of the military (Selous, Walker, and Misca, 2020). The aim of the current study was therefore to utilise a qualitative design to gain insight into, and understand the experiences of army spouses living outside a military patch community and the implications this potentiated on spousal wellbeing.

Spouses of *army* personnel were purposely made the focus of this study. This group was chosen as any changes to the potential offer of where and how military families wish to live in future, the shift towards greater stability and the potential loss of the opportunity to live on an established military patch, is likely to have greater implications on army families rather than other service branches. This is because, as noted earlier, army families represent the largest and most mobile of all service branch families, and tend to reside on a military patch community more than any other service family (MoD, 2021a). Indeed, many army families have already raised concern about the long-term impact of the MoD-led initiatives; that it may not be compatible with the transient life-style of the army, and, will undermine the age-old tradition of being part of a community that understands the challenges inherent in military life (AFF, 2016a; AFF, 2021; Selous, Walker, and Misca, 2020). Taking each service branch separately, particularly in relation to accommodation and how and where they will live is considered a '*must*' to ensure that the unique needs of each service branch family are addressed and the most appropriate support is received (Baade, No date). However, while army spouses were the focus, there is a lack of studies that focus on the army as a separate service branch, thus it was necessary to consider and utilise research and evidence from all service branches in order to help provide context and background to this study.

The focus of this study is on the lived experiences of army spouses and on their sense of wellbeing. While interest in the wellbeing of spouses has increased in recent years, particularly following the operational tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, the military spouse population continues to remain under-researched (DeBurgh *et al.* 2011). Yet, the wellbeing of spouses is of particular relevance since research has shown that their wellbeing is important to the individual family and the operational unit (Drummet, Coleman, and Cable, 2003; Eaton *et al.* 2008). Focusing on military spouses allows their voices and lived experiences to be heard, which is important as these are rarely brought to the fore (Fossey, 2012). In the foreword of the first UK Armed Forces Families Strategy (MoD, 2016a), the wellbeing of military families was further highlighted as an area of priority. It stated that doing more to listen, talk to, and empower families was vital, especially to ensure the retention of a robust and experienced military force. Exploring the potential implications that choosing to live outside a military patch community has on the wellbeing of military spouses is therefore not only an important area of study in its own right for both current and future military spouses, but also has relevance for the military as an organisation. Given this importance and the new drives towards stability, together with the paucity of literature on the experiences of military spouses more generally within the military literature, this study

was considered much needed and well timed. Its aims were to explore the lived experiences of army spouses who choose to reside outside of a military patch community and the implications of this on their sense of wellbeing.

### **1.1 My Lived Experience - The beginning of this enquiry**

Positionality reflects the position in which the researcher has chosen to adopt within a given study (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013). Outlining and making clear this position is important at the outset, given that research cannot be value free (Berger, 2015).

I am an army spouse, and therefore my initial interest in this research stems from my own lived experience of having to continually adjust to and make choices about how I navigate this distinctive way of life, that is, military life. Indeed, my journey so far has meant that I have had to cope with lengthy deployments, relocate frequently, leave behind valued colleagues and move jobs, and manage a number of house moves. Such demands have posed challenges every time, but they have also brought opportunities for new encounters, friendships, and a greater sense of independence. Yet, from time to time I find myself wondering whether this way of life is worth it, and whether there may be better, alternative choices for our family? When the demands of military life are great and decisions are pressing, over the years I have noticed a greater desire to set down roots and prioritise stability in one location by living in our own home. Choosing to live in this way would likely mean fewer transitions and changes and more certainty for our family. Yet, past experience of attempting to achieve 'stability' in one place and what this meant for our family continues to influence and shape my choice for us to remain a mobile family. Currently, we reside on a military patch, and 'patch life' is indeed unique. Over such time, I have come to accept the complex dynamics that often underpin and occur within a military patch community, in part, because of the support in which it provides at times of uncertainty and challenge. This becomes yet another factor that shapes my current thinking and choice to remain mobile and reside within an established military patch community at this time.

Thus, the initial drive for this study was personal, and prompted me to become interested in the lived accounts of other military spouses who had chosen to live outside a military patch community, but whom could also draw experiences from living on a military patch. The duality of experiencing both was of particular interest. I felt that this duality had not only created and shaped my own personal experience, but by exploring other spouses' insights, the uniqueness of both experiences could be uncovered and as a result the study's findings

enriched. I wondered what other spouse's experiences were and how they made sense of the benefits and challenges of their living options. I was curious to find out if their experiences had implications for their wellbeing, and if this was similar or different to my own. I therefore wished to use this study as an opportunity to uncover these lived experiences, whilst also possibly revealing the shared aspects of this experience across others and with that of my own.

Furthermore, throughout this time, my interest continued to develop and I became cognisant of the dearth of literature in this area, which further fuelled my desire and supported the need for this study. Moreover, against the backdrop of the new pilot schemes and initiatives which seek to support families who wish to live in local civilian communities, away from military patches and bases (e.g., FAM and Forces Help to Buy), the need to explore and understand spouses lived experiences, in-depth, became even more pertinent to consider. A request to other military spouses on social media for potential areas of interest for a doctoral-level research study also supported the conclusion that this was an area worthy of investigation. Their responses suggested that this was under-researched, but much needed and timely considering the changes that were taking place. My own personal connection and experience of being an army spouse therefore created a unique opportunity to gain access to this community and conduct research in this area, especially since those that choose to reside outside of a military patch community are identified as being particularly hard to reach (Verey and Fossey, 2013).

My desire to explore the lived experiences of others made a phenomenological study a valuable and attractive methodological choice for this particular research, and for a counselling psychology researcher. However, whilst my main interest was to focus on the *experiences* of military spouses who were living outside a military patch community, as a novice counselling psychology researcher that had yet to develop a strong identity as a psychology practitioner and psychology researcher, I chose to extend my focus to explore the implications that living in this way had on spousal wellbeing. At the time, the inclusion of wellbeing embedded the research within existing counselling psychology research and practice. However, as I developed throughout my training and research journey, my decision to extend the research question to include wellbeing as a concept in order to specifically situate the research within counselling psychology was not necessary. I came to learn that at its core, counselling psychology privileges respect for the personal and subjective experience of individuals (Cooper, 2009), from which a sense of wellbeing is

rooted and can be unearthed. Thus, there would have been just as much value in choosing to remain focused on spouse's lived experience of the phenomenon, as it was to include how such experience had implications for wellbeing. Nevertheless, the decision to consider and explore not only the lived experience of the phenomena, but the potential implications this had on spouse's sense of wellbeing allowed for an important contribution to the study's findings.

Whilst I examined various conceptualisations of wellbeing as part of my research journey, my approach was to investigate wellbeing without offering participants a prescribed definition, particularly since the aim was to explore spouse's subjective lived experiences. The interview schedule and discussions therefore did not focus on one specific form of wellbeing, nor did it focus on certain factors of wellbeing. Nevertheless, participant's experiences did provide insight into how their experiences had implications on their sense of wellbeing. Moreover, my own experience of living both on and outside of an established military patch community made me aware of the wide range of issues and factors (e.g., autonomy, identity, positive and negative affect) that impacted my own sense of wellbeing during these times, which are also considered important issues for military spouses more generally as described in the literature (see; Blakely *et al.* 2014; Gribble, 2017a, 2017b; Jervis, 2011; Verey and Fossey, 2013). Offering participants a specific definition, or narrowing the focus to explore only certain factors of wellbeing may have restricted discussions, or missed important implications for wellbeing. Ultimately, it may have limited the study's findings.

During this research, I was very much aware that I had experience of the phenomenon and held multiple positions; military spouse and a counselling psychology researcher. The need to manage these roles therefore became an important part of my research journey. How I approached this methodologically is addressed throughout the thesis, and specifically in the reflexivity sections (see section 3.15).

To conclude, exploring the experiences of army spouses who currently live, or have lived outside of a military patch community and the implications this may have on wellbeing is an important area of research that is much needed and timely. The following chapter will now explore further what is currently known in relation to this topic.

## **1.2 Structure of the thesis**

The thesis is structured into six chapters:

This chapter introduces this thesis, and provides an overview of the changing needs of military families, alongside two existing initiatives that are likely to increase flexibility and encourage stability. My position and how this research emerged is also presented.

Chapter 2 provides the search strategy, and provides a critical review of the existing literature in relation to dispersed military families. The lack of literature in this area is then considered alongside other military literature in order to provide context to the study.

Chapter 3 presents a discussion of research methodology and the research methods employed in the research. It considers IPA as a method, and outlines a rationale for its choice. Additionally, an overview of the study sample, and the completion of data collection and analysis is provided. Ethical issues, and researcher reflexivity is also presented.

Chapter 4 details the findings from seven IPA interviews with participants. Five master themes emerged, and are supported in the context of participant quotes.

Chapter 5 offers a discussion of the key themes and findings, and situates this in relation to the wider literature.

Chapter 6 provides an evaluation of the quality of the study, and both the study's strengths and limitations are outlined. Finally, recommendations for practice and a conclusion of the overall thesis are presented.



## CHAPTER TWO

## **2. Chapter Two: Search strategy and review of relevant literature**

The aim of this chapter is to contextualise the study within the relevant and wider literature pertaining to military families, and specifically military families that are living outside of a military patch community. Firstly, a description of the search strategy undertaken is outlined and the findings detailed. The search of published journal articles highlighted a lack of research in this area and need to source wider literature. As an emerging research area, the grey literature proved critically important. It provided an understanding of the topic that was not represented in indexing databases or within formally published, peer-reviewed research. Following this, the wider literature is explored to provide further context and concludes with a brief summary that provides a rationale for undertaking this study.

### **2.1 Search strategy**

#### *2.1.1 Aims and objectives*

An initial review of the literature, using systematic techniques, was conducted in relation to the following research question:

‘What are the experiences of army spouses living outside an established military patch community and the implications for spousal wellbeing?’

Specifically, the objectives of the review were to gather and synthesize the existing knowledge relating to:

- The experiences of military spouses living outside a military patch community
- The implications of their experiences on the wellbeing of spouses

#### *2.1.2 Rationale for conducting a literature review*

While a review of the literature may be criticised for not being rigorous enough (Bower, 2010), the time constraints of the study meant that a full systematic review was not possible. However, the review conducted was completed in a systematic manner between 2019-2020. It highlighted the dearth of research in this area, which subsequently

strengthened the rationale for completing this study. However, because of the lack of literature it was necessary to complete smaller, and more focused searches at later dates in order to provide a better understanding of some of the experiences that military families may encounter whilst living outside a military patch community, and the potential implications this may have for spousal well being. Details of this review journey will now be provided in the following sections.

### *2.1.3 Inclusion and exclusion criteria*

During the initial search, research articles were included if participants detailed in the studies were military spouses and were focused on living outside an established military patch community (often described in the literature as living dispersed, or unaccompanied). The review considered studies that were conducted within the last ten years (from 2010-2020) to reflect the recent changes in the needs of military families and the new ways in which military families are choosing to live. Both qualitative and quantitative studies were considered, as well as those studies that employed a mixed method approach.

The review excluded articles that were not in relation to families / spouses living dispersed, or unaccompanied. Thus, studies related to accompanied postings, or indeed unaccompanied experiences because of deployment for example, were excluded from the initial search, although they did later provide contextual information that was useful to draw upon. In addition, papers were excluded if the study's main focus was on family members other than spouses, for example children. Articles that were not peer-reviewed, not available as full texts, or available in English were also excluded.

### *2.1.4 Search terms*

**Initial Search:** Key terms relating to the military ("Army" OR "Navy" OR "RAF" OR "Military" OR "Reservist" OR "Armed forces") and spouses ("Spouse" OR "Partner" OR "Wife" OR "Wives" OR "Husband" OR "Family") were used. These terms were combined with key words that are often used to describe military families living outside of an established military community ("dispersed" OR "unaccompanied"). Together, these terms were used to capture research relating to the main aims of the study.

Search string: (“ Army” OR “Navy” OR “RAF” or “Military” OR “Reservist” OR “Armed Forces”) AND (“Spouse\*” OR “partner\*” OR “wife” OR “wives” OR “husband” OR “famil\*”) AND (“dispersed” OR “unaccompanied”).

#### *2.1.5 Sources*

To provide a meaningful overview of the published, peer-reviewed literature in relation to this study area, a search of a number of electronic databases and collections was completed including Academic Search Complete, ASSIA, CINAHL Plus with full-text, Nursing and Allied Health databases, ProQuest, PubMed, PsycArticles, PsychInfo, and Science Direct.

#### *2.1.6 Overview of the search process*

Databases were searched individually. By sifting through the retrieved article titles and abstracts, a number of articles were excluded as they were deemed not relevant, were duplicate records, or did not meet the inclusion criteria set. Only a handful of studies were, after this sifting, identified as being appropriate and warranted a full text review.

The table below depicts the process of the search strategy for each individual database / collection, the associated number of ‘hits’ for each one, along with the number of articles selected for full abstract, and paper screen and those that were relevant to the research aims.

**Table 1. Overview of database search strategy and process**

Database	Limiters	Initial no. of 'hits' after limiters applied		Articles selected for full abstract, and paper screen		Articles Included in review
ASSIA	Peer reviewed, English Language, Full-Text, Date set from 2010	144	→	<p>2</p> <p>Davis <i>et al.</i> (2017) Engaging National Guard and Reserve Families in Research. <i>Journal of Human Sciences and Extension</i></p> <p><i>Excluded:</i> Focus on how to increase research recruitment and participation in dispersed military families (National Guard and Reserve Families)</p> <p>Aronson, K.R and Perkins, D.F. (2013) Challenges Faced by Military Families: Perceptions of United States Marine Corps School Liaisons</p> <p><i>Excluded:</i> Focus on service children / youth stressors, and interventions such as a school liaison programme</p>	→	Nil
Academic Search Complete	Peer reviewed, English Language, Full-Text, Date set from 2010	9	→	<p>2</p> <p>Rodrigues <i>et al.</i> (2020)</p>	→	1 Rodrigues <i>et al.</i>

				<p>Beardslee, W.R <i>et al.</i> (2013) Dissemination of Family-Centred Prevention for Military and Veteran Families: Adaptions and Adoption with Community and Military Systems of Care.</p> <p><i>Excluded:</i> Focus on Intervention designed for military families to reduce stress associated with deployment / combat injuries, and the process of adopting such interventions to reach geographically dispersed families</p>	<p>(2020)</p> <p>* Implications on support available for dispersed families in England</p>
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Cinahl Plus	Peer reviewed, English Language, date set from 2010	7	→	1  O'Neal, C.W. and Richardson, E.W. and Mancini, J.A (2018). Community, Context and Coping: How social connections influence coping and wellbeing for military members and their spouses  <i>Excluded:</i> Focus on the importance of military community, and not living dispersed.	→	Nil
Nursing & Allied health databases	Peer reviewed, English Language, date set from 2010, search terms Military AND spouse etc searched 'anywhere except full-text' added to reduce 'hits' from 869 to '32'	32	→	Nil	→	Nil
ProQuest	Peer reviewed, English Language, date set from	161	→	1  Murphy, R.A and Fairbank, J.A (2013) Implementation and	→	Nil

	2010, search terms; Military AND spouse searched 'anywhere except full-text' added to reduce 'hits' from 9,690 to '161'			dissemination of military informed and evidence based interventions for community dwelling military families.  Excluded: Focus on challenges to access EBP and treatment competencies for appropriate mental health care in order to serve reserve families living in community		
Psych articles	Peer reviewed, English Language, date set from 2010	132	→	Nil	→	Nil
Psych Info	Peer reviewed, English Language, date set from 2010	4	→	Nil	→	Nil
Science Direct	Peer reviewed, English Language, date set from 2010, all search terms searched in abstract, title, keywords, Limited to Psychology and Social Science Subject areas to	19	→	Nil	→	Nil



	<p>reduce from 978,501 to 22,209.</p> <p>Search terms changed from “military” AND “spouse” etc to one term “military spouse” in order to conduct a more simplified, yet focused search in order to further limit the no of hits.</p>					
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### *2.1.7 Outcome of initial focused search*

As highlighted above, the search for peer-reviewed literature in regards to dispersed military families is minimal, potentially because this is an emerging area of research.

Of the studies selected for full abstract review and paper screen 5 of 6 articles were excluded as they did not meet the aims of the research question. Only 1 article was identified for inclusion; 'The exploration of the dispersal of British military families in England following the Strategic Defence and Security Review 2010' (Rodrigues *et al.* 2020). This was the only article, whilst not its main focuses, shed some light on the potential implications of dispersal on military families wellbeing, that is, the potential loss of support for military families living dispersed. On this basis this was considered a reason for inclusion.

The included article was an exploratory study aimed at depicting and quantifying the spatial pattern of England's military families with dependant children. It reported an increase in the distribution of military families, and indicated that a greater number of families are becoming dispersed and living in locations some distance away from established military bases and garrisons. Consequently, the authors argue that these findings have implications for families living dispersed from a military patch community, particularly in terms of the military's existing paradigm for both informal and formal support. However, this study was exploratory in nature, and was not qualitative, thus, did not explore military families experiences of this way of life, nor did it specifically explore this in relation to wellbeing, although arguably it does have a relevance to wellbeing, in terms of the potential loss of support that it highlighted even if this was not specifically stated. The article mainly demonstrated a change in trend over the past ten years in how military families wish to live, suggesting that more UK-based families were becoming dispersed across the country. While this was helpful in providing evidence of the growing trend towards dispersal, the study itself relied on proxy measures, and the data took into account the distribution of military families in England only, but this was because publicly available data (that the study relied upon) was not available in other regions, for example, in Wales.

### *2.1.8 Search of grey literature*

Due to this being an emerging and niche topic with a lack of peer-reviewed research, additional sources, mainly the grey literature such as policy documents, reports, and surveys were accessed. Grey literature generally tends to vary in terms of its quality and reliability

(Cranfield University, 2021) mainly because it tends to not be peer-reviewed and the same rigorous process applied (as would be the case for research articles). However, the grey-literature, especially in this case, was an important evidence base and provided a much-needed and broad understanding into this topic area. The majority of the grey literature that was accessed was mainly cited and obtained from organisations that specifically supported military families, such as the Army Families Federation (AFF). This allowed issues pertaining to this emerging area of research to be recorded. Nevertheless, caution is advised when utilising grey-literature to support and understand an area of interest (Cranfield University, 2021), and therefore while sources were carefully considered and informally evaluated for currency, relevance, accuracy, authority and purpose, the use of the grey-literature is noted as a potential limitation.

To search the grey literature, a Google scholar search was initially completed using similar search terms (e.g., 'military', 'family' and 'dispersed' or 'unaccompanied') with limiters on the date. However, this produced a vast amount of results that lacked consistent organisation and relevance (e.g., related to unaccompanied minors in foreign countries at war, or asylum seekers). The number of results retrieved was considerable and also impossible to screen. It was also apparent that certain reports and surveys that I was aware of existing were not ranked highly within the search, or did not appear. Thus, grey-literature specifically pertaining to dispersed military families were instead browsed and targeted through specific military organisations and websites such as the Veterans and Families Research Hub. This search was completed in a similar way to the hand searching method for the screening of articles during the initial search (as described above). References that were cited and found to be relevant and of interest were also subsequently accessed independently, and other work by authors of certain reports and literature were also followed up in an attempt to find other useful articles.

#### *2.1.9 Outcome of search for additional sources*

In particular, three UK-based reports were identified as being of specific interest and were related to the topic area. Verey and Fossey (2012), *Report on Geographically Dispersed Families*; RAF Families Federation (2019) *Benefits and Challenges of Dispersed Living*; Gribble and Fear (2019) *The Effect of Non-Operational Family Separations on Family Functioning and Wellbeing among Royal Navy / Royal Marines Families*.

These reports used the terms geographically dispersed, living dispersed, living unaccompanied, and weekending to describe those families that are likely to live outside of a military patch community and instead reside within their own homes, or private sector rentals within a local civilian community which was the focus of this study. Each one of the published reports reflects research relating to military families from each of the service branches: Army, RAF and Navy.

Whilst these reports were helpful in outlining some of the experiences and the impact on military families and spouses who choose to live dispersed and outside of a patch community, none of them were peer-reviewed, and only one was specifically in relation to army spouses, and this was based upon an MSc level study.

Nevertheless, across the three reports there were a number of similarities, and two main themes were identified as being present. The first common theme amongst the three reports was in relation to separation (and the potential impact that this had on spousal wellbeing, for example single parenting and strain), and secondly in relation to the potential loss of support (the lack of connection to the military community, and the barriers in accessing appropriate support whilst living dispersed). Identification of these themes subsequently allowed for smaller and more focused searches to be conducted to help further understand some of these main experiences that military families residing outside of the military community may encounter.

#### *2.1.10 Subsequent searches*

As noted above, the grey literature highlighted two prominent themes / experiences that are likely to be a common feature of living dispersed and outside a military patch community; separation and loss of connection and support from the military community and support systems. This, together with the one article identified from the initial search of academic literature that also highlighted the potential for loss of support, meant that two smaller and focused searches relating to these two areas, although not the main focus of this study, was needed. In the absence of available literature, conducting these smaller searches allowed a broader perspective and understanding to be drawn from other potentially relevant literature that was peer-reviewed. However, the literature in regards to separation was found to be mainly in relation to deployment experiences, and not for example shorter and frequent separation that was highlighted within the grey literature. Additionally, the research pertaining to support for military families was mainly concerned

with the importance of access to social support from within the military community, which spouses in the reports of the grey literature identified as being more difficult to access since living dispersed and outside of this community.

## **2.2 Review of the literature**

To provide further context to this study, and to strengthen the rationale for undertaking research into this emerging and niche area of study, the following sections provide a more in-depth, and contextual understanding of some of the key areas highlighted in the introductory chapter. It also integrates the literature identified through wider readings as well as the findings from the initial, subsequent and grey-literature searches that were conducted as part of this review (as reported above). The subsequent sections therefore explore the changes that are occurring within the military and the military family. This helps develop a greater understanding of those military families that may choose to reside outside of an established military patch community in future and the potential implications that this may have on their sense of wellbeing, which was the overall focus of this research study.

### *2.2.1 The military and the military family*

According to Clever and Segal (2013), military families should be considered as a '*diverse population with diverse needs*' (p13). The demands of the military often extend beyond that of the serving personnel to include their family members (Selous, Walker, and Misca, 2020). It is often said that '*when one family member serves, every family member serves*', indicating that whilst military families face many of the same challenges and transitions that civilian families face, they also experience a range of unique stressors due to military life that they are required to cope with. These include regular separations, frequent relocations, and the threat of injury or death to a partner (Martin and McClure, 2000; Padden and Posey, 2013; Venning, 2005). While some military families perceive some of these encounters to be '*part*' of military life that brings unique benefits (Thomas, 2018), some research has demonstrated how these experiences can increase family stress and contribute to poorer mental health and psychological wellbeing among military spouses (Booth and Ledere, 2012; Burrell *et al*, 2006; Drummet, Coleman and Cable, 2003). Military families are therefore distinct from other families because of these multiple demands and stressors (Jessup, 1996; Venning, 2005) which often are experienced simultaneously (Jessup, 1996).

There are several dimensions to understanding the culture of the military and military family life in order to understand the development of the research question. Firstly, Segal (1986) described the military and the modernising military family as both '*greedy institutions*'. Such an institutionalised way of life demands what has been described as '*a pattern of absolute devotion*' (Coser, 1974 in Moelker *et al.* 2015) from the serving personnel. Whilst the military is not alone in making 'greedy' demands of its employees (Dandeker *et al.* 2006), unlike other contexts, there is little room for negation in the military in regards to any such demands that are posed. Serving personnel have little choice over decisions that determine how, when, and where they will serve, and the needs of the military must necessarily come first (MoD, 2016a). This has the potential to create a dual loyalty problem between military work and family needs, creating possible spill over or conflict between the two (Angelis and Segal, 2015). Conflict is likely to occur when one is given priority whilst the other is given short-measure (Moelker *et al.* 2015). This is suggested to be the result of having only a limited amount of resources and when a large proportion is taken up to meet the needs of one role, there typically is not enough left to meet the demands of another. Selous, Walker, and Misca (2020) suggests that this may lead to increased family and spousal stress, family and relationship breakdown, or often the serving personnel transitioning out of the military altogether. This is also reflected in the most recent attitude survey of UK-based military spouses. In this survey, 39% of 5,987 spouses felt that their family life was negatively impacted by having a partner in the military (MoD, 2021a), with many reporting that they would feel happier if the serving personnel choose to leave the military all together.

A second factor to consider was that traditionally it could be argued that military families and spouses gave priority to and fitted in with the military way of life (Jessup, 1996; Moelker *et al.* 2015). Families and spouses have historically tended to '*follow the flag*' regularly moving and accompanying serving personnel on assignments around the world (Selous, Walker, and Misca, 2020, p.13). In the past, the majority of spouses lived 'on base' and participated in the military community (Hyde, 2016; Moelker *et al.* 2015) providing a range of informal activities, such as supporting other military spouses and organising community events that were often related to their husband's position in the military hierarchy (Harrell, 2000; Shields, 1988). It has been argued that the military relied on such invisible contributions and this went some way in helping build and maintain a cohesive community that supported families during times of increased stress and absences, such as deployments (Shields, 1988; Hyde, 2016). Furthermore, as well as being active members of their

communities, military spouses were often expected to perform most of the domestic and caring responsibilities within the family in order to ensure that the service personnel was able to focus on operational effectiveness (Harrison and Laliberte, 1994). Upholding the idealised identity of a good military wife and adopting the traditional view of the military was important, as those challenging this worldview and not conforming were often perceived as a threat and excluded by others (Enloe, 2000).

However, the perceived identity, role and expectations of the military family and spouse have shifted over time in light of societal changes (Dandekar *et al.* 2016; Selous, Walker, and Misca, 2020). Although, it has been argued by some that military spouses continue to be shaped by their historical role as women who followed their husbands and provided unpaid work and support (Enloe, 2000; Oddy 2000). Indeed, it is also the case that within the military context today, spouses continue to be positioned and considered as 'dependents'. Equally, whilst spouses are no longer are obliged to be part of, or have an active role in the military community (Moelker *et al.*, 2015), with some claiming that over time spouses have become less tolerant of their traditional role (Iron, 2003 in Dandekar *et al.* 2006), recent research has suggested that spouses continue to experience pressure to support and give priority to service life (Gribble *et al.* 2019a; Jervis, 2011).

Nevertheless, there does appear to be a slow yet growing acceptance that the way in which military families and spouses are defined and wish to live their lives both now and in the future differs and will continue to differ to that of before (Selous, Walker, and Misca, 2020), reflecting some of these shifts and changes that have occurred. Military families today are therefore not necessarily the stereotypical nuclear family that is married and adopts traditional gender roles and responsibilities (Selous, Walker, and Misca, 2020), like perhaps was the case historically. Today, spouses are much more likely to have their own social networks, groups of support, and their own jobs (Moskos *et al.* 1999), although there continues to be a number of barriers to employment for military spouses, which has been widely documented within the literature (Lyonette *et al.* 2018). Military families may no longer wish to follow the flag, that is in modern terms relocate every two years accompanying the serving personnel to a location that is tied to his/her posting order, and living within SFA on a military patch.

While many families and spouses continue to consider living on a patch to be a desirable 'part' of military life, it is clear that others do not (Gribble, 2017b). These other spouses may instead prefer to live in an area of their choosing outside of and possibly some distance away from an established military community. Arguably, in do so this would allow them the opportunity to experience a number of benefits. This includes increased employment opportunities that are less restricted by their ties to the military (AFF, 2003 in Dandeker *et al.* 2006), and the potential for an identity that is independent of the military and their husband's career as this historically has been difficult to achieve.

These changes have increased debate on whether this may lead to an exacerbation of the military-family rivalry as embodied in the concept of the greedy institution (Andres, Angels, and McCone, 2015; Deakin, 1994 in Dandeker *et al.* 2006). If this is the case, any new tensions and negotiations that families may experience will occur outside of a military patch community. This is significant as arguably those who do not reside within a military patch community, or are perhaps less connected to the military lifestyle on a daily basis may potentially be less accustomed and accepting of the demands posed by the military, in comparison to those who are. Opting to live away from the military patch community may therefore create greater, and possibly additional tension in terms of the work-family conflict and this has yet to be fully considered. Alongside, this may be in addition to the potential challenges that come from living dispersed, the implications of which have yet to be fully considered.

### *2.2.2 The military patch community – Importance of social support*

As outlined in the previous section, it has been long been tradition for serving personnel and their families to follow the flag. This typically means that military families tend to move often and reside in specific housing, called Service Family Accommodation (SFA) provided at a reduced rent by the MoD. Typically referred to as 'married quarters', these houses are often located on or close to an established military patch community (Cozza, Chun and Polo, 2005). These military patches tend to provide military families with access to schools, shops, and leisure facilities (Jessop, 1992; Thomas, 2018), which are usually convenient and easy to access. The 2021 UK Tri-Service Families Continuous Attitude Survey indicates that an estimated 57% of military families live in SFA today, a percentage that appears to remain



unchanged since 2014, with army families most likely to reside in SFA on a military patch in comparison to other service families (MoD, 2021a).

Residing in SFA, and within a military patch community provides not only a physical infrastructure but, according to Brazier and Louth (2017), also establishes an emotionally supportive community for spouses and families too. However, it has been argued that despite the support that can be gained through these communities, the strategic placing of all military families in SFA on designated, self-contained patches ensures military control over families, in terms of shaping their views, expectations and behaviours (Jervis, 2011; Jessup, 1996) that uphold the view of the good military wife (Enloe, 2000).

Historically, living on a military patch was greatly desirable for many military families (Finch, 1983 in Jervis, 2011). This was particularly the case since high mobility often meant that spouses had fewer opportunities to form stable, meaningful relationships with civilians (Finch, 1983 in Jervis, 2011) and high deployment rates meant that spouses were often left behind for several months waiting for, amongst other spouses, their partners safe return. Today, the presence of the military patch community, and the support received through it, continues to remain an important aspect of military life for the majority of military families. This is demonstrated in the AFF's big survey report on housing, with 74% of 5,942 army spouses indicating that having membership to the military community and living close to other service families was what they valued the most about military life (AFF, 2016a).

Living on a military patch has the potential to provide spouses with a sense of community cohesion and opportunities to connect with others living the military lifestyle, from which support can be derived (O'Neal, Richards and Mancini, 2020). For the majority of spouses, living within a patch community tends to mean that they become more immersed in the military culture, in part because living in proximity to facilities and events tends to increase attendance and participation in military-related activities, and more generally socialization with other military families and spouses. This potential for more frequent interactions, together with the shared experiences of living amongst others who understand, can therefore provide spouses with a sense of belonging (Bowen and Orther, 2009), and opportunities in which to derive support (Bowen and Orther, 2009), that may improve wellbeing (Wang *et al.* 2015).

Social support refers to the behaviours of others who provide emotional support, practical assistance and social interactions (Wang *et al.* 2015). Commonly, social support tends to be received through informal networks of friends and family, but it can also come from larger networks, such as more formal military channels. Within the literature, social support is frequently cited for the protective qualities it provides military spouses (Burrell, Durand, and Fortado, 2003; Figley, 1983; Green, Nuris, and Lester, 2013), although the majority of it has focused on the importance of support during deployment separation (Merolla, 2010; Orthner and Rose, 2009; Rosen and Moghadam, 1990; Skomorovsky, 2014).

Specifically, social support has been associated with fewer depressive (Skomorovsky, 2014) and anxiety-related symptoms in some studies (Burrell, Durand, and Fortado, 2013), but not in others (Green, Nuris, and Lester, 2013). It has also been linked to lower levels of stress in some studies (Van-Winkle and Lipari, 2015), and has been identified as helpful in maintaining relationships during deployment (Andres, 2014; Merolla, 2010), as well as a factor in the desire to remain in the military for both the serving personnel and their spouse (Burrell, Durand, and Fortado, 2003).

In terms of where support is received from, many studies combine social support to include, family, friends, and formal networks, making it difficult to disentangle what avenue of support is most helpful for spouses. Research has shown that military spouses and families are more likely to seek support from informal networks of family and friends, rather than from formal military channels (Aducci *et al.* 2015; Dandeker *et al.* 2006). In terms of such informal support, findings are conflicting. For example, a study conducted by Wang *et al.* (2015) who surveyed 207 spouses from the US military found that social support received specifically from other military spouses had a significant influence on spousal wellbeing more than support from civilian family members, concluding that utilising support from within the military community may provide a more immediate relief, which in turn supports spouses' psychological wellbeing. Indeed, this supports research that connecting with others, especially those in a similar situation, leads to better outcomes (Haslam, 2008).

Yet, conversely, Skomorovsky (2014) examined the role of social support in a sample of 639 spouses of the Canadian Armed Forces, and identified that social support, particularly from family and civilian friends, was associated with better psychological health and lower levels of depression (Skomorovsky, 2014), and support from military friends was not a predictor of wellbeing, when other sources of support were accounted for.

Thus, while social support is an important coping strategy, and does appear to mitigate some of the challenges that military families and spouses may face, there are variations in its effects, and where this is received / accessed from is likely to differ across circumstances and situations.

Specifically from the UK literature, Gribble (2017b) explored military spouse experiences of social connections during accompanied postings, that is, spouses accompanying serving personnel on posting orders and therefore residing on a military patch, and the perceived impact on wellbeing. This study, based upon qualitative interviews conducted with 19 British Army and RAF spouses shed light on the importance of a patch community in providing spouses with both practical and emotional support as well as a reciprocated understanding of the issues inherent in military life. Gribble (2017b) reported that the informal support and mutual understanding that spouses experienced from other military spouses contributed to community cohesion, which created a sense of connection and belonging that had implications for spousal wellbeing (Gribble, 2017b). Indeed, it is known that meaningful social support does not occur with any / all social relationships, but rather emerges from a shared group membership (Haslam *et al.* 2008), for example between one military spouse to another. This suggests that being in contiguity to others with similar experiences is important for social support, and can provide a general sense of community, which has implications for an individual's wellbeing (O'Neal, Mancini, and DeGraff, 2016).

However, in contrast, Gribble (2017b) also found that for some spouses building connections within the military community was difficult, and therefore social support from other spouses was not gained. For some, friendships were developed based on proximity and ease of access rather than meaningful connections. This also reflects similar findings from Jervis (2011) whereby spouses described the development of acquaintances rather than friendships, and having to make friends with people that they wouldn't necessarily choose to be close with. However, these perceptions were not common in Gribble's findings and most spouses appeared to develop deep connections within the military community that allowed support to be derived, which Gribble outlined had benefits for spousal wellbeing.

Under the Armed Forces Covenant there is a moral obligation to support military families (MoD, 2014). Military families are therefore able to access support from formal military

channels, such as welfare teams and HIVE's (information centres that provide support to members of the military community). However, typically, access to these teams and this support tends to be predominately focused and centred around military patches and communities (Rodrigues *et al.*, 2021). This means that those living on a patch, or nearby can easily access this support because of proximity and high presence. While spouses tend to prefer to seek more informal social support from others, such as friends and families, rather than seeking formal military support (Adduci *et al.* 2015; Dandeker *et al.* 2006), other studies for example by Burrell, Durand and Fordato (2003) and Orther and Rose (2009) highlight that increased closeness to military resources, as well as having strong informal relationships in which to derive support from, is a protective factor for spousal wellbeing, especially during stressful periods such as work-related separations. However, there are potential barriers for spouses in accessing support. For example, Mailey *et al.* 2018 found that some military spouses feared being perceived as being unable to cope with military demands and were worried that access to formal support may have impacted their partners career opportunities.

### *2.2.3 Changes in military accommodation*

As initially outlined in the introductory chapter, there are a number of new models and initiatives that have been introduced by the MoD and the government that are intended to offer more choice to military families about where and how they want to live, and to support those that wish to seek stability, usually in one geographic location, as opposed to remaining mobile. This is likely to mean that greater numbers of military families will become dispersed, live outside of a military patch community, and instead reside within local civilian towns in future.

The initiatives include the Family Accommodation Model (MoD, 2021b) and secondly the Forces Help to Buy Scheme (MoD, 2014). Firstly, FAM seeks to move military families out of SFA and towards greater home ownership or private sector rentals in local civilian towns. The model has been introduced with the aim of offering greater agency and stability for military families, although concerns about the motives, aims and realities of FAM (AFF, 2021), in that, it is being driven by a financial agenda (Brazier and Louth, 2017) have been made. Under the FAM model, military families can continue to opt to live in SFA if available, but will also be offered a rental payment to enable them to rent a property in the private sector, at broadly the same cost of SFA. Families can therefore choose to live within their

homes, and may receive a core payment towards maintaining their home depending on the distance from the FAM pilot site (MoD, 2021b).

The Forces Help to Buy Scheme on the other hand offers financial support for military families to buy their own property. This was implemented to help address the considerably poor home ownership rates amongst the military population (MoD, 2014), and likely because of the dissatisfaction of poor SFA that was being provided to military families, which had the potential to impact the morale and the retention of the serving personnel (National Audit Office, 2016). The scheme therefore allows more military families to achieve geographic stability in an area of their choosing, which may be a considerable distance away from a military base or community.

Arguably, these initiatives will enable military families more autonomy in regards to how and where they want to live, particularly if they do not wish to be a mobile family and reside within SFA on a military patch. Thus, the drive for greater stability will likely reduce the amount of relocations that spouses and families may experience. Indeed, moving home and relocating is recognised as one of the most stressful transitions that families can experience (Selous, Walker and Misca, 2020). Research on the impact of relocations is well documented within the military literature (Blakely *et al.* 2012; Gribble *et al.* 2019b), and while it can be a positive aspect of military life, creating opportunities for travel and the experience of a life overseas (Dandeker *et al.* 2006), there are also a number of implications that can affect spousal wellbeing.

The offer of greater geographical stability in one area is therefore appealing, and it is likely that this will lead more military families to live outside a military patch community in future. Already, to date, recent statistics from the MoD indicate that over 20,000 military applicants have been successful in gaining purchases under the Forces Help to Buy scheme for example since 2014 (MoD, 2021c), further demonstrating the changing preferences of military families.

According to Rodrigues *et al.* (2020), the impact of military life may become exacerbated because of these changes. This is because families will no longer live in close proximity to a patch community where most support (both formal and informal) tends to be available. Indeed, the House of Commons Defence Committee acknowledged that support for military families is not currently adapted to assist families living away from an established military

community (House of Commons Defence Committee, 2018), although FAM does wish to address these types of issues in future.

Similar concerns have been put forward by military families themselves, particularly those families who are most likely to live in SFA on a military patch. Their concerns have centred around how the initiatives have the potential to undermine the tradition of being part of a community that understands the challenges of military life (Selous, Walker, and Misca, 2020), which further suggests the importance that families place on the patch community. Moreover, Selous, Walker, and Misca (2020) in their report – ‘Living in our shoes’ - suggested that as a result of these changes and growing preferences, more families will live unaccompanied, that is, live separately from the serving personnel throughout the week. This means that military families may experience more frequent separations from each other, possibly leading to increased family pressure. This potentially may lead to an increase in serving personnel leaving the military, although there is no conclusive evidence that has demonstrated a relationship between families living accompanied and within their own home and those that transition out of the armed forces. However, it is known that increased pressure on family life is cited as the most frequent reason for serving personnel to consider exiting the military (Selous, Walker, and Misca, 2020). Thus, such changes may have longer-term implications not only on the wellbeing of families and spouses, but also on the retention of serving personnel in future.

Overall, these initiatives and models will fundamentally change the way military families live, and the ‘offer’ that is available (AFF, 2016a). While these initiatives and models offer the advantage of greater stability, choice and agency, becoming geographically stable and choosing to reside outside of a military patch community may, as highlighted by Rodrigues *et al* (2021), come at a cost. Thus, the AFF (2021) have urged for clearer communication between the MoD and families in regards to the aims and challenges of these initiatives, as they may create what Selous, Walker, and Misca (2020) highlighted as ‘*unintended consequences*’, of which have not been fully explored and understood.

#### *2.2.4 Living outside an established military community - ‘Unintended Consequences’*

To date, as noted earlier there has been only three reports published that has specifically focused on military families that live dispersed and outside of an established military patch community.

Firstly, Verey and Fossey (2013) reported on the geographical dispersion of army families; this report shed some light on the experiences of army spouses who chose to leave accommodation provided by the MoD, and live unaccompanied within their own homes in a location of their choice, most of which were 100 miles away from their partners place of work. The report was based upon the findings of a qualitative study that undertook interviews with 11 army spouses. Secondly, the RAF Families Federation (RAF Families Federation, 2019) published a report on the experiences of RAF families that were living dispersed, defined as being at least 10 miles away from their parent unit. This research gathered data through online surveys, family interviews, and a range of informal stakeholder meetings. The study had 401 respondents to the survey, and interviewed 30 families. Finally, Gribble and Fear (2019) prepared a report for the Naval Families Federation focusing on the effect of non-operational family separations on the family functioning and wellbeing. The report was based upon data from pre-existing studies of Naval families from within the KCMHR, as well as new data collected from Navy personnel and their families (some of which lived outside of an established military community, and some within one) through online surveys, interviews and focus groups.

Reasons for choosing to live outside an established military community were identified across studies, with reasons such as home ownership, and increased family stability, in terms of consistency in children's education and spousal employment opportunities (RAF Families Federation, 2019; Gribble and Fear, 2019) being reported. Across all service families, living dispersed meant that families experienced shorter, yet more frequent periods of separation especially if the serving personnel was unable to commute back and forth due to distance. As a result of the temporary absence of the service personnel during the working week a negative affect on the family's functioning and wellbeing were reported (Verey and Fossey, 2013; RAF families Federation, 2019; Gribble and Fear, 2019). Across all of the reports, spouses described becoming single parents during this time, which increased the emotional strain on spouses (Verey and Fossey, 2013), led to experience of stress, anxiety and tiredness (Gribble and Fear, 2019), and placed excess strain on the entire family unit (RAF, 2019). All reports identified how family roles tended to alter during this time to account for the serving personnel's physical absence, with both Naval and RAF families identifying the difficulties in the absent personnel re-integrating back into the family at weekends (Gribble and Fear, 2019; RAF, 2019).

Furthermore, all families felt a level of disconnection from the military community, and all identified the lack of support and communication received from formal military channels, leaving families feeling disadvantaged by their choice to live outside of an established military community, where most support is available (Verey and Fossey, 2013; RAF families Federation, 2019; Gribble and Fear, 2019). For army spouses in particular, it was noted that this level of disconnect meant that spouses were potentially vulnerable to a loss of identity as members of the military community (Verey and Fossey, 2013), although this was not identified in the other reports.

To help mitigate some of the challenges and to better manage the work-family conflict that was an identifiable feature in all reports, accessing social support appeared beneficial for families and spouses of all service branches. For Naval families, accessing support from their employers, and particularly support from family was pivotal in helping them manage daily life in their partner's absence. Friends were also found to be able to provide similar support, but this was less commonly discussed and potential tensions were identified between spouses and pre-existing social groups because of a perceived lack of understanding of military life among civilian friends (Gribble and Fear, 2019). Similarly, the perception that civilian friends could not understand military families' unique needs was highlighted in both other reports (RAF, 2019; Verey and Fossey, 2013), therefore resulting in the weakened support of two social networks; the military one and the civilian one. As a result, becoming integrated within the civilian community was reported to be more difficult for families, and a lack of belonging and feelings of loneliness were consequently identified. This prevented the establishing of friendships and limited the social interaction that families engaged in within the civilian community. Accessing support from other military families was identified as helpful for both Naval families. The mutual understanding that was received from others in the same position, prevented feelings of isolation and loneliness during separation from their partners in Naval families, although not all families reported this. Other adaptive strategies were implemented by military families, particularly army spouses, allowing them to better cope with any additional strain that resulted from living dispersed. These included adopting a positive evaluation of their marital relationships, and perceiving themselves as holding greater autonomy in their new home environments (Verey and Fossey, 2013).

#### *2.2.5 The wider impact of separation*



Separation is a common experience within military life, with recent data suggesting that 69% of 5,987 military spouses reported that they had experienced some form of separation from their serving partner in 2021 (MoD, 2021a). Most prominently, separation due to deployment, and the impact of this has dominated much of the research in this area, with the majority of research being conducted within the US and Canada. Such research has demonstrated how deployment-related separation can negatively affect military families (De Burgh *et al.* 2011), in that spouses have to assume the role of both parents during this time, have difficulties maintaining their employment, and experience problems with communication and emotional closeness with their partners, all of which contribute to poorer mental health and wellbeing (Aducci *et al.* 2011; Werner and Shannon, 2013). Moreover, it has also been documented that the return of the serving personnel from lengthy deployments can also be a challenging time for family members whereby a period of adjustment to the serving personnel's return is needed (Knobloch *et al.* 2014; Louie and Cromer, 2014). Research has shown that families tend to restructure due to the absence of the serving personnel, thus, when the serving personnel returns home and wishes to resume previous roles within the family and household, this can often lead to tensions, with families having to re-establish daily routines and emotional closeness to the serving personnel (Manet, Cole, and Cable, 2003).

While longer-term deployment separation has dominated most of the research, other forms of non-deployment separation may also be common within military life, because of training exercises, short-notice commitments, and other work requirements. In comparison, this appears to have been an area that has been largely overlooked. Additionally, for those families opting for geographical stability in future, and who may choose to live some distance away from a military community might experience an increased amount of time apart. This is because the serving personnel is likely to need to continue being mobile. This means that they may be unable to commute back and forth to the family home. This form of separation is often termed weekending, and has been documented and discussed within the grey-literature by Gribble and Fear (2019).

Gribble and Fear (2019) reported that these shorter, but more frequent separations might pose challenges to the military family, which may be similar to deployment-related separations, although they argue that more research in this area is needed. However, what is known is that 72% of 8,322 army spouses' of who completed the AFF's Big Housing Survey

(2016) reported that living apart (living unaccompanied) had significantly harmed or harmed the serving personnel's relationship with their family (AFF, 2016a).

Such living arrangements have also been highlighted as one of the key concerns for army families if they opt for stability, and live outside a military community (AFF, 2016a; Verey and Fossey, 2013). For them, it would appear that stability is defined in terms of their family relationships, that is, what is important to them is being able to live together as a family unit (AFF, 2016a, 2016b), rather than creating stability in terms of geographical location or owning 'bricks and mortar' that the MoD and government initiatives appear to offer.

#### *2.2.6 Wider research – Reservist population*

The growing and changing ways in which military families are choosing to live might align better with the experiences of families of Reserve personnel. Reservists exist in both civilian and military environments, as well as across them (Edmunds *et al.* 2016). This creates a number of unique pressures for both the serving personnel and their families. Research has found that reservists often find it difficult to straddle and alternate between these two social settings resulting in them feeling unsupported, misunderstood and consequently they tend to be poorly integrated within both sets of social networks (Griffith, 2009; Harvey *et al.*, 2011; Lomsky-Feder, Gazit, Ben-Ari., 2007) which is likely to have an implications on their own as well as their families wellbeing. Arguably, because of the implementation of the MoD and government initiatives that offer greater choice to families to settle in civilian communities, and the military becoming more occupational in nature, military families may also experience similar difficulties in future if they experiences become more aligned with reservists families.

Reservists and their families tend to live within their own homes in local civilian communities. Essentially, they are not embedded within military communities like regular serving personnel's families might be, meaning that reservist families are less likely to have access to the military network and social networks of a military patch community that tend to understand and provide support (Edmunds *et al.* 2016). Moreover, as reservists live geographically dispersed across the country it has been proposed that they tend to be more socially isolated from other reservist families potentiating experiences of isolation and loneliness (Leslie *et al.* 2020), unlike military families who tend to live amongst other militaries families that are likely to understand their needs. However, this may change in

future with more regular military families opting to live outside the military community, potentiating experiences of social isolation for these military families also.

Additionally, it has been suggested that reservist families, because they are not embedded within an established community and exposed to the unique culture of the military, may struggle to accept or tolerate the work commitments that may be placed on the reservist personnel (Dandeker *et al.* 2010; Dandeker, Greenberg, Orme, 2011). This is likely because they are not 'part' of, nor fully understand the military and the demands posed. This has the potential to place additional stress on family relationships and spouses, which also has implications for regular military families if similar living arrangements and experiences become the 'norm' in future.

### *2.2.7 Wellbeing for military spouses*

The mental health and wellbeing of military families and spouses is under-researched (DeBurgh *et al.* 2011). While most spouses withstand the stressors associated from various military demands, such as deployment separation and relocations, others do not and the impact of military life can affect spousal wellbeing, in terms of loss of identity, autonomy, social networks and employment opportunities (Burrell *et al.* 2006; Green, Nurius, and Lester, 2013; Gribble *et al.* 2020; Jervis, 2011). It can also have an impact on spouses' mental health. A study by Gribble, Goodwin, and Fear (2019) indicated that there was a significantly higher prevalence of mental health difficulties (probable depression), hazardous alcohol consumption, and binge drinking among UK-based spouses compared to women in the general population. The study identified that deployment, which is usually the focus of the literature, was not associated with such outcomes. This suggests that the additional mental health needs and problematic drinking behaviours may instead be the result of the impact associated with more of the day-to-day demands of military life, of which there may be many.

The Armed Forces Covenant states that it has a '*moral obligation to those who serve, have served, their families and the bereaved*' (MoD, 2014). Thus, understanding more about military families, their needs and their wellbeing is important, and will ensure that they are not, as outlined in the Covenant (MoD, 2014) face disadvantage. As well as the military's duty of care towards spouses, the MoD has published the first UK Armed Forces Families Strategy (MoD, 2016a), which highlights how spouse's needs are pivotal to address. The

strategy sets out a number of areas of priority, which includes areas such as wellbeing and other factors that are linked to wellbeing, such as spousal employment (MoD, 2016a).

Increasingly then, spouse's sense of wellbeing is being recognised as an important area worthy of more focus. It is already known that spouses are the cornerstones of the wellness of the military family (Drummet, Coleman, and Cable, 2003; Green, Nurius, and Lester, 2013). For example, research has shown a correlation between spousal wellbeing and the functionality of the serving personnel (Eaton *et al.*, 2008). Additionally, they are also a key factor in whether the serving personal remains within the military or not (Drummet, Coleman, and Cable, 2003), and therefore their wellbeing has additional implications for the military itself, in terms of retention.

The need and priority for operational effectiveness has been identified as competing with family life, echoing the concept of the '*greedy institution*' (Segal, 1986). This often means that military spouses needs come secondary to the military. This coupled with expectations to uphold being a good military wife (Enloe, 2000) and being '*conditioned*' to prioritise the needs of the serving personnel above their own (Mailey *et al.* 2018), it is unsurprising to find that military spouses voices are under-represented (Fossey, 2012). Moreover, it is further unsurprising that spouses may be at an increased risk of poor mental health and wellbeing (e.g., depression; Eaton *et al.* 2008; Gribble, Goodwin, and Fear, 2019; Verdeli *et al.* 2011). Thus, providing voice to spouses lived experiences and exploring their sense of wellbeing is therefore a necessary area of research.

Specifically, research exploring the experiences and implications on wellbeing of spouses who choose to live outside an established military patch community, such as those choosing to reside within their own homes or in private sector rentals within local civilian neighbourhoods, is lacking. It is therefore both important and timely to conduct further research in this area, especially since it is likely that more military families and spouses will choose to live in this way in future.

### *2.2.8 Wellbeing and counselling psychology*

Wellbeing is widely cited and discussed in academic and political realms yet despite its frequent occurrence, wellbeing is a complex construct that continues to be difficult to define and measure (Dodge *et al.* 2012,). Consequently, there exists no agreed definition of wellbeing, although many argue that one is needed (Gable and Haidt, 2005; Simons and

Baldwin, 2021). This has led to wellbeing being captured in different ways across research areas and disciplines. Due to constraints with thesis length, it is not possible to provide an in-depth account of wellbeing. A broader account is however presented to contextualise wellbeing that supports the broader stance to wellbeing that was taken during the research process.

Generally, the study of wellbeing has emerged from two distinct perspectives: hedonic, which reflects the view that wellbeing consists of pleasure and happiness, and eudonism, which proposes that wellbeing consists of more than just pleasure and happiness, and instead lies in the psychological functioning and fulfilment of human development (Waterman, 1993). According to Huta and Waterman (2014) both perspectives have been fundamental in efforts to understand the nature of what it is to be well, although, recently there have been other characteristics, such as optimism and gratitude, that have been identified as forming valued aspects of positive human functioning (Ryff, Bylan and Kirsh, 2021).

Research conducted within the hedonic perspective has given rise to the concept of subjective wellbeing, consisting of life satisfaction, positive affect, and (the absence of) negative affect (Diener *et al.* 2002). Psychological wellbeing on the other hand is more closely aligned with the eudemonic view (Ryff 1989; 1995), which led to the development of the six-factor model that characterises wellbeing as a life reflecting six ideals: autonomy, personal growth, self-acceptance, purpose in life, environmental mastery, and positive relations with others (Ryff, 1989). Expanding on the dimensions of both subjective and psychological wellbeing, Keyes (1998) further proposed that a third type of wellbeing – social wellbeing – was also an important addition which is the extent to which individuals are thriving in their social lives in local and broader communities. These varied perspectives therefore illustrate the complexity and variation within wellbeing definitions and applications.

Many argue that wellbeing is best thought of as a multidimensional phenomenon, which brings together and includes aspects of the different understandings of wellbeing (Dolan, Layard, and Metcalf, 2011; Vanhoutte, 2015). Thus, combining aspects of subjective, psychological and social wellbeing allowed for a broader description of wellbeing to be understood. The broadening of the concept within psychology is much needed given that past psychological literature has been dominated by a restricted view of wellbeing in line

with the psychopathological view of distress (Joseph and Wood, 2010) that has understood wellbeing as merely the absence of distress and dysfunction.

The essence of counselling psychology is that it is embedded within a set of humanistic values (Kanellakis, 2009) that according to Woolfe, Dryden and Strawbridge (2003) holds a positive view of human beings as 'in the process of becoming', guided by a 'self-actualizing' tendency as outlined by Maslow and similarly Rogers notion of a 'fully functioning person'. The humanistic perspective, and therefore counselling psychology, view individuals first and foremost as human-beings. Human beings who live existentially, constantly in process, flexible and adaptable, who are open to experience, and importantly have capacity for choice and self-responsibility, with their locus of evaluation and control being internal (Woolfe, Dryden, and Strawbridge, 2003). The origins of counselling psychology have therefore always been concerned with wellbeing and growth and supporting individuals to progress towards their fundamental wants, such as relatedness, autonomy and esteem, rather than focusing on pathology and perspectives external to an individuals subjective world (Steffen, Vossler, Stephen, 2015). Taking on a non-pathological and a more contextualised and holistic understanding of an individual, their experience and internal world, is arguably what sets the discipline apart from other mental health professions (Rafalin, 2010).

Yet, in recent years, counselling psychology appears to have partly lost sight of this initial focus on resources and wellbeing, and has moved towards having a stronger focus on disease and distress (Hage, 2003). This possibly reflects the medicalization of the discipline (Steffen, Vossler, and Stephen, 2015) that promises greater employment opportunities for psychologists (Meara and Myers, 1999) and prestige (Tyler, 1992). In response to this there have been calls for the profession of counselling psychology to reconnect its practice back to its roots (Steffen, Vossler, and Stephen, 2015; van Deurzen, 2015). Returning to the core of the profession would allow for a lesser focus on individuals deficits and dysfunction, and a revived commitment to understanding individuals as intelligible, meaning seeking beings who are striving to do their best in their given circumstances (Cooper, 2009). I therefore decided to use the term 'wellbeing' and to focus on this concept, rather than for example, utilising and focusing on the term 'mental health'. Indeed, whilst mental health is more than the absence of mental disorders (World Health Organisation, 2018), the term is often used in everyday communication and when referring to an individuals difficulties or distress. Thus, incorporating the term 'mental health' into the research question, and to introduce it

at the start of any interviews with participants potentiated a focus almost entirely on the negative concepts and affects. This would have allowed less flexibility in exploring and understanding the whole of an individual's experience that counselling psychology, and I myself as the researcher, was interested in exploring.

#### *2.2.9 Wellbeing within the context of this study*

This study adopted the concept of wellbeing in its broadest sense, which naturally broadened the study's enquiry. In this study, and in the context of my professional practice wellbeing was understood as multifaceted and an ever-changing assessment of the quality and experience of participants lived experience of daily life. A broad understanding was therefore relevant to this research that was specifically concerned with exploring the subjective, lived experiences of military spouses who chose to reside outside of a military patch community. Past research has suggested that whilst emotional states are important to explore, other factors such as agency, control, connectedness and positive relationships, are also central to our understanding of spousal experiences of military life and their sense of wellbeing (Blakely *et al.* 2014; Gribble *et al.* 2019; Gribble, 2017a, 2017b; Jervis, 2011; Verey and Fossey, 2013). It was therefore appropriate to adopt this broader view within my research, allowing individuals to determine and judge their own understanding of wellbeing, and to become open to a wide range of their experiences, both positive and negative (Steffan, Vossler, and Joseph, 2011). This would allow a more holistic approach to understanding individual's experience, granting individuals '*best expert status*' on their own phenomenological experiences (McGregor and Little, 1998, p508), which was important in this IPA study.

#### *2.2.10 Conclusion*

Military families and the way in which they wish to live is changing alongside new initiatives that are supporting families that wish to opt for stability in one location. This will likely lead to a greater amount of military families living dispersed and outside of an established military community in future, and there may be implications in doing so that have yet to be explored. While wider literature can be drawn upon to help potentially understand these implications, literature specific to dispersed military families is limited. Consequently, this research aims to fill this gap and provides a much needed understanding into this area. The aim of the study was to therefore explore the experiences of those army spouses who

choose to live outside of a military patch community and the implications that this may have had on their sense wellbeing.

### **2.3 Summary**

This chapter outlined the lack of research that has been conducted on military families living outside of a military patch community. Only three UK reports have been published in this area, none of which are peer-reviewed. However, they do go some way in helping build an understanding of this way of life, and the implications that this potentiates for spouses and families. Two prominent themes were identified within the reports: increased separation and a loss of support. These factors, together with a review of the wider literature, provided context and a basis in which to begin understanding the changes that are occurring within the military and the military family, and those who have already chosen to live outside a military patch community. The implications of these changes have not yet been fully considered, thus, this research aimed to fill this gap. Moreover, the potential implications that this may have on spousal wellbeing formed part of the study's aims. Considering spousal wellbeing is important, and sits well within the context of counselling psychology.



## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **3. Chapter Three: Research methods**

This chapter outlines and justifies the design of this study. It presents an overview of IPA and a rationale for its use over other approaches. This is followed by information about the participants and recruitment process, the design of the interview schedule, the pilot interview, data collection and analysis. A discussion of the ethical considerations is also presented, as well as the reflexive practice that was employed in order to enhance the quality of the study.

#### **3.1 Research design**

A qualitative methodological approach was selected as it was considered most applicable for the topic of research. The choice to utilise a qualitative approach was ultimately determined following consideration of a number of factors.

Firstly, according to Creswell (2013) the nature of the phenomenon being studied should guide the choice of methodology. Essentially, the research aimed to explore the experiences of army families, specifically army spouses, who had chosen to live outside a military patch community. In particular, its intention was to uncover the implications that this potentiated on spousal wellbeing. A qualitative methodology, with its emphasis on capturing lived experience was most suited to the study aims and could provide a holistic picture of what real life was like (Vivar, 2007), and the meanings spouses assigned to their experiences. According to Beeson (1997) qualitative methods have the advantage of providing nuance, complexity and context, which was important for this study that wished to give voice to different perspectives, illuminating the multifaceted nature of participant experiences. A quantitative design on the hand that favours measurement and prediction rather than exploration and interpretation would not have been able to achieve the depth of data that qualitative research gives. A quantitative design would have been better suited to a research question that aimed to explore, for example, the relationship between spouses that live outside a patch community and the impact on a specific aspect of wellbeing as measured by a standardised tool.

Secondly, arguments for the relevance and benefits of utilising a qualitative methodology in under-researched areas have been previously made (Vivar, 2007). In particular, in topics that

require effort to uncover and understand, a qualitative approach often provides a better alternative to a quantitative design (Richards and Morse, 2013; Savin-Baden and Major, 2013). The literature review in chapter two outlined that little research exists into the experiences of army spouses who choose to live outside an a military patch community, with the majority of studies focusing on families' experiences of living accompanied (and therefore within / on a military patch). Thus, it was important that a rich insight into spouse's experiences was initially gained in order to develop a better understanding of the area prior to larger, more generalisable studies being conducted in future. According to Richards and Morse (2013) qualitative research can help form the groundwork for subsequent quantitative studies where prior back grounding is needed. Based on these factors, a qualitative methodology was further considered to be the most appropriate method for investigating the research question in order to help bring to the forefront an understanding of spouses experiences through providing breadth and depth.

Thirdly, in contrast to a quantitative methodology that seeks objectivity and distance between the researcher and those being studied, a qualitative methodology rejects the notion that complete objectivity and neutrality can be achieved, and argues that the researcher is not divorced from the phenomenon under study. Instead, in qualitative research the interaction between the researcher and participant is an integral part of the process (Clarke, 2006). Researcher subjectivity is therefore framed as a resource, and as an opportunity to contextualise and enrich the research process (Gough, 2016). This is of particular importance in this study due to my dual role of being an army spouse and counselling psychology researcher. Thus, selecting a methodology that does not eradicate my presence, but makes visible my position and how my responses may have shaped the study was of particular importance when considering what approach to adopt. In contrast to a quantitative methodology then, especially in the field of psychology (see; Gough and Madill, 2012), a methodology that valued reflexivity and allowed the incorporation of more reflexive practices further strengthened the need to adopt a qualitative approach.

Finally, while the nature of the phenomenon should ultimately guide the choice of methodology (Creswell, 2013), a qualitative approach also sits well within counselling psychology practice (Coyle, 1998). Arguably, many of the characteristics of qualitative research, that is, the focus on exploring experiences from the perspective of others in an un-prescriptive way; a concern with detailed, contextualised understanding of events and

experiences; an openness and flexibility in allowing unexpected areas to arise and to be addressed (Bryman, 1988 in Coyle, 1998), overlaps considerably and is closely related to the practice of counselling psychology. Thus, in view of all these factors, a qualitative methodology was ultimately chosen as the best way of achieving the aims of the research.

### **3.2 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)**

According to Creswell (2013), there are various qualitative research approaches each differing in form, term and focus. Researchers have to decide which approach is most appropriate for the aims of their research. For this study, I choose to employ Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which is fast becoming a popular research approach, and is increasingly being used in the field of counselling psychology (Smith, 2004). As a methodology in its own right, rather than simply a means of analysing data, IPA aims to explore, in detail, participants 'life worlds'; their experience of a particular phenomenon, how they have made sense of these experiences, and the meanings they attach to them (Smith, 2004), which linked to the study's aims. The main theoretical underpinnings of IPA are phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography. While these are not underpinnings are not unique to IPA, the way in which they have been combined, together with specific emphasis and techniques used, make IPA an affiliated but distinct approach in the field of phenomenological enquiry.

An overview of the main underpinnings, in relation to IPA with examples from this study is now offered.

#### *3.2.1 Phenomenology*

With its focus on exploring lived experience, IPA is strongly influenced by phenomenology. Initiated by Edmund Husserl, Phenomenology is a philosophical approach of 'being', that is, of existence and experience. Its aim is to explore and identify the essential components of experiences (Langridge, 2007). How an individual perceives and talks about their experiences, rather than describing it according to a conceptual criterion, is of particular importance in phenomenological studies (Langridge, 2007). IPA is therefore concerned with these principles, and attends to an individual's direct experience, encouraging participants to share their own story, in their own words (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009).

Husserl (1927) believed that in order to uncover the universal essence of a given experience as it presents itself to consciousness, one would have to engage in a process of methodological 'reductions', that is to 'bracket' preconceptions in order to allow the phenomena to speak for itself (Husserl, 1927 in Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). Whilst Husserl's ideas have been influential for phenomenological enquiry, the notion that our preconceptions can be bracketed has been dismissed as simplistic and unattainable (Spinelli, 2005). However, while this may be difficult to achieve, IPA researchers should nevertheless aim to follow the participant's story as it unfolds so that the data can be, as much as possible, exploratory and participant-led (Smith and Osborn, 2008). IPA has undoubtedly been informed by Husserl's work, but it also draws strongly upon the later works of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty who developed Husserl's work further.

Heidegger (1962), in his major work *Being and Time*, proposed that a human being is *Dasein*, meaning '*being there*', and more commonly now understood as '*being in the world*' (Spinelli, 1989, p108). Heidegger's work of *Dasein* replaces the individual predicted on Cartesian dualism (person/world) with individuals as a property of their relationships to the world and to others. Our being in the world, he insisted, is always already thrown into the pre-existing world of people and objects, language and history, from which we are unable to detach from. Thus, for Heidegger human existence is always embedded, temporal, and always 'in relation to' something. IPA is therefore concerned with the understanding of lived experience as context-dependent, and contingent upon historical and social perspectives (Eatough and Smith, 2008; Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009).

Indeed, within this study, participants made reference to other people, relationships, and past experiences, when talking about and making sense of their experiences of living outside a military patch community and the implications this potentiated on their sense of wellbeing. Thus, their experience was not individually situated, but were also intrinsically bound up with relationships with others, shaped by history, society and culture not only of the military, but wider than this too. From a researchers position in this study, I too have immersed myself in participant's accounts through my own contextual lens of meaning. The inseparable nature of understanding and language therefore appears evident here, as only through language can our being in the world manifest and be understood. Merleau-Ponty (1962) writes how '*man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself*' which further demonstrates the inextricable inter-connection and inter-relationship of person and

world (Merleau-Ponty, 1962 in Brooks, 2015). Importantly however, for Heidegger, as well as experience and engagement with the world being a fundamental feature of Dasein, he also pointed out that access to understanding is always through interpretation, and therefore prompts a case for phenomenology as a hermeneutic enquiry.

### 3.2.2 Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is derived from the Greek word, *hermeneuein*, to interpret, and its aim is to make meaning intelligible (Grondin, 1994, in Eatough and Smith, 2008). Hermeneutics is essentially the theory of interpretation, and has over time developed into a more general concern with the process of understanding (Tuffour, 2017).

Similar to phenomenology, hermeneutics has been influenced by the works of a wide range of theorists and philosophers, such as, Schleiermacher, Heidegger and Gadamer (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009).

Schleiermacher (1998), a theologian, was concerned with the interpretation of biblical texts. He proposed that interpretation involved both grammatical (exact and textual meaning) and psychological (the individuality of the author or speaker) elements, and that these both would lead to the meaning of the text, whilst at the same time revealing something about the author (Moran, 2000; Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009), and therefore the interpretative process, he argues, is to understand all elements; the text, the writer, and their intentions. He asserted that only through a holistic analysis one can produce an *'understanding of the utterer better than he understands himself'* (Schleiermacher, 1998 in Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p22).

This is particularly relevant to IPA as with effective analysis IPA suggests that one would be able to find, *'meaningful insights that exceed and subsume the explicit claims of our participants'* (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009, p23). Indeed, within this study, analysing the data in-depth, making connections within individual accounts and across cases, engaging with the literature and my own experiences allowed for an interpretation and the forming of an understanding that was indeed beyond what participants explicitly offered during the interview process.

As noted earlier, Heidegger's work was also a major influence that advanced the thesis of hermeneutics phenomenology. For Heidegger, interpretation is never a pre-suppositionless apprehending of something presented to us (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). For Heidegger, human existence is intrinsically bound up in the world of others, relationships, things and language. Consequently, it is impossible for anyone to disconnect from these in order to reveal some fundamental truth about lived experience.

In the context of research then, neither the researcher nor the participants are able to transcend these facets of their lives (Larkin, Watts, and Clifton, 2006). Within the context of IPA, the process of understanding another individual's life world or experience and that it is inevitably influenced by the researchers own experiences and preconceptions is acknowledged. This is known as the 'double hermeneutic', that is, the researcher trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of their own experience in the interview process (Smith and Osborn, 2008; Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009).

Gadamer (1960), another writer on hermeneutics, echoed much of Heidegger's work and suggested that we interpret our world from a particular perspective, and these make up our own horizon of understanding. Gadamer suggested that one may not necessarily be conscious of ones own biases and assumptions prior to interpretation, rather we become aware of what these are as we question and clarify our emergent interpretations (Gadamer, 1960, in Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009, p25). Essentially, the phenomenon influences the interpretation that in turn can influence ones biases and assumptions, which can then influence the interpretation.

Within this study I therefore engaged in the process of reflexivity in order to ensure '*priority to the new object, rather than one's preconceptions*' (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p25). I utilised a reflective journal and engaged in supervision throughout the research process. During this time, I attempted to acknowledge and examine my own motivations, perspectives and understandings, which was important given my insider position and previous experience of the area. Actively attempting to reveal and explore aspects of my 'self' and how this may impact the meaning and context of the experience under investigation (Hosburgh, 2003) was crucial in giving 'priority' to, and moving past these in order to focus on participant accounts and their sense-making.

### *3.2.3 Ideography*

IPA is also informed by ideography, which is concerned with studying the particular of an individual's experience rather than the general (Eatough and Smith, 2008; Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). Within IPA, this means that findings from the first participant are, as much as possible, set aside to ensure careful attention to each participant's unique story (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). This ensures commitment to an ideographic approach. In this study, ideography was demonstrated through the use of a small sample and by valuing each individual case on its own merits before moving on to a more general cross-case analysis to look at commonalities and differences between cases. In this way, I was able to build up a picture of the experiences of each participant, but also a general picture too.

### **3.3 Why IPA in preference to other qualitative approaches?**

While IPA was employed for this study, other possible options were considered. Firstly, grounded theory was considered as it is often seen as the main alternative to IPA research (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). Grounded theory, as the approach suggests, is concerned with the construction of theories to describe and explain the topic of interest (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), and is often used to conceptualise the social processes, that is, the social and collective patterns and constructions of behaviours of a particular group (Noble and Mitchell, 2016). At the simplest level, this research was not to generate an inductive theory that could provide explanations and interpretations of participants' experiences, but was instead seeking to gain insight into and understand a contextualized lived experience of living outside an established military patch community, and the implications this may have had on their sense of wellbeing. Thus, the nature of this approach would not have been appropriate for exploring the question that this study was seeking to shed light on. Moreover, in comparison to IPA that was selected, grounded theory utilises larger sample sizes, and is directed at a more macro level analysis, which further strengthened the need for an IPA approach in order to obtain and analyse individual's experiences in-depth.

Secondly, Ethnography was reviewed and considered as a possible method. The literature on ethnography and interpretative phenomenology invariably emphasize many similarities (Maggs – Rapport, 2000). Ethnography is concerned with the interactions, behaviours, and perceptions that occur within social groups, teams, organisations, and communities (Jones



and Smith, 2017). The aim is to 'get inside' the views and values of a particular culture, with the aim of describing the cultural knowledge of the participants (Maggs-Rapport, 2000). To do this, ethnography researchers immerse themselves in people's natural settings, observing and recording their way of life and activities (Jones and Smith, 2017). In this study, the army spouses could have been considered a social group and I an active member of this community, and therefore ethnography could therefore have been a possible option for my study. However, I was specifically interested in providing a detailed and nuanced account of the *individual* lived experience rather than the collective experiences of this social group that ethnography is concerned with. I was also interested in what meaning army spouses attributed to their experiences, and how specifically they perceived that this had impacted their wellbeing. IPA was arguably more suited to addressing this question given its desire to explore a multifaceted and dynamic phenomenon such as wellbeing. IPA therefore allowed participants, as noted by Reid, Flowers and Larkin (2005), an opportunity to express a diverse range of views about wellbeing. Furthermore, whilst an individual account remains the priority in IPA, it also allows shared experiences amongst participants to be noted. Thus, IPA had the ability to retain the insights of both (Thackery, 2015 in Eatough and Smith, 2017).

At a practical level, researchers of ethnographic studies are likely to undertake fieldwork for several months (Reeves *et al.* 2013), and produce longitudinal data. Given the timing constraints for the study, I felt as though I would not have been able to commit the time that is needed to ensure justice to an ethnographic approach that again reinforced the appropriateness of utilising IPA.

### **3.4 Justification summary for the use of IPA**

This study was focused on understanding the experiences of army spouses who were living, or had lived outside of an established military community, and the implications that this had on spouse's sense of wellbeing. IPA was therefore suited to the research question and was the preferred approach due to its commitment to understanding and making sense of an individual's life world (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009).

Furthermore, IPA is an appropriate method for exploring under-researched phenomena that is novel or concerned with complexity (Smith and Osborn, 2003), such as this one. It allows

an in-depth understanding to be gained which was important given that this study focused on the unique lived experiences of spouses from one service branch (i.e., British Army). Likewise, IPA allows for individual and shared voices to be heard, understood and articulated which was considered important for the participants of this study - military spouses - whose experiences and wellbeing needs are under-researched (De Burgh *et al.* 2011; Runge *et al.* 2014), and their voices rarely brought to the fore (Fossey, 2012).

In addition, IPA is a flexible and versatile approach to understanding individual's experiences (Tuffour, 2017). While there are many ways to conduct IPA research the guidance offered by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) for planning, collecting and analysing data was useful for novice researchers like myself to follow. This ensured rigour to the study and further made IPA an attractive methodological choice.

### **3.5 Sample-size**

A distinctive feature of IPA research is its commitment to a detailed interpretative account of lived experiences (Tuffour, 2017). In embracing its ideographic underpinnings, IPA studies tend to benefit from a concentrated focus on a small number of cases (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009; Smith and Osborn, 2008). Commonly, sample sizes between three and six are justified for IPA research at degree or masters level (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). At doctorate level, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) suggests that the recruitment of between four and ten participants is advisable. I initially aimed to recruit towards the upper end of this guidance given the ease of access I had to participants and the keen interest I had received. However, following advice from my research team a sample size of 7 was deemed sufficient in order to avoid overwhelming amounts of data that would limit my ability to carry out an intensive analysis of each account/transcript. Indeed, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) argues that it is more problematic to attempt to undertake IPA research with a sample size that is 'too large than one that is too small', which, according to Brocki and Weardon (2006) may have resulted in the loss of depth and subtle inflections of meaning.

I therefore used a sample size of seven, which I felt meant that all participants had the opportunity and time within the interviews to think, talk and be heard (Reid, Flowers, and Larkin, 2005) – an important factor within IPA research. A sample size of seven allowed me, albeit with some difficulty that I acknowledge in section 3.15.7 and 6.3.2, to identify the

particularities of participant's individual experience whilst also capturing the similarities within the group.

### **3.6 Inclusion criteria**

I established homogeneity by purposively selecting participants - a quality that is advocated for in IPA research. The study chose participants who met a set criteria, which was, to be an army spouse, be over the age of 18, and have experience living on an established military 'patch' as well as experience of living outside this community, whether this was for example in their own homes, or private sector rentals. Spouses of all ranks were invited to partake.

For this study, it was important spouses be able to draw upon their experience of both having lived within and outside of a military patch community. Experience of both would allow participants to draw upon and make reference to their 'patch' experience whilst making sense of their experiences living outside and away from this community. I further believed it would lead to richer and more nuanced data that would add to the findings of the study.

Only one exclusion criteria was applied and that was if spouses / partners were themselves serving members of the armed forces. The decision to set this as an exclusion criterion was a practical one due to the timing restraints of the study as inclusion of serving members would have required further approval from an external ethical committee (e.g., MoD ethics) that may have delayed the progress of the research.

### **3.7 Recruitment**

Participants were recruited throughout October 2020 via adverts placed across social media / networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter. These adverts were placed from an account set up specifically for the purpose of the research. The advert is presented in Appendix 6. The Army Families Federation (The AFF), a charity that supports army families worldwide, agreed to share the research advert and further promoted the study across their social media pages. AFF was specifically targeted as a means of recruiting participants as it allowed the advert to reach a considerable number of potential spouses and gave legitimacy to the research.

The adverts immediately generated a large amount of responses and as the study progressed I received further interest from possible participants who had been informed of the study from those that had already been recruited and interviewed. Thus, overall I received 23 expressions of interest from potential participants between October and December 2020.

All respondents were subsequently sent a consent form and information sheet about the study. I followed up by replying to their email or by telephoning them (for those that had provided a contact number for ease) to confirm that they met the inclusion criteria. I also used this as an opportunity to ascertain information regarding their age, gender, location, time lived outside of a patch and rank of the serving member. I used this information to not only inform them of the sampling method and that the aim was to utilise a small sample so that a rich understanding of experience could be gained, but I used it as a means of purposively selecting participants (e.g., firstly by rank, and then secondly by time lived outside of a patch). In addition to these factors, I also selected participants where I did not have an existing close friendship / relationship in an attempt to avoid any potential blurring of boundaries and ethical dilemmas.

Given that other studies have highlighted the need to recruit more spouses of more junior ranks, I was keen to recruit potential participants from this group. However, only three respondents identified themselves as from junior ranks. I attempted to pursue contact with all three of these respondents. However, one respondent highlighted her difficulty in availability due to childcare, a common reason that has also been identified as a barrier to completing research on military families in the literature (Davis *et al.* 2017), and I received no reply from my correspondence from the other two possible participants. I therefore was unable to follow this up any further.

The lack of respondents from spouses of junior ranks in comparison to those of more senior ranks may be due to the fact that they are less likely to be in a committed relationship that entitles them to live in SFA on a patch, thus being unable to meet the inclusion criteria. Or, it is possible that spouses of junior ranks are not in the housing market to as great a degree (as indicated in the latest Tri Service Attitude Survey; MoD, 2021a), thus limiting their ability to have the opportunity to experience life outside of the military community.

Amongst the respondents, two identified as being male spouses who told me that they were in same-sex relationships. One had not lived on a military patch thus could not be included, but the other met all the inclusion criteria but had responded after I had most of the participant data. Following an online dialogue and a telephone conversation with this respondent, I considered doing another interview since there is an absence of research that specifically explores male spouses experiences within the military community and in the context of this study. The respondent was keen to partake, and was also willing to help recruit other male participants. However, I needed to remain committed to the small sample size that IPA advocates for, and, due to the timing restraints of the study I did not pursue this. However, gaining male spouses' experiences and potentially exploring LGBT communities within this context is an area for future research.

### **3.8 Study sample**

The final sample for the study included seven heterosexual females, aged 30-55 years, of whom six identified themselves as White-British and one as Black-African. All were married or in a relationship to army personnel, and had experience of both living in SFA on an established patch as well as outside of this community. At the time of data collection, five spouses were currently residing outside, mostly in their own homes, although one was residing in Substitute Service Family Accommodation (SSFA; classed as a private rental when no SFA is available), and two participants identified themselves as living on a 'patch', but had a number of years of living within their own homes before this move.

### **3.9 Interview schedule**

In accordance with the relevant literature, in particular the recommendations of Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009), developing an interview schedule prompted me to think about what I hoped the interview might cover, and pre-empted how I envisaged the interviews proceeding. Initially, I also found it comforting as it went some way in supporting my preference to have control and certainty over the interview encounter as a novice researcher, which would ensure that the aims of the study were met (Walker, 2011), and helped maintain some of the anxiety I was experiencing in relation to whether all possible areas of spouses' experiences were 'covered'.

However, I revised the schedule after supervisory comments and engaging in reflexivity about some of the expectations I held regarding the research and how this was shaping my desire to have control over data collection. Consequently, the final schedule (Appendix 7) was a small set of broad, open-ended questions. In practice, I mainly used it only as a guide to prompt discussion and in reality questions were moved around and adapted in light of participants responses, which better reflected the guidance for conducting interviews for IPA purposes.

### **3.10 Defining wellbeing**

Given my positioning in relation to wellbeing outlined in chapter 2, I purposefully did not provide participants with a definition of wellbeing prior to the interviews. Instead, the interview schedule proposed a very broad question to participants, such as 'how do you think this (living outside a patch) impacted your wellbeing?', and during the interviews themselves I prompted participants, where appropriate, to reflect upon their responses to events and experiences at the time by using prompts such as, what impact do you think this had?. This enabled participants to determine and judge their own understanding of what wellbeing meant for them, and elaborate on their responses accordingly. This granted participants '*best expert status*' on their own phenomenological experience (McGregor and Little, 1998, p508), and allowed for idiosyncratic inputs and meanings to drive the interview, which was important, particularly given that this study was about individual lived experience and adopted an IPA approach. This meant that, for example, while some participants began their focus during the interviews in describing times under which they experienced positive or negative influences such as stress and low mood, other spouse responses centred on their sense of connections with others and their social networks.

Furthermore, after data collection was completed, I analysed participant responses and explored their experiences and perceptions of wellbeing. Thus, in doing so, my own understanding of wellbeing as a broad and multi-dimensional concept combining aspects of subjective, psychological and social wellbeing further informed the study's findings, an acceptable and supported part of the research process within IPA.

### **3.11 Data collection**

IPA tends to advocate for the use of semi-structured interviews as a means of gathering data (Pietkiewitz and Smith, 2012), although unstructured interviews and alternative data-collection methods such as diaries, online communications, and focus groups are also compatible within IPA research (Pietkiewitz and Smith, 2012). I choose to undertake semi-structured interviews with participants in this study, which according to Smith and Osborn (2008) is likely to be the best way to collect data for an IPA study, and indeed the way most IPA studies have been conducted.

Employing different data collection methods, such as focus groups for example, would not have provided me with an account of participant's experiences in the same depth as one-to-one interviews might. Additionally, whilst there are benefits to an unstructured interview such as its ability to generate rich data and allowing participants to steer the entire direction of the interview (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000), this was too anxiety provoking for me given that during the initial stages I personally wished to have some control over the contents and process of the interviews.

Semi-structured interviews allowed me to maintain some control through some broad, open-ended questions that would help prompt discussion, but it also allowed me to be flexible to explore issues that naturally arose during interviews. Such interactions I felt helped create conditions for the unfolding of a 'conversation with a purpose' that is ultimately the aim when conducting IPA research, although there was one exception to this which I reflect upon in more detail in section 6.3.1, whereby my sense of anxiety about ensuring the 'right' questions and responses were gained affected my performance as a researcher, and how I conducted this interview. However, all subsequent interviews became more relaxed and fruitful each time. All interviews lasted over an hour. Initially I was surprised how willingly and honestly individuals shared their experiences with me. They appeared not to be guarded and felt at ease to speak about their experiences of both the positives and challenges of living outside a military patch community, and the implications this has on their sense of wellbeing. I was privileged to be part of this, and to understand the complexities of participant's identities, their experiences and life choices. I felt that IPA afforded me this privilege, and the opportunity to develop in-depth ideographic accounts of their experiences.

I conducted seven interviews during October and November 2020. In line with recommendations from Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, (2009), the dates and times of the

interviews were decided upon by the participants during our initial contact together and were arranged to ensure convenience. However, because of the timing restraints of the study, I was only able to offer this short period of two months to conduct and complete interviews. Prior to the interviews, all participants had received a copy of the participant information sheet, and had sent their consent form back to me by email. Prior to the interviews, I again briefly touched upon the aims of the study, the informal interview format, and highlighted the option to withdraw after the interview up until the point of analysis. After each interview, the recording was saved onto an encrypted USB stick for listening and verbatim transcribing. I also backed up the audio recordings onto a separate password protected USB in case of loss of data from a technical difficulty. The original recordings were subsequently deleted. I also made note of my reflections after each interview in terms of the contents, process and my overall experiences of the interview.

I decided to transcribe each interview myself which was a hugely time-consuming task. However, whilst I found this process to be never-ending at times, listening and re-listening to the interviews as I was transcribing them allowed me to become immersed, and re-immersed in participants stories. As a novice transcriber, the process forced me to 'slow down' and pay careful attention to what participants were saying – their words and the language they were using. I noted these down as I went, along with any preliminary comments that I had, which I referred back to when I came to analyse the data.

### *3.11.1 Telephone interviews*

The interviews were all conducted over the telephone and audio recorded using a digital dictaphone. Telephone interviews are a valuable method for collecting data, and conducting research at a distance (Ladlow, Way, and Tarrant, No date). However, in most qualitative studies face-to-face interviews appear to be the norm with telephone interviewing seldom being considered as a first-choice to apprehend another's social world (Novick, 2008). Specifically, in relation to conducting an IPA interview, I found very little information or guidance regarding the possible methodological or ethical issues that may arise from conducting an IPA interview over the telephone.

Despite the lack of guidance specifically in relation to IPA interviews over the telephone, this study chose to collect data via telephone, as it was considered more appropriate for



participants than face-to-face interviews. Secondly, while this was the case, because this study was being conducted during covid-19, limiting the amount of direct contact with individuals was also in line with government guidelines, which reinforced the appropriateness of completing remote interviews.

Telephone interviews specifically suited the geographical dispersion of the army community and ensured a wider participation in the study, allowing participants from various parts of the country to share their story for the purpose of this research. As noted by Glogowska, Young, and Lockyer (2010) telephone interviews can make participation in research more accessible and ensure reach to a broader demographic.

The literature cites a number of concerns in relation to research interviews that are conducted over the telephone. These includes the loss of quality data due to the absence of contextual and non-verbal information, difficulty in building rapport, as well as concerns regarding retention and interview duration (Gillham, 2005; Holt ,2010; Irvine *et al.* 2013; Novick, 2008).

Despite such concerns, telephone interviews can be a valuable method for generating data and conducting research at a distance (Ladlow, Way and Tarron, 2021). Compared to face-to-face interviews, this method is flexible, less resource-intensive and according to Holt (2010) may help balance researcher – participant power dynamics.

Within this study, I have not been disadvantaged by using telephone interviews nor did any of the common concerns arise. A review of the recordings, together with my reflections, suggest that depth was not lost, and the majority of interviews, as noted earlier, lasted approximately 1 hour and produced ‘thick’ data. Rapport was easily established, perhaps because participants knew of my army spouse identity and that there was already some shared understanding. Additionally, from my perspective as the researcher the flexibility of telephone interviews was a particular strength, allowing me to be able to offer interviews times outside of normal working hours, and reduce the time spent travelling for example to a certain location. This was helpful given that this research took place amidst juggling employment, DPsych training, family and child commitments. Specifically, for the army community, this method was highly appropriate given the population’s high mobility and dispersion across the UK. However, telephone interviews did mean that contextual

information that could have been derived by other cues in participant's environments was not gathered. Furthermore, interviewing over the telephone meant that non-verbal communication could not be gained as easily. Unlike face-to-face interviews, everything had to be articulated by both myself and the participant, although, such full articulation meant that a much richer text was produced from which to begin analysis. In similar ways to how Holt (2010) successfully conducted narrative interviews over the telephone, during the interview process I too noted obvious pauses, the tone of participant's voices as well as other cues, which later supplemented the process of analysis.

### **3.12 Data analysis**

Following transcription, I followed the set of IPA guidelines offered by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) in regards to analysing the data to ensure the quality and detail of analysis that IPA demands was upheld as much as possible. The guidelines broadly involve reading the transcripts, making initial notes, developing emerging themes, searching for connections across themes, moving to the next case, and finally looking for patterns across cases.

#### *3.12.1 Beginning the process of analysis – Re-immersing myself*

Following the completion of transcribing, I distanced myself from the data for several weeks. The decision to distance myself was not purposeful but rather I had other commitments that needed my attention. However, by distancing myself, I recognised that there were many positives in doing so, and consequently I began analysis feeling refreshed, and not so overwhelmed like was the case when I was transcribing the interviews. When I returned to the data, I therefore needed to re-immersing myself again. I began this process by reading each transcript to become re-familiar with the participants accounts. I also re-visited the notes that I had made as well as the audio recordings. Listening to the recordings and the way in which participants conveyed their stories (e.g., emphasis, volume) threw up some new questions and thoughts that subsequently helped develop my analysis. Choosing to re-immersing myself in both the transcripts and the audio recordings proved beneficial, as I was concerned that I was missing certain elements by just re-reading the transcripts in isolation. Specifically, I was concerned that I was quickly and more easily 'assuming' what the participant was trying to convey, which at times 'felt' different, or did not match my initial assumptions when listening back to their verbal accounts.

Initially, I began analysis on hard - physical copies of participant's transcripts. However, after some time in doing this, I decided that I needed a more organised and functional approach to attend to the data. This was because copies of transcripts and notes were becoming jumbled and the process was a little messy. Consequently and after discussions with my supervisors, I considered the use of a software programme (NVivo) that would support me in organising as well as analysing the data that I had gathered. However, I decided against using this package, mainly because I was unfamiliar with it and I lacked the time to learn to use it to a standard that would allow me to benefit from it. Moreover, I was aware that concerns existed regarding using software within IPA research, and that its use cannot replace active analysis in qualitative research more generally (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009). I instead decided to create my own tables in Microsoft word to carry out my analysis. I then proceeded to follow the analytic steps outlined by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, (2009), as detailed below.

### *3.12.2 Initial noting and development of emergent themes*

As suggested by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) I copied each transcript into a table with three columns and began working solely with the electronic copies after transferring any initial comments over. The transcript occupied the middle column of the table, with the left column for emerging themes and the right one for my comments. Remaining committed to an idiographic approach, each transcript was attended to separately and I began by using the right hand column to document summaries of what was being said, the language used and any preliminary interpretations. Any semantic-related comments I made in *italics*, and my preliminary interpretations were underlined.

I then proceeded to document emerging theme titles in the left hand margin, using key words to capture the summaries that I had made in the right-hand margin (Appendix 8). I followed this process for each interview. As I moved through them, I noticed that my notes began reflecting connections with previous sections of the interview, and also contradictions and differences in what the participant was saying. Throughout this process, I had discussions with my supervisory team, and we specifically discussed and reflected on this analytic process and on the emergence of the preliminary themes. Moreover, my supervisors also viewed the data, which allowed the data to be viewed through more than one lens.

### *3.12.3 Searching for connections across emergent themes*

The next stage of the analysis was in relation to looking for patterns and connections between the emergent themes in each individual participant account. I listed all the emergent themes in a table before attempting to identify related themes with similar understandings. Master themes subsequently emerged at a higher level as a result of grouping themes together and giving it a name to describe the whole (Appendix 9).

### *3.12.4 Looking for patterns across cases*

At this stage of the analysis, I attempted to identify patterns, asking myself – what connections are there across these cases? And what themes are most prominent? I found that there were a number of patterns across cases and that some themes were not just particular to one participant, but there were certain factors within these themes that were shared across the majority of the group. At times, I found that these could be merged together, or represented by sub-themes within a master theme. This was a ‘messy’ process because of the over-lap of such thematic workings, the subtle differences in each participant’s accounts, and also how I was interpreting the data. For example, different articulations of certain experiences arose, and there were many nuances within these experiences, in regards to how it was felt and experienced by participants and the impact it had. This made it difficult at times to make decisions about how this would be represented, for example, as something individual or something in common. Nevertheless, in working through this process, five master themes were identified, each with their own sub-theme (Appendix 10).

### *3.12.5 Refining master themes*

When writing up my analysis and findings, I noticed the ‘messiness’ of such thematic workings again, and felt that many of the sub-themes within the master themes continued to overlap, and that in particular the wellbeing aspect of the study’s research question was still not being adequately captured. Participants sense-making in how they experienced certain occurrences to have had implications on their sense of wellbeing was not, for example, being fully represented or articulated well by the themes that had developed. This

led me to re-look at the transcripts again and the themes developed to date. Subsequently, this led to the reorganisation, renaming and refinement of the themes once again. Finally, five master themes were identified and were collated into a simple table. The table (Appendix 10) shows the master themes as experienced and linked to the sub-themes, as well as the feelings and implications that this potentiated on participants sense of wellbeing. It was felt that this ensured that the study's aims were met. For ease, and to help support the write up of the findings in this study the implications that this had on participants was then listed separately and linked to the broad aspects of subjective, psychological and social wellbeing (Appendix 11).

### **3.13 Ethical considerations**

The Research Ethics Committee at the University of South Wales granted full ethical approval for this study in September 2020 (Appendix 1). Additional MoD Ethics was not required as participants were civilian spouses recruited through social media and not through the MoD, or channels affiliated with it. Serving spouses were excluded as this also potentiated the need for MoD ethical approval. Submitting a further application and awaiting approval to proceed would have likely delayed the commencement of the study resulting in implications for completion deadlines.

Consideration of ethical issues should not be isolated to the formal review of an ethics protocol by a Research Ethics Committee, but instead should pervade all stages of research from inception through to dissemination and application (BPS, 2021). The underlying principles of The British Psychological Society's Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2021) therefore helped me as a psychology researcher to identify, analyse and address the range of issues that were relevant for this study at each stage of the process. This ensured that it this study was carried out in an ethically sound way.

Within the code, there are four underlying principles of the code, these are: 1) respect for the autonomy, privacy and dignity of individuals, groups and communities, 2) scientific integrity, 3) social responsibility, and 4) maximising benefit and minimising harm. These will now be outlined.

#### *3.13.1 Respect for the autonomy, privacy and dignity of individuals, groups and communities*

Rights to privacy, self-determination, personal liberty and natural justice should be protected and promoted within research (BPS, 2021).

I respected participants' autonomy by ensuring that they were fully aware that their participation in this study was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw at any point up until the point of analysis, after which point it would no longer be feasible. This, along with providing participants with a participant information sheet that detailed information about the nature and aims of the research allowed them to make an informed decision on whether or not they wished to participate. Any queries or questions that may have arisen from the information sheet had the opportunity to be addressed by email, telephone, or prior to the commencement of the interview. Prior to the interviews, I also re-checked whether participants had any queries or concerns regarding the nature of the study, but none did. A consent form was sent to all participants and was required to be sent back prior to interview. In addition to written consent, prior to interview verbally sought consent to proceed.

Participants' privacy was respected and confidentiality maintained. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants, and all identifiable information, including direct quotes, geographical locations / bases, partner names and roles/job-titles were anonymised to protect confidentiality. All personal information and data was further kept confidential and stored securely in accordance with the Data Protection Act (2018).

### *3.13.2 Scientific integrity*

Scientific and scholarly standards of research should be of sufficiently high quality and robustness (BPS, 2021). This study was designed and conducted in a way that ensured quality, integrity and at this doctoral level a unique contribution to the development of knowledge and understanding.

I sought regular supervision and guidance from my research team that over saw the integrity of the research design, ensuring quality was maintained and the output was worthy of dissemination. Additionally, through the process of reflexivity I sought to ensure that the entire research process was made as transparent as possible, allowing others a clear indication of the choices and steps undertaken to achieve the study's aims. This was

achieved through maintaining a journal throughout the process, extracts of which have been included within the thesis.

### *3.13.3 Social responsibility*

The aim of generating psychological knowledge should be to support beneficial outcomes, which should support and reflect the dignity and integrity of others (BPS, 2021). Accordingly, I respected participants views, attitudes and choices and within the interviews addressed them politely, respectfully and compassionately.

Throughout the study, I maintained a self-reflexive stance and held an awareness of my positioning in relation to this research and the responsibilities that I held as a researcher.

### *3.13.4 Maximising benefit and minimising harm*

Research should be conducted with the aim of maximising potential benefits and avoiding any risks to psychological wellbeing and mental health (BPS, 2021). Although I did not anticipate the study to cause adverse affects, the sharing and recalling of experiences had the potential to cause some form of impact on participants (e.g., possible discomfort). If this happened, it was agreed that participants would be given the choice of whether they wished to continue with the interview and/or study, and would have been sent a debrief sheet which contained further information on organisations they may have found useful. It was agreed, if appropriate, that they would also be signposted to their GP.

During one of the interviews a participant whilst talking about her experience of living away from the army community shared with me that she had miscarried a child whilst her husband was serving away. In these moments, I responded empathically and sensitively as a human being would, and then as the researcher checked-in with her in regards to whether she needed a break, and whether she wanted to continue with the interview. She was content to proceed, and shared with me at the end of the interview that she did not require any additional or further support in regards to this.

I was also confronted with some other ethical dilemmas during the course of this research, mainly resulting from my insider position. Consequently, according to Ellis (2007) reflexive and continuous articulation of the ethical dilemmas and practices should be of key

importance throughout research. Brannick and Coughlan (2007) raise the concern of role duality, which is often claimed to be part of an insider-researcher journey. In this study, I too experienced difficulties in separating out my roles as a researcher and as an army spouse, which I refer more to in section 3.16.1.

### **3.14 Insider position**

Much has been written about the positioning of the researcher as either an 'insider' or 'outsider' within qualitative research, although this has mainly been documented within Ethnographic studies. While the influence of modern philosophical paradigms challenge the insider / outsider dichotomy noting that identity and belonging emerge not from static conceptual categories but from fluid engagement between researchers and participants (Savvides *et al.* 2014), I was very much aware that I was a member of the group that I was researching. Like all my participants I too was female, an army spouse and had experience of the phenomena.

While I agreed that there were limitations in utilising an insider / outsider binary to categorise researcher positions, it nevertheless allowed me to become aware of the implications of occupying more towards an insider position and how this may have impacted on the research process.

The benefits associated with insider researchers have been well documented. It has been suggested that insiders hold a privileged position in the research process (Adler and Adler, 1987; Lipson, 1989; Reid, 1991), particularly if they choose to disclose this to their participants. Furthermore, insider status is thought to benefit from having the potential to develop a more meaningful research question, ease of access to and recruitment of potential participants, early rapport building and the associated potential to facilitate 'thick' (Geertz, 1973) and rich data during the data collection phase of research (Berger, 2015; Holmes, 2020). Moreover, insider researchers in comparison to outsider researchers, are argued to be more aware of the lives of their participants and therefore are in a good position to conduct research with under-researched groups, like was the case in this study, and give them voice (Berger, 2015; Holmes, 2020).

However, whether an insider position provides the researcher an advantageous position (Hammersley, 1993) remains a debate, as it can bring with it a host of challenges. Holmes



(2020) summarised the potential disadvantages that this can bring. Firstly, participants may believe that an insider researcher wants to improve perceptions and understanding of the group, and therefore participants may be more willing to share their experiences because they feel it would be of benefit to them, and may therefore disclose more than they are comfortable with (Holmes, 2020). While the data collected may be richer due to the perceived shared understandings of both the researcher and the participants, such assumptions can be problematic (Holmes, 2020). Equally, commonality between the researcher and participant does not necessarily mean that an insider researcher will understand the perspectives of the participants any more than an outsider researcher would, especially if other characteristics are different (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007; Dwyer and Buckle, 2009), for example, personal and social ones, which may indeed outweigh what is shared. My experiences in terms of my positionality in this study are further described in section 3.15 below.

### **3.15 Reflexivity**

Reflexivity, and the benefits of engaging with it is a familiar notion for qualitative researchers (Finlay and Gough, 2003), and indeed for counselling psychology practitioners (Strawbridge and Woolfe, 2009). Reflexivity has been defined and utilised in a number of ways but for the purpose of this research is understood as a process which involves the researcher turning a critical gaze towards themselves (Finlay and Gough, 2003), that is, engaging in a continual internal dialogue and critical self-reflection of their positioning and how this might impact and transform the research. According to Gadamer (1960), we experience and indeed interpret the world from a particular horizon. We therefore all have our own pre-suppositions that we cannot fully escape, and as a result our horizons have the potential to enhance or hinder the process of research (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009).

Within IPA, reflexivity is of particular importance because of the central role interpretation plays in this study. Engaging in reflexivity is indeed a key part of conducting IPA research, and is an essential part of engaging with the double hermeneutic (Rodham, Fox and Doran (2015), and helps create a form of self-supervision and an audit trail of a researchers reasoning, judgement and decisions (Rolfe, 2006).

Despite reflexivity being a central component of IPA research, Rodham, Fox, and Doran (2015) suggest that many researchers do not clearly explain the processes in which they

have been engaged in, which arguably then affects the trustworthiness of the research that is produced.

Throughout this research journey, I kept a reflexive journal throughout the duration of this study, which proved a valuable resource. The journal contained, for example, some of my personal motivations, preferences, biases and experiences. It also included my thoughts on my performance of being a researcher and this learning process, as well as the difficulties and emotions I felt whilst grappling with the data. Moreover, it contained my perceptions of participants, the dynamics of the interview processes, and reflections on how some of my assumptions and views were changing as I made sense of participant's experiences. Additionally, I used it as an opportunity to document my stance towards certain theories and research. The journal therefore demonstrates some of this 'audit trail', and also evidences transparency. Two key areas of my reflexivity will now be outlined: The first is my reflections in relation to my position, and the second in relation to my performance as a research interviewer.

#### *3.15.1 Myself as an 'insider' researcher*

Identifying as an 'insider' researcher afforded me many of the benefits associated with occupying an insider position as discussed earlier. Indeed, the emergence of this research was borne out of my own lived experience of the phenomenon and personal interest in this area, and without it, it is possible that this research may never have been a possibility.

Firstly, during the initial phase of the research, I telephoned all selected participants to make arrangements for the interviews. I immediately, without much hesitation disclosed my position as a fellow army spouse as I simply thought it made sense to do this, and that it would potentiate rapport with participants, which I feel it did. Interestingly however many participants had already 'guessed' that I was an army spouse, as they had seen the advert for the study through army friends that had shared my research on social networks or WhatsApp groups.

During the interviews, I further felt that participants were all very willing and keen to share their experiences and views with me, perhaps because military spouses and families are more willing to engage in research if it has meaning for them, and for their peers (Davis *et al.* 2017) but perhaps also because they felt understood and that they perceived me as being 'one of them'. Indeed, at times during the interviews I felt as though participant's knowledge

of my spouse identity meant that they regarded me as a fellow spouse rather than a researcher.

An extract from my journal highlights my reflections at this time:

*' ... I'm really surprised how open, and honest everyone has been so far in sharing their experiences... ... Interestingly, I wonder whether they are because I am an 'insider' – an army spouse, and not a 'civi'? ... ...I think this is probably the case – I don't think they would have opened up as much perhaps if I had not been... ... Although, technically I am a 'civi', but also married to someone in the army... .... I am also a mum, therapist, and a researcher! I have multiple positions and identities. I think, so far, they are relating to me as an army spouse, not really as a researcher... yet we cannot get away from the fact that I am conducting this research, and they are participating? Some of my experiences seem similar, some are definitely not ...'*

Identifying me as a spouse, rather than as a researcher was further highlighted to me when for example, a participant asked whether we could meet for a coffee in the future and when another, after I thanked her for her participation, responded by stating that she was always happy to help a 'fellow wife' out. Moreover, in reviewing the data after completion of the interviews, participants acknowledged our shared experiences and identities as army spouse's by using the terms 'we' rather than 'I', or 'ours / us' and 'they' (referring to those outside the military). For example, participant Sally\* says, *'... people in the civilian world just do not understand our lives... and we're going what the hell!'* and Rachel\* says *'but as you know yourself...'*. This language and these types of comments that highlight the shared relationship between participants and myself were common within the transcripts. Arguably then, without membership I may have been perceived as an outsider – as *'one of those civilians'*- detached and unable to understand participants unique experiences or the decisions that they have had to grapple with. This may have hindered their willingness to share their stories and consequently the depth of the data collected. Thus, I believe that being an insider for this study allowed me to effectively build a rapport with participants and explore this topic in greater depth, which is an important aspect of IPA research (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009; Shaw, 2010).

Yet, on the other hand, my insider relations created role confusion, and presented some quandaries about the research relationship (Johnston, 2019). I sometimes found myself feeling unsure of my positioning at times especially as I felt that the participants related to

me mainly as an army spouse, rather than a researcher and when for example the participant I referred to above expressed an interest in possibly meeting up in the future for a coffee. At the time, I remember feeling muddled, and uncomfortable as to whether this would be appropriate or not as I had not anticipated this dilemma. I did not meet with her, but equally the army community is a small one, and it may therefore be possible that I will encounter her and other participants at some point in the future particularly as for some we established shared military connections and friendship groups.

An extract from my journal highlights my reflections at this time:

*'... ..I did not anticipate that! Did I do the right thing? Did I over-share? Was XXXX treating me more like a friend – just another army friend? Or, perhaps was I? ... .. If I were to meet with her, would we talk about this study? And her responses? Do I want her to know about my life in that way, like a friend would? .... .. What happens if I do come across her...after all the army is a small community! What about confidentiality, if there are others around? I'm not sure.... what is the meaning of our relationship?...researcher – participant?... I'm feeling a bit unsure by this, and about being an insider now... ..perhaps this is one of the down-sides I hadn't anticipated'.*

Additionally, it is known that military families are more likely to engage in research if it has a meaning for them, can aid other military families, and has an impact on their way of life (Davis *et al.* 2017). Indeed, some participants perceived the research to be an opportunity to raise concerns about this area with someone who they perceived may understand and hold similar views, particularly about the possibility of the new MoD led initiatives. During one of the interviews, one participant specifically highlighted how glad she was that someone was 'looking into this area', and would be able to highlight some of the concerns that living outside a patch may bring. My journal reflections discuss a sense of responsibility that I had only to come realise in that moment having realised that for some there was a level of expectation that I would be able to not only give voice to their unique experiences but produce something meaningful that may be of benefit to the army community and future accommodation proposals. This sense of responsibility to produce meaningful research that has the potential to benefit spouses and the community remained with me from this moment on, and created additional pressure. This was particularly difficult to tolerate when I realised that I could not realistically pay attention to, and report every detail of

participant's experience because of the sheer volume of data produced, and the word restrictions of this thesis. This was particularly uncomfortable for me to learn about.

According to Holmes (2020) assumptions can be problematic because participants fail to explain their experiences fully. This was indeed an additional challenge that arose from being an insider researcher as, on some occasions, participants responded to me with the assumption that I was aware of and understood certain things, for example, they would say 'you know how it is?', and 'you know...'. However, I was aware that this had the potential to occur from reading around the concept of insider status and therefore I attempted to overcome this problem by asking participants to clarify, and expand on their experiences for the purpose of the research and for others that may not have any prior understanding of army life, by saying, 'what do you mean by that?', 'Could you explain a little more?'

I felt being prepared for this helped participants elaborate on their answers, which I do not think they would have necessarily done if I had not prompted fuller responses – this potentially would have had implications on the richness of the data gathered if this had not been the case.

Lastly, it has been suggested that insider researchers may be clouded by their own personal experience (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009) and as a result overlook aspects of the data that fall outside of their own experiences. To reduce this concern, it became crucial that I had the ability to cast a critical gaze at my own subjective positioning and engage in on-going reflexivity (Finlay and Gough, 2003). I therefore pro-actively utilised a reflexive journal as described earlier, and found this helpful in acknowledging and being critical of my own motivations, experiences, biases and assumptions. By engaging reflexively with these understandings and making them explicit, I was able to be more self aware of how these were impacting my decisions and interpretations within the research. This was helpful in ensuring that I gave 'priority' to participant accounts and that I remain open to possibilities and experiences that fell outside of my own. Moreover, having opportunities to regularly meet and reflect with my supervisory team, who were 'outsiders' to the army community, allowed me to further explore and recognise any potential biases and assumptions I had. It also allowed different perspectives on the data, and was helpful in prompting me to take a step back and re-think interpretations and themes throughout the analytical process.

### *3.15.2 Myself as a counselling psychology researcher*

As well as an army spouse, I am also a counselling psychology researcher and wished to conduct a study that aligned itself to the values of this profession, many of which align with my own personal ones. Counselling Psychology defines itself as being concerned with the individual's subjective experience (Strawbridge and Woolfe, 2003), and indeed this study allowed me the opportunity to respect the complexity and centrality of participants lived experience that upheld these values. This study further allowed me as a psychology researcher to uncover the understanding of experiences and meaning, rather than searching for a universal truth that is demanded by other approaches. As a counselling psychology researcher, I wished to engage with participants in a way that attended to each individual's unique experiences and wanted the research to have a voice that was genuinely rooted in participant's experience, and this study did just this. Specifically, through the process of reflexivity I was able to remain open, expand my appreciation of differences and seek new perspectives that were at times similar and indeed different to that of my own. Paying attention to, and valuing the richness of experiences that participants offered, and by undertaking this research in a collaborative and reflexive way, the findings of this study were enriched.

### *3.15.3 Identifying and naming participants as 'army spouses'*

For some participants in this study, they made reference to being labelled as a 'dependant', and how they did not appreciate this term. Being labelled as a 'dependant' is often how, within the military, spouses are identified in order to access military camps and services for example. This, together with becoming more immersed in the data and making note of how some participants highlighted the importance of gaining their own independence outside of the military community, through employment for example, led me to question whether participants in this study appreciated being labelled as an 'army spouse', that frames participants through their relationship with their partner. Indeed, as noted in the previous section, I identified myself as an 'army spouse' and shared this with all of the participants during the research process without much hesitation or consideration, although interestingly many spouses commented upon how they had 'guessed' that this may be the case given the area of research, and how they came to be aware of the study. I had not considered that my own comfortableness with being called an 'army spouse' may not have been the same for all participants who took part in this study who may have preferred to be referred to as participants or simply women. Because of this, I therefore choose to use the term participant to refer to those that had taken part in this study.

#### 3.15.4 My performance as a researcher – The interview process

As a novice qualitative researcher, I identified following my first interview with Fern\* that I was experiencing some anxiety in relation to collecting the data that I thought to be 'right' that was tempting me into steering participants stories to fit with my existing experience and the emerging topics that I had understood within the literature. I was acting like, what Court and Abbas (2013) might have suggested, a 'miner'; digging out as much information that I could during the interview process in order to meet the aims of the research and the researcher. Engaging in reflexivity and supervision allowed me to become aware of this, and prompted me to let go of my desire to control the interview process and that I needed to encourage participants to share more closely in the direction of the interviews as I moved forward, allowing *their* own stories to emerge, rather than adhering rigidly to the defined structure and questions.

An extract from my journal highlight my reflections at this time:

*'... I definitely felt some level of anxiety...I think this was probably impacting my 'performance', and why I felt so tense. I think it was probably too structured, and 'interview-like?' But then, I do need it to cover the research aims? ... .. Or is it best to let go, and see what happens? I think this is probably best... I think I am too worried about it being 'right'...but who defines this? I feel I am being influenced by my own experiences, and what I have read perhaps? ... Do I know her experience now? ... .. I needed to let XXXX take more control and lead the direction of the interview if I want to truly know 'her' experience... as it is for her, from her perspective... .. I think I need to re-fine the interview questions, and make them somewhat looser before the next interview'.*

This acknowledgment meant that I made a conscious and deliberate effort to ensure that I did not overly steer the direction of the interviews. Consequently, this meant that on many occasions there was considerable movement away from the anticipated questions. This may have been because of the rapport that had been developed between myself and the participants, which supported them to feel comfortable in providing rich descriptions of their lived experiences in relation to other elements of their lives. However, it may have also been because I allowed quite a lot of latitude during the interviews which meant that there were times when participants stories moved too far away from the agreed aims of the study and subsequently made the data analysis stage more difficult to conduct. This left me, as the

researcher not only with vast amounts of data following the interviews but also later left me in an uncomfortable dilemma, feeling that parts of participant's experiences were needing to be left behind because they simply did not 'fit' my research question, because for example, they were in relation to their children's experiences. This was difficult when I had built a relationship with participants and I was immersed in the analysis, and felt that I had some responsibility to share their stories. I sensed that these areas that came unprompted were likely of importance to participants who I felt wanted to give a voice to these experiences.

### *3.15.5 My grapples with IPA as a Research Methodology*

IPA research is known to be challenging (Tuffour, 2017), however, as a novice IPA researcher, I had not anticipated the significance of the level of challenge that I would encounter, which was especially difficult when I was feeling the pull from other commitments since this thesis was being completed within a professional training programme, and at the same time as work and other family demands.

Firstly, I was struck by the amount and richness of data that emerged from the relatively small sample, and together with the latitude that I allowed during the interviews led to what I felt was 'data overload' by the time this had been transcribed, and I began reading, and re-reading the data. The sheer volume of data produced felt somewhat overwhelming at times.

The following extract documents by reflections at this time:

*'There is just SO much data, I mean where do I start?? This already feels overwhelming! I have no idea how I am going to pay attention to the 'details' of each one that IPA asks for!'*

Because of the sheer volume, and richness of data produced the analysis process was considerably demanding and challenging. Indeed, as highlighted by my reflections at the time I noticed that, particularly at the start of the analysis process, I struggled to move beyond the 'descriptive level' of analysis, and had a tendency to move too quickly away from individual accounts and instead search for more common claims across the accounts. However, acknowledging and being aware of this through discussions within research meetings and supervision was helpful in 'bringing myself back' to individual accounts, in order to firstly move beyond the explicit claims and also retain spouses' individual voices within the group level themes.



Moreover, documenting the learning journey that I was taking to 'get to grips' with IPA, and the analysis was also useful, supporting me to identify the stage in which I was at during the analysis.

*'... ... Analysis seems to be going ok at the moment, and not too tricky? Perhaps this means that my interpretations lack depth, and I'm still at the descriptive stage?... ... maybe with further engagement it will come?..'*

*'... I'm not sure I'm getting to grips with this...I've tried reading it backwards, tried focusing on certain aspects of the data... and I'm still not sure I'm getting it ....'*

Secondly, another challenging part of the IPA process was the process of identifying master themes. Nolan (2011 in Wagstaff *et al.* 2014) has previously described her experience of the process as 'drowning in a deep bowl of spaghetti', and I too can relate to her experience. Within this study this process felt particularly 'messy' especially when attempting to illustrate each theme across participants, which sometimes felt that individual nuances and differences were in some way being lost when fitting them into a broader category. Nolan (2011 in Wagstaff *et al.* 2014) reflects upon 'pushing and shoving themes into boxes' in order to produce super-ordinate themes, and similarly Wagstaff (2011 in Wagstaff *et al.* 2014) described the on-going process of theme expansion and reduction. Again, I can relate to both experiences as the themes in this study grew, collapsed, were merged together, and then seemingly the process started all over again. This was a challenging process, and one where I needed to carefully consider the over-laps as well as the nuances of each theme, while also considering the practical limitations of the thesis, such as word-count and time. The need to be continually reflective about the process of my interpretations, how the themes were developed, and what I was able to include in my findings was therefore of high importance.

Despite such grapples with IPA as a research methodology, it offered the study as myself as a researcher an opportunity to thoughtfully explore, in-depth, army spouses lived experience of residing outside an established military community and the implications that this had on spouse's sense of wellbeing.

### **3.16 Summary**

This chapter was concerned with the study's methodology, and aimed to provide detail in regards to the decisions behind the methods employed. A qualitative approach was

considered most appropriate to meet the study's aims, and furthermore IPA, underpinned by phenomenology, hermeneutics and ideography, was utilised. This allowed for an in-depth understanding of spouses' lived experience to be gained. A sample of seven participants were recruited, and data collection took the form of semi-structured telephone interviews. This suited the geographic dispersal of participants. During the completion of the study, no major ethical issues arose, however plans were in place if this occurred. Interviews were transcribed, and analysed following the guidance set out by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, (2009). Throughout the research journey, reflexive practices were employed in order to enhance the quality of the research.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

#### 4. Chapter Four: Findings

This chapter presents the findings from the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of the seven interviews. From the interviews, five master themes were identified. These included; Military life v Civilian Life: *'Military life is just different'*; Separation v Stability – *'The Sacrifice'*; Disconnection – *'You Just Don't Feel Part of Anything'*; The Military Community: A Place of Several Meanings - *'Loss' and 'Visions of Army Wives Gathering and Supporting'*; An opportunity to gain – *'You can do what you want'*.

The themes chosen best represented the individual lived experience of the participants interviewed, and the shared aspects of the experience across them. The findings therefore, whilst uncovering unique experiences, also attempted to draw commonalities that could be used to further develop an understanding of this choice of living and the implications this had on participant's sense of wellbeing.

Each theme is outlined in turn with my own interpretations of participants' meaning making and understanding of their experience. Verbatim extracts from the transcripts are also used to support each case. An exploration of the implications of these themes in relation to the wider literature is discussed in the following chapter.

##### 4.1 Military life v Civilian Life: *'Military life is just different'*

Perceived differences between the military and civilians were identified, which contributed to the perception that **civilians lacked an understanding of the unique demands and stressors of army life**. These differences appeared exacerbated when living within a local civilian community away from a military patch, and potentiated a sense of distance between spouses and civilian neighbours. Furthermore, this led some to experience a sense of **isolation, frustration and feelings of not being safe** as a result of feeling uncertain regarding civilian's opinions of the military, all of which have implications for spousal wellbeing.

Participants commented on how those outside the military community lacked an understanding of the uniqueness of army life, which meant that for some living outside a patch establishing community and social connections was much more difficult and required more effort on their part, which was a challenge particularly for those described themselves

as having a more reserved personality. The time taken to build connections within a civilian community, along with the perception that civilians hold a different understanding of the world than military families, contributed to feelings of **loneliness**. This was in comparison to living on a patch whereby the majority of participants felt that they had immediate access to social networks and others who could understand the challenges of military life that contributed to a sense of cohesion and belonging amongst spouses residing within a military patch community.

**Fern:** Fern identified the difference between military and civilian life that she experienced, although struggled to articulate or describe these differences specifically.

*'I think, like, in a military life you are in a bit of a bubble... It's different from civilian life. I think you kind of forget a bit about what civilian life is like. Its hard to describe...military life is just different. Here on the patch, like, you really wouldn't think twice about the outside world but then you step out of it and it's a bit it's perhaps a bit confusing, that's not very helpful, it's different!'*

Fern went on to share her experiences of living outside a patch and how challenging it was to meet others, and others who understood some of the challenges of military life. She described a sense of isolation that came from this which was in contrast to her experiences of living on a patch that she identified in other parts of the interview, whereby she had access to a ready-formed community that could provide her with support, thus contributing to a sense of belonging. Fern described herself as having more of a reserved personality, which made searching for and building social connections within the civilian community more difficult, possibly because there was no immediate mutual understanding or shared experiences.

*'... ... I would say it is more of a challenge to meet new people and like I wasn't particularly an outgoing person in the early days, I was quite shy so I struggled to meet people anyway but I think when you move to a new civi area and everything it is a bit more difficult, so I would say that was probably the main thing for me was getting out there and managing to meet people and also meeting people that had an understanding of a military life.'*

She goes on to describe the impact of such social isolation as an army spouse living within a civilian community;

*'... .. it was very lonely at the start. I found it quite isolating and people just didn't kind of get it as when you are on a patch everyone is in the same boat and they can relate but it was difficult to find people to relate to... I think not being around people to discuss it with who are going through the same thing that did affect my wellbeing'.*

In addition to the extra effort required to build connections and social networks in the civilian community, other participants described becoming more cautious about making relationships with their civilian neighbours, particularly when first integrating into the local community. Participants appeared to do this in order to protect their identity as an army spouse, particularly as they experienced a sense of uncertainty regarding their civilian counterparts, in relation to their understanding and views towards the military. This contributed to a sense of vulnerability and feelings of not being safe. Consequently, this created further distance and a sense of disconnection between participants and civilians, with some participants choosing not to integrate into their neighbourhoods as a result.

On the other hand, for those who were able to establish relationships and connections with their neighbours and within their local communities, there was some recognition that these connections were *'different'* to those that could be build with other spouses in the *'same boat'* on a military patch.

**Rachel:** During Rachel's interview, she also shared with me the transition of moving from living on a patch into a civilian community, which further strengthens the collective experience identified in most participants accounts, that military and civilian lives are different, and the perception that civilians lack an understanding of the uniqueness of military life.

*'There was not that immediate knowledge that people are going to understand your life and support you'.* Making comparisons to living on a patch, Rachel went on to say *'I know the people next to me are lovely and very welcoming but it is not the same as moving onto a*

*patch where you don't need to explain things and there is that sort of ring around it about people living on a patch that they understand your life'.*

Rachel goes on to explain the importance of the patch community, particularly during times of increased stress, such as being faced with a lengthy operational deployment.

*'I am sure our general well being was greater when we were in SFA and as I said partly because he knows that if he gets deployed or goes on exercise or whatever that we have got that community there that I can, you know, reach out to, but equally just knowing that we are living around like minded people who understand your way of life, who will support you is really, really important'.*

Rachel talked about how she becomes defensive by the lack of understanding from civilians regarding army life, and her choice of words suggests a sense of frustration about this. She goes on to describe how effort some it is to explain the uniqueness of one's situation to others whom are non-military, further emphasising the military v civilian tensions;

*'I feel quite defensive of my life-style and think shut-up! You don't know what you're talking about!' and further goes on to say; 'When I bumped into a neighbour in the road the other day, he said did you move up here from XXXX? I just said yes, because I thought I can't be bothered to start explaining ... .. in order to explain, I would have to explain quite a lot, and also the problem of course, is that I have no idea what people's views of the military are'.*

Whilst Rachel was not explicit in why she would be curious in what civilian views of the military are, it implied a need to be cautious of what one would disclose about her relationship with the military when living amongst the civilian community in order ensure a sense of safety. Later in the interview, she made reference to how her husband would not drive to and from work in his uniform, suggesting that she perhaps experiences a sense of vulnerability being identified as an army spouse whilst living amongst the civilian population. The following part of the interview highlighted perhaps why this was important to maintain. Moreover, in the extract where she discusses this, her choice of language to describe the civilian community – *'normal'* – appeared to further strengthen the idea that military life is unique, and is different from *'normal'* civilian life, that most others know.

*'... ... there is no way that XXXX would go to work in his uniform. I mean that partly post Lee Rigby anyway, I think the advice after he was murdered was that you know the reservists and army personnel shouldn't walk around in uniform but as you know yourself in XXXX, it is not uncommon to see people down in Tesco or just walking up XXXX on their way home or whatever and that's great. I think that it is brilliant that people are and feel safe to do that, but here just living in a normal residential area of XXXX\* (\*Large City) there is no way my husband would, and I'm talking about just going from the front door, down the driveway and getting into the car, people would just know where he was working... and it's just not worth it!'*

**Sally:** Sally also discussed the lack of understanding from civilians when sharing her experiences of the transition moving from a patch to a civilian community, and goes on to describe a feeling of alienation from others.

*'... ... because you are used to being around people of the same sense, same thought processes, same understanding and most people in the civilian world just do not understand our lives. They just don't understand that our husbands can be away for 6 months at a time, they struggle with them going away for 1 night and we're going what the hell'*

Similar to Rachel, Sally also reflected back to her first experience of residing outside a military community. Within her account, memories and experiences of past events that have shaped the military community also continue to shape her responses, contributing also to a sense of vulnerability and need to be cautious about developing connections with civilians, and when living within a civilian neighbourhood.

*'... ... So its always a bit daunting, I mean, the first time we did it [Live outside a military community] we are talking 3 years after 9/11...um... being military and not knowing who your neighbours are. That was a bit scary. When you are on a patch, ok you're going to have literally military whether you have got army, air force, or navy but they are all going to be included in some sort of way, whereas in a city patch you have no idea who your neighbours are and it actually does prevent you from making friends because you are like 'oh should I be talking to you? Um... am I ok to talk to you?' It's quite alienating'*



Nevertheless, unlike Rachel who appeared hesitant to build social connections, Sally talked about the need to be forthcoming in making an effort to form friendships and support networks where she lived and that whether she did or not was her responsibility, whilst at the same time recognising that any connections made would be different from those experiences and the bonds developed with other spouses when on a patch because of the perceived absence of shared experiences.

*'... ... you have to make more effort to get to know people. ... It's your choice. I think its not the same as being able to go out the front door pop next door if you are having a shit day and speak to somebody who is in the same boat'.*

#### **4.2 Separation v Stability – 'The Sacrifice'**

Living some distance away from an established military community potentiated a number of quandaries for participants, namely whether the choice of greater geographic stability was worth the sacrifice of **frequent separation** that was identified as one of the most common consequences. This created a number of challenges, namely the experience of **single parenting and a lack of connection and communication between participants and their partners**. This resulted in additional **pressure and stress** on participants, and also created **relationship strain** but also a renewed sense of **relationship strength**. Moreover, the experience of shorter, yet more frequent separation created **feelings of loneliness** and a general sense of **unhappiness** could be identified within participant's accounts. Taken together, some participants considered the impact of such sacrifices too great which prompted them to consider, or indeed to become a mobile family again and to reside back within an established military community. Yet for others there appeared to be a level of acceptance of the sacrifices in which they and their partners were making, helping them to better tolerate and cope with their experiences and the impact of on-going separation.

**Milly:** Milly began sharing how her experience of choosing to live outside a military patch, away from her partners place of work and within her own home had an impact on her day-to-day life, resulting in her being solely responsible for household chores and childcare during the week. This was in contrast to her experience of living together on a military patch whereby she described both herself and her partner being able to take a more equal share of everyday chores and responsibilities.

*'I think because sort of even things like doing the school run you will see um families that I know that are children`s parents you know their mums and dads will split the school run and one will work in the morning, the other will pick them up later and its things like that that we could never do'.*

Her account here and her choice of words *'things like that we could never do'* suggests a sense of longing for a different way of life, a *'normal life'*, where her husband was able to support her during the week; as a family unit. This underlying sense of longing that perhaps highlights the impact of challenges was evident throughout Milly's interview, particularly when referring back to her earlier experiences of living on a patch, whereby she specifically made reference to this as periods of normality. She says;

*'... .. normal... both coming home to the same house everyday... .. just both being involved in normal life challenges'.*

For Milly, it would appear that this tension between reality and longing to be a *'normal'* family unit was constantly there, and brought awareness to the sacrifices that the family were making to ensure stability, which for Milly was in relation to ensuring her children remained settled in school and at home. She talked about becoming fed-up in regards to the impact of being separated from her partner, which prompted the family to move back to a patch for a short period of time.

*'... .. XXXX would go to work and I`d be at home and I would be working and he would come home at weekends and then we just decided that our eldest, who was only 1 at the time, we just sort of had enough of us not seeing each other and not being all together so we rented our house out and went and lived back on a patch'.*

Later in the interview, she talked again about this.

*'... .. there are some weeks where you think, I`ve had enough of this, lets just pack it in and go back to the patch again...but then you sort of see the bigger picture of the kids settled'.*

This further highlights the continuous quandaries and 'weighing up' whether stability is worth the sacrifices that Milly understands herself to be making, mainly the impact of separation and the desire to be a 'normal' family, whereby they are able to live together as a family unit.

Within Milly's account, the experience of separation and the shifts that potentially occur within the family as a result, in terms of the changes to the family's identity and roles, are further reflected within her language and choice of words. Milly shifts from using 'we' when describing living together on a patch as a '*normal family*' and at weekends, to 'I' and 'us' in relation to herself and her children, and 'he' or 'him' in relation to her partner when being separated and living apart from each other. For example, she says;

*'We have our own routine here... .. if at times he is home, it tends to mess us up' and ' he's in the army ... and I am on my own here in the week'.*

Many times throughout Milly's account, she overtly states; '*for me it's ok. I don't mind it too much*' in regards to the concessions that she perceives herself to be making as a result of choosing to reside outside an established military community in order to gain greater stability. However, her choice of words and the tone in which these statements are delivered within her interview suggests that perhaps underlying her verbal account is evidence of this seemingly re-occurring tension and the potential difficulties it brings. Later in the interview, some of this difficulty begins to become exposed, but is often and quickly followed by a statement that is likely to help Milly cope with the choice that she is making to remain in one geographic location, outside of a military community, for example after a glimpse of any challenge that is revealed within her story, she tends to say that everything is '*ok*', '*fine*', '*not too bad*', or '*it is, what is it*'.

For example, she says '*it has been tough. I have found it tough... but it is fine*'. Moreover, in order to help herself better cope with the potential challenges and difficulties of separation and living apart, she also at times focuses on the positive aspects of choosing to live in this way and that this means she is able to see her children 'settled', which appeared to help tolerate an underlying sense of anxiety about her and her family's reasons and decisions for choosing to live within their own home and outside of a military patch.

**Dawn:** Explicitly from the beginning Dawn shared her experience and impact of increased separation as a result of choosing to reside within their own home, which was a considerable distance away from his place of work and an established military community.

*'I didn't like the experience of him being away.'*

Dawn further went on to discuss being 'left' when her partner returned back to his work, suggesting a sense of abandonment. She said;

*'I didn't like being left on my own at home... ...I didn't like being left all the time... ... it was better for us to be together'.*

Within Dawn's account, despite it initially being a choice to live in their own home for consistency in regards to her job and having many established friends in the area, her lived experience suggests that despite this initial choice, she had not fully anticipated the day-to-day strains of this and how this was may have impacted her and her marital relationship. Dawn went on to explain;

*'I didn't like it, I just didn't want it'.*

Her language and choice of words that she used to convey this within her account suggests that there was a sense of dissatisfaction that she perhaps experienced at the time in regards to the situation.

Dawn went on to discuss the perceived impact that this had on her relationship. The lack of physical connection between her and her partner was also felt as she highlighted how her main means of communicating with her partner was via telephone.

*'It is one of those things where you just don't want to be in that situation because obviously one of you is sacrificing because that is how one becomes two and um for me I didn't like it, I just didn't want it... and it means that the only communication that you have got is on the phone'.*

This led to feelings of loneliness and an appeared sense of helplessness regarding her relationship and its future at this time. She said;

*'... Emotionally. I was quite upset most of the time and felt lonely and because he is not there and I can't talk to him and I can't see how he is, he can't see how I am and when I need his help, so emotionally it is not an easy thing especially when you have a feeling its not going to work'.*

However, it would appear that for Dawn the strain on the relationship was only temporary, and short-lived, although it would appear that this changed following her decision to leave the family home, and begin relocating again. Nevertheless, Dawn reported that strength was developed during the frequent separation that she and her partner experienced as a result of living within their own home, outside of an established military community. She said;

*'Um it made us more stronger as a couple in the end and possibly made us to make the decision that we wanted to move because we knew the affect of it'*

**Jenny:** Jenny further evidenced the continuous weighing up of the quandaries that participants experienced, and whether stability in one place, outside of an established military community was worth the 'sacrifices' that were perceived to being made. For Jenny, there appeared to be a level of acceptance that geographic stability and living more dispersed might mean more frequent separation and lengthy commutes for the serving family member. She explains that living in their own home provided her children with a 'home' and a 'base'. Through her choice of words, there is a suggested sense of both physical stability and relational security that this provides her with. Jenny, like Dawn, also discussed the importance of job stability, and access to immediate family in the area. These were all significant factors for Jenny that appeared to provide her with greater control and agency over her decisions and family life that allowed her justify the choices that she and her family had made in order to gain this. The transcript documents our discussion;

*'Whenever we have been UK based he has commuted for all of the times, he was weekly commuting a six-hour drive... .. But that was a decision we made so that the children felt like they had a home'. She goes on to say; ' ... .. when you make that decision you know that you are sacrificing something, and its that weighing up if it is worth the sacrifice and what we are*

*trying to achieve from it, and for us it was our long term future of a place to call home and having a base'.*

Jenny also describes her experience of being a single parent throughout the week, similar to other participant experiences, but for Jenny whilst she describes routines being strenuous throughout the week which contribute to feelings of loneliness, there is a level of acceptance that having a 'base' and a 'home' is worth the potential impact that this may have on both her and her husband's wellbeing. Jenny goes on to say;

*'... ... I don't even know when he is coming home next and people don't get that, so it is a bit, I can be a bit lonely because you are like a single parent most of the time'.*

She mentalizes the potential impact this may also be having on her partner, the serving personnel, and, describes a sense of guilt that perhaps the level of sacrifice that he is experiencing is greater than hers in some way. She describes his absence, and him 'missing out' on various family experiences, mainly in relation to their children. She was the only participant to raise reflect on the husband's perspective of separation.

*'... ... I do feel very based here but am conscious that my husband is coming and going all of the time'. She goes on to explain the implication of the separation for her partner; 'I think my husband finds it harder than I do'. AMY: And harder in what way? He doesn't like being away from me and the kids anymore... ... I think he is finding the, not the travelling, the traveling to and from doesn't worry him at all, but I think just being away from us he finds harder. Missing some of the important things like parents evenings and most things that the children do at school, he misses all those key things in the children's life... ...' .*

Within Jenny's account the notion of 'missing out' on important events because of the demands of military life, which appear to be exacerbated by lengthy commutes and living a considerable distance away from her partner's base, appears to be a reoccurring experience for her partner.

Additionally, and similar to Dawn, Jenny talked about the experience of renewed strength within her relationship with her partner. She identified that this strength developed over the

course of multiple separations and pressures that they have faced due to the demands of the military.

*'We thought we survived that one so we can survive anything... you get used to it, I used to be in the military as well so it is kind of the lifestyle that we know, um, I'm not a needy person so I don't need him here all the time'*

**Fern** – Fern shared her experiences choosing to live away from an established military community in an attempt to enable her to continue working with a previous job. In her account, she highlighted the implications this potentiated on her sense of wellbeing and the additional strain that it put on her relationship. Fern reported that such strain contributed to her decision to return to a military patch and become a mobile family once again. Fern says;

*'I was pretty miserable in XXXX, I mean he was commuting to XXXX and I was commuting to Surrey so we did not see a lot of each other and I had friends at my work but I did not have any friends where we actually lived. It was very unfriendly there and I was pretty miserable.'*

When asked how specifically this impacted her, and what she meant by miserable, she said;

*'I would say it definitely put pressure on us as like I was just unhappy'.*

Fern also talked about the introduction of the FAM and how this might mean re-experiencing some of the difficulties that she and her family faced when living outside a patch community. Fern shared with me a sense of worry in regards to the impact of separation and the stress this may potentially cause;

*'... .. it is all well and good them saying that they will help you get your own home but how does that help with your husband being posted every two years? So if we were to do that now say buy a house where we are in XXXX and in two years time we could be in Cyprus or Scotland then what happens to my property? Like, do I have to live away from my husband for a minimum of two years again and the kids not see him all the time? Or do we then have to move again back to SFA?', and then have the stress of either paying a mortgage on a empty property or renting it out'.*

### **4.3 Disconnection – ‘You Just Don’t Feel Part of Anything’**

A sense of **disconnection and exclusion** from the military community is observed, particularly when living outside an established military community. This was linked to a number of factors, and from these arose a number of different experiences and feelings. Firstly, the **lack of formal support** from the military, particularly during times of increased stress such as deployment, exacerbated such disconnection and as a result appeared to intensify the presence of any difficult feelings that participants were holding towards the military. With this came in some cases a sense of **resentment towards and feeling let down** by the military. This was difficult for some participants whom felt that they had sacrificed and continue to make concessions as a result of the demands posed by military life. Secondly, the lack of connection to the military, when living outside of an established military community, further potentiated a **loss of meaning and identity** for some participants, in that, their identity and understanding of themselves as an army spouse appeared to have been challenged in some way and in need of re-negotiating. Moreover, for those participants with previous high levels of immersion in the military community, moving to and living within a local civilian community required a period of adjustment. Being suspended between the both communities, with uncertainty in regards to their relationship with the military, therefore created experiences of a **loss of place and belonging** for participants.

**Helen:** Within her experience, Helen talks about a desire to continue being part of the army community, but shared how, since living outside the patch that she has felt a sense of disconnection and even exclusion from the army, both in terms of the community and welfare support. Her identity as an army spouse, the meaning it has for her and the pride that she perhaps once gained from it, appears to have been challenged in some way by feeling let down and unacknowledged since choosing to live away from a military patch. This is felt within her account particularly as she discusses the sacrifices and concessions that she and her family are perceived to have, and continue to make due to the army. She discusses detaching herself from this community, possibly as a means of protection from the sense of loss that is felt, yet on the other hand her desire to fully detach appears ambivalent, as she later discusses her monitoring of patch and battalion social media pages, to continue being in the ‘know’.



Thus, whilst Helen and her family chose to reside away from the military community (physically), it was apparent that she perhaps did not choose to leave behind the relational aspect of membership to and support that this community could provide.

*'... ... some people choose not to be a part of it at all but I kind of like to know, I kind of like to be a part of it, I'm very proud of XXXX and what he does and what he has achieved, and you know, I like being an army wife ... ... I feel that they (army welfare) don't really communicate with the wives particularly about what is on offer and especially more so now that I am here, I don't even have any connection whatsoever to the army... ... So, you know, I would just want some kind of connection so whether that is done as a, you know, it could just be the welfare officer ringing you up and saying, 'Hi XXXX, you have chosen to live away and that's your choice and that's what you and your husband have decided to do, but how can we, what can we do to make it better for you?'*

An initial sense of resentment seemed to appear here towards the military, and the formal mechanisms of support likely borne out of the additional strain that she experienced particularly when her husband was deployed on an operational tour, and she became a new Mum within this time.

*'I didn't get much from kind of the Welfare side of the army in terms of how I was doing, how I was settling with a new baby... ... I have always had a bit of an issue with the army's attitude to family and how they kind of present this family life but actually don't really fulfil that in a way that I would expect them to do... ...that used to drive me insane because I used to think actually there is really no, it doesn't feel that they are really caring about these women who are left behind'.*

The sense of resentment appeared to ebb and flow, and an additional sense of sadness was instead felt as Helen begins the process of acceptance that she no longer feels that she belongs to the community, and is able to access support. She says;

*'I can see any events [on social media pages] but you know they're kind of short notice, they're not, obviously we are quite a distance now so a lot of them are immediately after school, so I wouldn't be able to get there anyway, even if I tried, so yeah I guess I mean I*

*have probably just detached, kind of thought you know what I guess this is just what it is now, and we are not really part of it anymore'.*

The impact of choosing to live outside an established military community and feeling disconnected from the military community and support becomes more apparent in Helen's account when she recalls the time whereby she and her family moved back to settle in her hometown, after many years relocating and living on army patches. The following part of our conversation depicts Helen as almost being suspended between both communities, and her lived experience in the following extract appears to suggest a feeling of not being grounded in any one place. Her place in the world, and her sense of self is not clear and therefore there appears to be a temporal loss of meaning, identity, and sense of belonging within her experience whilst she was adapting to life back in a familiar community.

*'... .. it's a real struggle when you have lived somewhere all your life and then you make that decision to move away and think that you're going to be living in other areas for the rest of your life and then you come back and that's really odd, so you then don't feel a part of anything because you are not part of the army community, and your not a part of your own home community... um... it's very odd, it's a strange situation really'.*

**Rachel:** Rachel discussed isolation and similar to others a sense of disconnection from the army community was highlighted. Reflecting upon her experiences prior to and whilst living outside the military community she said;

*'I think I just felt that we were going to be quite isolated from the army community and that definitely is the case'*

She highlighted the lack of support available in comparison to living within an established military patch community which has the potential to increase pressure on spouses to seek this out for themselves. Even outside of the formal military channels, support for and the needs of army families is not appearing to be adequately met. Rachel shares;

*' Moving here I have already written to our MP here about various stuff and I have mentioned that we are an army family and there is no response to it... .. the interests of army families, which are very specific, are not being met when you live outside SFA because*

*understandably, its not a priority to our MP... ... you don't have a hive, you don't have information about a local area in the same why, you don't have perhaps a facebook group where you can find out about things, so it becomes very much on us'.*

In addition, the sense of disconnection experienced was also linked to a perceived loss of identity for Rachel. She went on to describe a sense of worry about identifying herself as an army spouse and how this would be perceived, thus, she appeared to suppress this part of her identity whilst living in a major city amongst a civilian community, and felt unable to fulfil the 'role' of an army spouse in the way that she perceived to be important. The perceived absence of a shared social identity with others in her immediate community potentiated a further avoidance of interactions and physical distancing from others, which she discussed in earlier parts of the interview (represented in theme 1). Moreover, Rachel spoke about the shift in her identity as an army spouse that transitioned from a defined, valued role when living amongst other army spouses on a patch, into the unknown when living outside the patch. She went on to say;

*' I am really proud to support my husband. I am really proud of him but I think living outside of SFA that part of my identity doesn't matter as much and that is partly because I am not living in an army community where, as I said everybody understand my life and I understand their life, but, it is partly because tying into what I mentioned earlier about not really knowing how people around me, how our neighbours and how they perceive the military, so it is not something that I am going to be completely open about... ...It's difficult to feel like the army wife a part of my identity which I am proud of... where as I know when I am in SFA it does matter and its respected.'*

**Milly:** In her interview, Milly also described a sense of disconnection between herself and the military community, including the lack of support she received. Similar to other participants these feelings were intensified during experiences when serving personnel were on operational tour, or on exercise out of the country. Her account suggests a sense of being disadvantaged by the choice to become geographically stable and reside outside of an established military community. This contributed to feelings of disappointment and being unacknowledged by the military community. She says;

*'...I think it was a bit of a let-down, as when he was in Afghan for 8 or 9 months, but he had also been away for 2 months before, so it was a long, you know he was away for best part of a year really and it was really tough. I just think that something, there could have been some kind of acknowledgement, I don't really know what but just something because I know if your living on a patch you get a coach day out or they do nice things for the kids but your not even, you might as well not even exist because there was nothing'.*

Similar to other participant's experiences, the feeling of being suspended between two communities further suggests an underlying lack of belonging and place within the world. She says;

*'...Its literally like I could not have even existed... ... you don't feel either that you are just a normal family because he's in the army and we do have a different way of life, because you know I am on my own in the week, so yeah...'*

**Fern:** Fern further described the sense of disconnection from formal army support whilst living within her own home, and similar to others a feeling of being disadvantaged by living away from an established military community was reported which potentiated a sense of isolation from community and the support in which it could offer. Fern went on to explain;

*'I found also the things that was arranged by Welfare tended to be quite patch focused. There were a few things that I was invited to which was great but a lot of it was geared towards people actually living on the patch... ... I think not being around people to discuss it with who are going through the same thing that did affect my wellbeing, but, knowing that there was a community just down the road that I wasn't a part of and they were having support and I wasn't that definitely didn't help with my wellbeing'.*

#### **4.4 The military community: A place of several meanings - 'Loss' and 'Visions of Army Wives Gathering and Supporting'**

A perceived sense of **loss** was experienced when living outside an established military community. This included missing the strong sense of community cohesion and belonging that residing within this environment provided many participants. The perceived **loss of social bonds with other military spouses**, which were often likened to family, was

highlighted and how connections made with others outside of this were different, in that, they lacked a **sense of camaraderie and specialness**. However, not all participants experienced this, particularly those that did not develop these strong relationships whilst residing within a military patch community. However, some participants anticipated and hoped for an experience similar to what was experienced by others, and similar to what they had been 'taught' by others and learnt from fictional movies of army life. For these participants, this was yet to be experienced and therefore there was a different sense of loss in their accounts – the loss of this 'idea' or vision of a supportive, military community and the development of strong bonds between women.

**Jenny:** Jenny described having left behind a 'military family' when moving to live within her own home, within a local civilian community. She comments upon, and uses phrases such as '*picked up*', '*brought along*', and '*putting their arms around you*' when describing the military patch community, which suggests a deep sense of safety, protection and support that the community and the social connections that she developed within it, provided her. There is a perceived sense of loss of this special community and in relation to these strong social bonds. Jenny comments;

*'...there is an element of what you miss when you do move around is that military family that you can't quite define, but whenever you move with the military you get picked up and brought along... .. You can have really good civilian friends but I don't think its that same military family of putting their arms around you and sorting things out for you. Its kind of the opposite if you feel that you can escape it but often its bits of it that you want.'* She goes on to say, '*I think for me it's the missing the camaraderie that you get in the military family with others*'.

In describing the differences between living on a patch, and now living outside one, she says;

*' We have got some friends but if I knocked on their door late at night with a big issue they would probably look at me as if I was strange in a little village, whereas in the military there is always somebody that you can knock on the door at anytime and people welcome you in, so kind of that, it's like I don't know how to explain it, it's the unwritten rule, it's the military family ... .. I don't feel that you get that, the same'*.

**Rachel:** Rachel described missing the immediate access to relationships and connections that she had built with other spouses whilst living within an established military patch, and highlights the strong-sense of a supportive community that patch life can provide, that appears to become lost when living within a local civilian community. She says in relation to living on a patch;

*'... ... if you do need to ask someone to help you out with something, watch the kids or your dog or whatever, people are willing to help you out which is hugely important for our well being... ... It's knowing that if something were to happen that you have that support available, even if you never have to call on your army wife friends you know you can.'*

In Rachel's account, she likens the connections made with other spouses to family – a family that can perhaps endure most things, is consistent and available at times of difficulty. She said;

*'... you can all have a bit of a bitch about the army but you know that you doing it with a bit of fondness, because you are all there for the same reason, you can have a bitch about it because you know its your life, its kind of like you know that thing where you can say anything you want about your own family, slag them off as much as you like, but if anyone else does it you get quite annoyed, I feel like that about them.'*

There is a strong sense of cohesion and belonging that was gained whilst residing within an established military community. In Rachel's account, and making comparisons to living within a civilian community she says;

*'... You know when you move into a civilian road people are very nice but they are probably not going to go out of their way to try and say 'hello' and later concludes her experience by stating '... ... in a civilian community.... ....there is a lack of an established community'.*

In her descriptions of living amongst a civilian community, there appears to be a greater sense of disconnection, and detachment from the community – she appears to not be a member of, or feel part of the collective, suggesting a further sense of isolation. This may be in part because Rachel and her partner reside within a suburb of a large city, whereby she

talked about many of her neighbours within their local community having lived in this area for a number of years, thus, this may be an additional factor that perhaps makes it more difficult to build connections within the community. She said;

*'You know, obviously people here are just getting on with their lives... some have been here for 20-30 years and are just getting on with life.'*

However, Rachel discussed attempted to replicate the supportive community of a patch by placing cards through neighbour's doors informing them of their move to the area, in an attempt to perhaps counter-balance these feelings. She discusses needing to take ownership of this, which possibly reflects a deeper desire to belong for Rachel;

*'...we wrote out little cards, just saying 'Hi this is XXXX we have just moved in' and we posted them'. She later says, 'my mum always instilled in me when I was growing up as a child, when I complained that I was being left out of somebody's game at school, she would say you can't wait for people to come to you, you have got to go to them... ... If we are going to make this enjoyable for ourselves and if we are going to in anyway replicate a community living patch it is up to us to instigate it'.*

**Sally:** Within Sally's account, she discusses a specialness of the social connections with other spouses made whilst living within an established military community, which were difficult to replicate when developing friendships with civilians within a local civilian community. Whilst Sally describes having made opportunities to develop social connections with others whilst living in a civilian community, she nevertheless identifies them as being different, and as if they lacking this specialness of the bonds created with other spouses whilst living within an established patch community. She also, in her account, describes how these relationships and the support from within a patch community helped mitigate some of the difficulties faced when her partner was on operational tour. The sense of cohesion can be felt within Sally's account, and the repetition of the word 'together' and phrase 'all together' further emphasizes this, which is in contrast to her descriptions of her experience of living outside a patch community. Sally says; *' ... we have a history of our guys being in Afghan, and for example, every core regiment has lost lots of guys, so unfortunately when the word comes back that we have lost a guy, they get all the wives together, they tell us all together, they help us deal with it all together...'*

She concludes by saying, *' I think the only thing that I would add is patch life can be remarkably special ... .. you can make brilliant friends on a civilian patch, don't get me wrong, but you just do not have that, oh yeah I can phone x if that happens because they can help... .. It's different'*.

On the other hand, some participants particularly those that had not experienced these strong bonds and a sense of a supportive community did not feel this sense of loss. Instead, another sense of loss was experienced in regards to possibly not experiencing these connections, and a feeling of sadness is attached to this for some – that they did not have the opportunity to encounter this 'movie-like' experience of the social support that patch life could, and was thought to offer. Such a fictional view of what life is like on a military patch possibly links back to the experiences expressed by participants in this study, that civilians do not understand the reality of military life, and for some spouses entering into a patch for the first time their expectations may have been shaped by these perceptions.

**Helen:** Helen highlighted within her account how building meaningful relationships with other spouses whilst living on a patch was difficult, mainly because of the length of time of an accompanied posting. Thus, her experience of living in an established military community was not missing the sense of belonging and community that some of the other participants described. However, there was a different sense of loss and feeling of 'missing something' – a loss of an idea and expectation of what patch experience could have been like. Helen starts by saying;

*'you still can't really make friends with people in the barracks you know the wives because you are going to move after 2 years'*

She then later described that as a result she had not experienced the *'community feeling'*. There appears to be times whereby Helen questions herself whether this could have been different, and whether perhaps she should have made more of an effort to establish relationships and to be part of the community. This possibly reflects the sense of responsibility that she and potentially others may have experienced in relation to creating and being part of the community experience, rather than other factors being responsible for this.



*'I have never really experienced that whole community feeling of being on camp, I guess its much a muchness to me... .. as I said to your earlier I don't know whether that is because I haven't maybe put myself forward enough'.*

Later in her account, it becomes apparent for perhaps the reasoning for her questioning. It would appear that she held an idea of what living on a patch would be like, informed by fictional movies of army wives and their lives. From her choice of words, there is a sense that she too desired to have this idealized experience, and an opportunity to build strong connections with other spouses, and experience a sense of belonging to this community. Perhaps Helen holds on to this because in her account she discussed the possibility of renting their house, and moving back to the patch, relocating again to be together as a family. Helen reports;

*'I would love that community feeling you know when you watch the films about army wives and you just think you know, there is a couple isn't there, where you just think 'god what would I do if my husband was killed in Afghanistan and someone turned up and knocked on my door` who would I turn to if I was living in army accommodation? But you wouldn't, I wouldn't, not in my situation now... and then you have, in the films got all the visions of army wives gathering and supporting...'*

**Dawn:** Dawn also described a perceived sense of loss of an expectation of what patch life would be like, which was informed through 'teaching' from other spouses. Patch life appears idealized and an extremely happy experience, which for Dawn she had not experienced, but appears to still desire to have this opportunity too.

*'... .. she [participant's friend] was just happy, and everything that she taught me was just positive, it was like you know when they lived in Cyprus, when they lived in Germany, when they came back and the community that they lived in, the friends that they had made around the world... it was absolutely amazing, so that was the picture I had in my mind, um, but in our case it wasn't the same... I just haven't had the experience'.*

She later discusses the *'joys of patch life'*, and the implicit competition and cliques that can form between spouses, but despite this Dawn appears to want the opportunity to experience this, perhaps in an attempt to belong to this idealized community of army spouses. It may also be part of her ability to cope, and tolerate the demands of military life, given her choice to begin relocating again. There is a further sense of hope in her account, that this experience will come true for her;

*' I don't know if I had the same interview with you in the next three years, I would give you a different story.'*

#### **4.5 An opportunity to gain – *'You can do what you want'***

Many participants described benefits and the gaining of specific opportunities when living outside of an established military community. Such opportunities potentiated a greater sense of wellbeing for participants and the opportunity to establish geographic stability was an important factor for many, contributing to a sense of feeling grounded and enabling participants to **establish, and maintain jobs**. Employment, for many, created a **greater sense of autonomy and self-efficacy**. In addition, participants commented upon other opportunities that living outside of SFA, and an established military patch community brought. This included having the opportunity to decorate their homes as they wished, and choice over the tradespeople who completed maintenance on their properties for example. These smaller opportunities, along with not feeling 'watched' for one particular participant, allowed **participants to regain a sense of control and agency** that perhaps was more restricted when living in quarters, on an established military patch.

**Dawn:** Dawn described a greater sense of ownership as well as control as a result of living within her own home.

*'the positive side is your home is your home, it's your own home you can do what you want'*.

Her wording, 'its your own' suggests not only a financial own, but a relational one too – a place that she can call home, which further implies a relational aspect and not only a physical aspect of owning bricks and mortar. The lack of choice and the need to conform to the more restrictive elements of living within SFA, on a military patch, becomes apparent in

Dawn's account, and this sense of gaining greater control over decisions is more overtly felt. Dawn went on to explain;

*'... living on a patch you have got restrictions... you can do things, but it means that if you change anything, on the last day when you are moving out you have to put it back much to the original way, um, so that is quite different. It's quite stressful... ... and the other thing is, um, maintenance. I do love the idea of, um, they do look after the maintenance so you can just request it, but that takes a long time and you don't know where or when they are coming, but when you are in your own house you can just choose, ring up, and ask when are you coming? Come on, I need you today! So, just little things like that, but it makes a massive big difference'.*

**Jenny:** Jenny discussed how living within their own home a considerable distance away from an established military community, allowed for a greater sense of freedom from the control of the military and similar to Dawn the more restrictive elements of living within an established military community.

This sense of freedom and greater control is particularly felt when she describes not feeling watched by the military. She further uses the word 'escape' to describe her husband coming back on weekends to their home, which further highlights the sense of liberation that one might experience when transitioning from military life back to a home outside of an established military community, where the need to perhaps conform and adhere to the 'rules' of the military and housing is more prominent. Furthermore, Jenny goes on to highlight a feeling of being grounded when describing her experience of living within her own home, which is in contrast to the transient nature of living within a patch community, which is often for a short period of time, before moving to another.

*'... having your own space and not feeling that the military is watching you. We can do what we like here and if I don't clean my oven there is no march out when they come and check the accommodation whenever we have moved but yes I think its that freedom of there isn't any control other than as you say we are legally allowed to do because its our home so the positives are very much that it feels like our home and not somewhere where we are just passing through so that feeling of grounding and escape for him and he is a lot more relaxed when he is away from the military, and at the weekends, so that definitely is a positive'.*

Jenny also highlighted how she has gained the opportunity to obtain, and maintain a job that appears to provide her with a sense of structure, routine and purpose.

*I have got a job I go out and feel that I am doing something each day whereas moving around all the time getting a job is actually quite challenging, so it has given me that freedom to do that which financially it helps out, even if only for the kids'*

She further highlighted that perhaps without the advantage of being in the same geographic location that she would not have gained employment.

*'but they wouldn't recruit someone who was going to move every two years they would look to the fact that and they told me that they were looking for people who had long period of service with previous employers and the lady that I took over from who moved on had been there for 23 years and 21 years in another department so they don't want people who are going to keep moving'*

**Milly:** Milly described that stability in one place has allowed her not only to be on the property ladder, which offers her financial security, but that it has also allowed a greater opportunity for her to work, without the threat of having to leave it because of relocation. She reported that employment helped her mentally, and whilst she did not expand on this specifically, it would appear that this had a positive aspect on wellbeing. Milly stated;

*'You are on the property ladder, and you have got your own house', and then later says, 'I have been able to get a job, because I have not worked for years so that is another positive that I have been able to do, get a job and not having to stay home because in a few months I might be moving, so that's one thing being able to work for me, as a person, even though I don't work a lot, it just helps me mentally'.*

#### *4.6 Summary of findings across the group*

The benefits of choosing to live outside an established military community enabled most spouses to have greater **stability and consistency** for both their and their family's lives, and this provided spouses with a greater sense of **autonomy** and **control**. On the other hand, this was continuously weighed up against the disadvantages that living outside an established military community brought, particularly in regards to the impact of **separation**,

and the sense of **disconnection**, and even **exclusion** that they perceived there to be between themselves and the military community in which they were previously part of. This, together with the perception that **civilians lacked on understanding of their lives**, and the sense of **loss** that many spouses experienced in regards to the connections made with other military families and the sense of belonging to the military community, created feelings of **isolation, loneliness and alienation** across spouse's experience. Even those that had not experienced the strong social bonds that others had whilst living on a 'patch', appeared to remain hopeful that they would experience this sense of belonging. The military patch therefore became a place of multiple meanings, as interpreted by each participant. For many, this meant that they were suspended between two communities, neither of which they felt members of, which potentiated a further **loss in relation to a sense of place and purpose**.

#### **4.7 Summary**

This chapter outlined the study's findings. Five themes were identified which best represented the commonalities in participant's stories. These pointed towards an understanding that living outside an established military community held multiple meanings for participants. It had both benefits and disadvantages that continuously need to be balanced and re-evaluated, and, that these had implications for spousal wellbeing.

## CHAPTER FIVE

## 5. Chapter Five: Discussion

The aim of this thesis was to explore the lived experiences of army spouses who lived, or had previously lived outside an established military patch and the implications that this potentiated for spousal wellbeing. Utilising an IPA approach, interviews with seven female army spouse participants were analysed generating five master themes. This chapter discusses the key themes in turn within the context of the wider literature.

### 5.1 *Military life v Civilian life – ‘Its just different’*

Within this research study, participants perceived there to be cultural differences between the military and the civilian community, which appeared more evident when choosing to live outside of an established military patch community. The military world is vast, and has been described by some as a closed society with rules and regulations that often govern the lives and performance of the serving personnel (Thomas, 2018). Such rules, regulations and norms are unique, and have been identified as differing from that of civilian society (Cooper *et al.*, 2017; Thomas, 2018). Arguably, this reinforces conformity with these distinct sets of norms and attitudes leading to distancing from civilian life. Similarly, for participant spouses in this study, cultural differences also led to a sense of separation and feelings of difference, best described as an ‘us’ and ‘them’ culture as seen through their choice of language. While participants were not military and were indeed civilians themselves, the all-encompassing nature of military life that has been acknowledged to extend beyond that of the serving personnel was therefore demonstrated. This provided support in how military spouses and families are also subsumed into the ‘greedy’ military institution (Segal, 1986), which arguably continues to have lasting effects on their understanding, views of the world, their identities and concepts of self.

In addition, participants made repeated references to how civilians lacked an understanding of the uniqueness of their lives. Specifically, they described civilians as not understanding the demands and impact of various aspects of military life, with comments about how civilians ‘*just don’t get it!*’. Similar perceptions in regards to the lack of understanding held by civilians have been reported in other studies by US spouses (Mailey *et al.* 2018), as well as by UK-based army spouses who were living geographically dispersed (Verey and Fossey, 2013). In Verey and Fossey’s (2013) study, the lack of understanding arose specifically

because spouses perceived civilians as being unable to empathise with the complex ways in which deployment cycles affected the family. However in contrast, participants in this current study reported a much broader lack of understanding from civilians of the demands and implications of military life rather than specifically in relation to one specific element - deployment. For participants in this study, such misunderstandings exacerbated the sense of distance participants experienced between themselves and their civilian counterparts, which created challenges for them in relation to establishing both social and community connections. Often, this sense of distance and difference was highlighted when participants made reference to their previous experience of living within an established military patch community. It would appear that their previous patch experience created an intensity of shared experiences that contributed to a sense of connection and belonging that was difficult to achieve when residing outside a military patch community. Many participants shared how being in the '*same boat*' as others when living on a patch meant that social support based upon mutual understanding could easily be derived, and that this could not be replicated or experienced in the same way with civilians. Consequently, in comparison to this previous experience and built-in community support system, participants discussed the difficulties in developing and managing new social and community connections, which would have been helpful for providing them with support. This left some participants experiencing a sense of loneliness and alienation.

Within the literature, the military / civilian gap has been frequently cited. A gap between military and civilian society is created when the general civilian public do not know anybody who has served, and consequently have limited experience with the military, the demands posed, and the impact this may have on military families (Taylor, 2011 in Keeling *et al.* 2019). This has the potential to create misunderstandings, and while the military / civilian gap concept has often been applied to highlight the difficulties veterans experience transitioning into a civilian community, this study also evidenced that the military / civilian gap also impacts spouses. This is in terms of their ability to build connections and support networks with civilians, and ability to be become fully involved within their civilian neighbourhoods, which has implications for spousal wellbeing.

Another important experience that was identified within this research study that has not previously been identified in past research was that some participants reported feeling uncertain of what civilian's views of the military were. This was raised usually in comparison



to living on a military patch, which provided participants with not only a physical sense of security but a relational one too. Many participants made reference to the adversities that had impacted the military community, and how memories of these events (for example the death of Lee Rigby) were continuing to shape their responses and behaviours. Subsequently some participants described exercising caution in identifying themselves as a military spouse and how forthcoming they were with this information when in conversation with their civilian neighbours. This created an additional barrier to immersing themselves fully in their local civilian communities and developing social connections with others. Such concern fostered feelings of vulnerability, and further exacerbated the distance and separateness from the wider civilian community, which had implications for wellbeing. This was an important new insight into the lived experiences of participants. A greater understanding of this heightened sense of potential threat and vulnerability that could develop in spouses who choose to reside outside of an established military patch community requires further exploration and is a potential area for future research, particularly given the implications this may have on wellbeing.

Drawing upon the social identity theory (Tajfel, 1972; Tajfal and Turner, 1979) helps to provide an understanding of participant's experiences. Social identity theory suggests that individuals define their sense of self in terms of group membership, which typically has positive implications on an individual's mental health and wellbeing (Haslam *et al.* 2008). This goes some way in helping understand the experiences of difference that participants reported between themselves and civilians, despite the fact that they were civilian themselves.

According to the theory, an individual's social identity is the basis for deriving effective social support. Meaningful social support does not occur within all social relationships, but rather, is more likely to be given and received when individuals perceive themselves to belong to a group and share a sense of social identity (Haslam *et al.* 2008). This further helps understand the difficulties they report in building connections with others, and establishing a support network. Moreover, it helps explain the 'us' and 'them' sense of distinctions that arose within participant's accounts, and the impact that being part of the military world has on their self-evaluations and worth. Additionally, in the context of this theory, given that social support is largely influenced by shared group membership, it is unsurprising that participants reported a sense of loss in regards to the relationships they created with other

military spouses, and the support in which they could provide (See section 4.4 and 5.4 for further details).

Drawing upon literature concerning veterans and their experience of transition can also support an understanding of participant experiences. In similar ways to what was reported by participants in this research study, veterans move from a well-known community that they regard as a surrogate family to a community in which norms and practices appear unfamiliar (Hutchinson and Banks Williams, 2006). Furthermore, as a result of having worked and lived in a military environment and community, veterans also tend to perceive there to be differences between themselves and civilians (Demers, 2011). This, according to Thomas (2018) has the potential to make transition to civilian life difficult and more stressful. Moreover, a sense of 'friction' can occur because of the perceived differences, which can result in veterans struggling to fully settle into their new civilian environments (Walker, 2013).

Veteran transition literature highlights that a successful transition to civilian life rests upon veterans re-learning how to navigate civilian society (Gordon, Burnell, and Wilson, 2020) and their ability to engage in meaningful community connection and social support (Keeling *et al.* 2019). Without establishing these, veterans are reported to be at greater risk of isolation and loneliness (SSAFA, 2017), which was also the case for participants in this study.

Experiences of isolation and loneliness are not however a new experience for military spouses. For example, a question about loneliness, and how lonely military spouses felt was first introduced in the Tri-Service Continuous Attitude Survey in 2019. The most recent data from this survey suggest that 17% of 5,417 military spouse respondents experienced feelings of loneliness always or often, and 62% of spouses reporting that they felt lonely occasionally or sometimes (MoD, 2020). Loneliness therefore appears to be a common experience amongst military spouses. While these feelings are not unique to those that choose to reside outside of an established military patch community, greater research is needed into this; particularly since the majority of participants in this study reported these feelings. Arguably as more military families move out of SFA and into local civilian communities in future, if they too have difficulty in building connections and integrating fully into their civilian communities, experiences of isolation and loneliness may further increase which has further implications for spousal wellbeing.

In addition to a need for more research in this area, it is important to consider how military spouses are supported when moving from SFA on a military patch community to outside and potentially some distance away from this community. There may be benefit in supporting military spouses who live outside of a military patch community to connect with others who are also living dispersed in order to share experiences and provide support to each other in the context of a continued group membership. Counselling psychologists may have a role in facilitating this, or by working jointly with welfare teams to develop appropriate structures that encourage greater experience sharing and support via online platforms, particularly given the likely geographical dispersal of current and future military spouses and that access to a physical military community may be limited. These online systems could be an opportunity for psychologists to facilitate a space that encourages the expression and discussion of experiences, but also offer advice, support and signposting information to dispersed military families more generally in relation to interventions that might mitigate loneliness and isolation, bolster wellbeing, or indeed increase management of any transitory loneliness that may accompany the transitional experience.

Secondly, the differences that are perceived to exist between military spouses and civilians has further implications for counselling psychologists that may encounter military spouses in a therapeutic context. Counselling psychologists without experience of the military may be perceived as limited in their ability to help military spouses, and be deemed an 'outsider', unable to understanding the uniqueness of their lives and specific needs. Increasing counselling psychologists familiarity with the military culture, language and unique lifestyle by communicating these findings to other counselling psychologists is therefore an important start in psychologists becoming more culturally competent with this population. Equally, if in the event that military spouses enter contexts in which counselling psychologists work, there may be benefit in encouraging psychologists who have a relationship with the military to make this known to clients during therapy as this may further help in the development of rapport and the effectiveness of any therapeutic work.

### *5.2 Separation v Stability – 'The Sacrifice'*

In this research study, all participants reported shorter but more frequent separations as a result of residing outside of and a considerable distance away from an established military

patch community. The experience of greater amounts of separation has also been highlighted in all three reports on military families who have lived outside of an established military community (Gribble and Fear, 2019; RAF, 2018; Verey and Fossey, 2013).

While separations tend to be a common feature of military life, in this study the impact of such frequent separations was reported to be great and had implications on participants sense of wellbeing as well as their marital relationships. Many of the experiences and challenges reported by participants in this study were also similar to some of the difficulties that have been reported in previous research concerning separation caused by deployment separation (Eaton *et al.* 2008; Wheeler and Stone, 2010). However, while similarities were present, participant's experiences of separation and the implications this potentiated are different to deployment-related separation, and this should be noted. This is because participant's experience of separation in this study tended to occur on a regular basis which potentiated the creation of on-going challenges associated with the '*comings and goings*' of the serving personnel. Thus, the lived experiences that have been uncovered in this research study help inform and add some much needed understanding of these shorter yet on-going separations, which have implications for spousal wellbeing. This is especially important given that the literature tends to be dominated by studies concerning the impact of separation caused by deployments, which are usually characterised by lengthy periods of absence.

The separation experienced by participants in this study can potentially be seen in the context of ambiguous loss, a term first outlined by Boss (1984). Boss' concept of ambiguous loss is a useful one for helping understand the experiences of these shorter, and more frequent separations reported by participants in this study. This is because what was common in participant accounts was uncertainty, in terms of the serving personnel's '*coming and goings*' and duration of absences. An ambiguous loss is by definition uncertain, vague, and unclear (Boss, 2004), and refers to a situation whereby a person is physically absent but psychologically present, or where a person is present but psychologically absent (Boss, 2004). In this research study, during separation the participant is left behind and continues to be in a relationship, but, the serving person is absent and unable to perform their usual roles and responsibilities or provide the emotional support that is expected in an intimate relationship. This means that participants needed to make on-going adjustments to being in a relationship for a period of time, and then transition into a sole parent, or household head for another period of time. This has the potential to create a sense of

uncertainty. As discussed by Boss, such losses may result in poorer psychological wellbeing for all family members, leading to depression and anxiety among those left behind (Boss, 1984; Boss, 2004; Orthner and Rose, 2009). Within this study, whilst participants did not use the terms depression and anxiety, separation did cause participants to feel 'unhappy' and 'miserable', suggesting that the impact of such loss indeed had emotional affects on participants, particularly for those participants that perceived themselves as having a lack of agency and control in relation to their current situation, and the frequency of separations.

The experience of separation and 'coming and goings' of the service personnel from the family home during the working week will now be explored. Firstly, this meant that some flexibility around usual family relationships and roles was often required, especially for those participants with children. Consequently, the demands on participants increased during the week due to the temporary assumption of a single parent role and need to take on additional responsibilities around the home. Research has demonstrated that these stressors have the potential to cause an adverse effect on the wellbeing of the military spouse (Dandeker *et al.*, 2006; Eaton *et al.*, 2008; Figley, 1993; Patzel *et al.*, 2013), and this was also the case for participants in this study. Specifically, participants reported experiences of increased stress, as well as feelings of loneliness. These experiences were especially prominent when participants discussed the absence of their partner's presence and support as they went about maintaining and '*getting on with*' their everyday life between a Monday and a Friday. Similar experiences of solo parenting and emotional strain have been identified in other research concerning army spouses during unaccompanied postings (Verey and Fossey, 2013). Additionally, spouses from other service branches have also described taking on the majority of family and home responsibilities during non-operational separations, and have identified the impact that this has had on being able to maintain and commit to their employment, as well as maintain healthy exercise and eating habits (Gribble and Fear, 2019).

Within this study, concerns regarding the impact of separation on employment were not explicitly reported by participants. However, indirectly, participants with children deemed themselves to be the primary caregivers for their children during the serving person's absence from home during the working week. Their accounts made reference to how they would be responsible for and would be needed to, in a sense 'drop' any obligations and commitments such as work, if for example their children needed to be absent and come

home from school. Similarly, participants highlighted potential difficulties they experienced in reconciling their partners job demands, often compulsory, with their own employment demands, especially if they too had professional careers themselves. Although not overtly identified within this research study, the subtle tensions that some participants experienced in this study between their own employment and their partners employment, may go some way in understanding the potential growing frictions between the military and the modernising family, as embodied in the concept of '*greedy institutions*' discussed in the earlier chapters. This potentiates a number of implications for spousal wellbeing, especially as obtaining employment and being satisfied with this can contribute to better health and an increased sense of purpose and self-esteem in spouses (Faragher, Cass and Cooper, 2005; Gribble *et al.* 2019b).

Furthermore, in contrast to the research of Gribble and Fear (2019), the impact of separation on spouse's ability to maintain healthy exercise and eating habits was not commented upon by any of the participants. It is possible that this is because participants understanding of wellbeing did not extend to these factors, or that maintaining exercise and healthy eating was not an issue that they encountered. Likewise, it may have been that the emotional experiences were more important for them to discuss, or that they considered that I, as a counselling psychology researcher, would perceive these as more important. Nevertheless, this could be a potential important area for future research, especially as it has been identified by military spouses in other studies (Gribble and Fear, 2019; Mailey *et al.* 2018).

Secondly, the findings from the study revealed that as well as the increased amount of time participants and their partners spent apart, the lack of physical connection and the void of shared experiences had implications on their sense of wellbeing. Consequently, these experiences exacerbated participant's feelings of loneliness, and led to a sense of unhappiness, loss and even abandonment for some. Dissatisfaction with their marital relationships was also experienced. These findings are similar to previous research that has identified loneliness as a common theme among military spouses during deployment separation (Warner *et al.*, 2009), and indicates that marital relationships and spousal wellbeing can be negatively affected (Dandeker *et al.* 2006; Meadows *et al.* 2017).

Because of the separation experienced, conversations that participants had with their partners were usually over the telephone, which for some was difficult, as this would often be perceived to be strained and difficult. Strong lines of communication have previously been shown to be helpful in maintaining dialogue and relationships between married spouses and serving personnel whilst deployed (Greene *et al.* 2010) as well as during non-deployment separation (Gribble and Fear, 2019). However, in contrast to this research, for some participants in this research study, communication via the phone appeared to exacerbate the sense of loneliness and loss they experienced due to the lack of physical connection and support from their partners. Consequently, communication over the phone highlighted their partner's absence and their partners inability to provide them with the emotional support that they may need, as well as their partners inability to share and help in the family's day-to-day experiences and activities. This appeared to exacerbate the sense of unhappiness that participants felt with their situation, and dissatisfaction with their relationships at that time.

The dissatisfaction and additional strain on marital relationships that was reported by some participants appeared to only be temporary and short-lived, before a renewed sense of relationship strength was created. This was demonstrated by participant's choice of language that was used as they recounted their experiences and described their current relationship (e.g., '*strong*', and '*can survive anything*'). How participants experienced their relationships is also similar to how serving personnel perceive their relationships. For example, Keeling, Woodhead and Fear's (2015) highlighted how serving UK-based serving personnel similarly identified that work-related separation could cause both weakness and strength in marital relationships. Moreover, the findings revealed that not only did some participants describe their relationships as having grown stronger as a result of surviving the demands of the military, including the impact of varying forms of separation, but some also perceived themselves to be survivors too. Some participants therefore discussed how the impact of military life had made them more resilient and independent individuals.

For the participants, the impact of separation was one of the most frequently reported consequences of choosing to reside in one location outside of the military community. However for some, they acknowledged that separation was part of the '*sacrifice*' for ensuring greater stability for themselves and their families. Drawing on their previous experiences, most spouses identified that the opportunity to create a consistent base was

*'worth'* these sacrifices, and allowed them to continue living outside of and some distance away from an established military patch community. Specially, participants highlighted that stability in one place allowed them to have greater control and choice over continuity for their children's education and their employment. Moreover, for those who had bought homes in areas where they were originally from, immediate access to family support was considered important, especially since the experience and impact of frequent separations were greater. The reasons participants cited for stability in this research study therefore were consistent with previous research in this area that identified similar reasons for army families choosing to live in one location outside of and some distance away from established military communities (AFF, 2016a; Verey and Fossey, 2013).

While participants in this research study held a level of acceptance that there would be sacrifices, this appeared to be in a continuous state of flux, with participants appearing to endlessly *'weigh up if it is worth the sacrifice'* (stability v separation). Specifically, separation meant that they were not being able to live together as a family unit which some longed for. Additionally, the implications that separation had on participants own sense of wellbeing was also noted as a sacrifice. One participant however explicitly discussed the guilt she felt that her partner was in some way experiencing a greater amount of sacrifice, because he often missed out on important family events and milestones in their children's lives as a result of living away during the working week. This participant was however the only one who highlighted this. This was not reported across participants, with the majority identifying themselves as making the concessions and experiencing the impact of such sacrifices.

Nevertheless, despite the sacrifices experienced, those participants who evidenced a level of acceptance felt they could continue living in the way they had chosen, that was outside of a military patch community. The sense of control that they experienced themselves to have went some way towards helping them cope. Participants spoke about them seeing the *'bigger picture'*, the positive aspects, and the potential strengths gained as a result of stability and living outside of a military patch community. This included seeing their children *'settled'*, having a consistent *'base'* to call *'home'*, as well as other factors (see section 4.5 and 5.5 for more details). How participants appeared to cope in this study with the separation that they experienced seemed to be similar to the strategies used by other army families during unaccompanied postings (Verey and Fossey, 2013).



The weighing up if *'it is worth the sacrifice'*, seeing the *'bigger picture'* and the positive aspects of ones situation that participants engaged in, could be characterised as a coping response to a stressful event, that is separation. Coping has been defined as the effort that is made to render perceived stressors more tolerable and minimize distress induced by a situation (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). There are many models of coping, but broadly, most assume that individuals who cope more effectively with stressful life experiences show lower levels of psychological problems and better quality of life (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Indeed, problem-solving strategies or active coping, such as acceptance and positive reframing, tend to be linked with greater wellbeing while strategies such as self-blame, denial, and venting tend to be associated with more psychological difficulties. (Braun-Lewenshn and Bar, 2017).

Past research on military spouses have shown that those who hold a positive attitude and concentrate on situations in which they can control leads to positive adaption (Bell and Schumm, 1995). Additionally, the wellbeing of military spouses can improve with the use of different types of social support (Figley, 1983; Green, Nuris, and Lester, 2013; Skomorovsky, 2014; Wang *et al.* 2015) particularly during deployment-related separations, although for most participants in this study, the absence of social support was instead identified because of difficulties building connections (see section 4.1 and 5.1) and access to formal military channels (see section 4.3 and 5.3). Also, other studies have demonstrated that some military spouses feel pressure to take care of everything and cope with additional pressures, thus, may have difficulty seeking support from others within their community (Mailey *et al.* 2016). In addition, having religious affiliations has been identified in the literature as a protector against the stressors of deployment-related separation (Braun-Lewenshn and Bar, 2017), although, this was not highlighted by participants in this study. This is however a worthy area of further exploration to determine if this mitigates some of the difficulties associated with separation as a result of living outside and some distance away from a military patch community, particularly since the sample of participants used in this research study was relatively small.

Given the research on coping, there may be a future role for counselling psychologists in raising awareness of how military spouses can strengthen the practice of useful coping strategies and enrich their coping repertoire. This may support spouses to cope with the

difficulties they experience in relation to separation as a result of living outside of and some distance away from an established military community.

On the other hand, for some of the other participants in this study, the sacrifices had or were indeed becoming too great, prompting change to occur. Research with RAF spouses identified that the challenges of living dispersed, and experiencing separation meant they were more likely to encourage their partners to leave the military (RAF, 2019). However, in contrast for some participants in this study, it instead prompted them to make the decision to return to being a mobile family, or to again consider this possibility in the future. However, it may be that if this were not possible, participants would have placed greater pressure on the serving personnel to resign, in similar ways that RAF spouses reported. For participants in this study the consistency and stability they were trying and hoping to maintain had the potential to become disrupted, and this caused a sense of anxiety. Thus, the choice to become stable and reside outside of an established military patch community, while it had benefits for participants, was not fixed and was subject to change depending on the level of sacrifice experienced and whether these were worth it at a particular point in time. There is therefore potential for military families to benefit from targeted support during the transition from military to civilian living, and counselling psychology may have a role in supporting the military to understand some of the experiences of this transition as well as the potential to work directly with the family itself during this period to support this transition. This may also help normalise the experiences and difficulties that spouses may encounter, further helping to break down some of the perceptions that spouses may hold in regards to feeling the need to *'take care of everything'* and cope alone (Mailey *et al.* 2018).

### 5.3 Disconnection – *'You Just Don't Feel Part of Anything'*

Experiences of disconnection and exclusion were expressed by participants in this study as a result of choosing to reside outside of an established military community. Such experiences are similarly identified by veterans (Gordon, Burrell, and Wilson, 2020), and have also been reported by spouses who were living outside a military patch community (Gribble, 2017; Gribble and Fear, 2019). In this study, participants felt unacknowledged, and as if they did not 'exist' by the military. The findings of this study further demonstrated that the sense of disconnection and exclusion arose from a mismatch between the expectations that

participants held and the provision that was being provided. This had implications on participant's sense of wellbeing.

Firstly, the communication and support participants expected to receive (from welfare) and the lack of this, meant that participants reported feeling disadvantaged by living outside a military patch community. This arguably exacerbated the impact of military life and the inherent demands. Many commented upon the disparity in the amount of communication and support they were offered and received, particularly as they drew comparisons to their lived experiences of residing within a military patch community. While participants had actively chosen to not reside in SFA within this community, their accounts suggest that they had not necessarily chosen to become disconnected or disadvantaged from accessing military-based communication and support either. Instead, many participants reported that they wished to remain informed, involved and invited to military-based and family-related events and services. Participants viewed this as helpful support and a means of remaining involved in the military community. However, many participants acknowledged that due to their locations and the distance in which they lived from their partner's base, attending any supportive events and activities would be difficult if these continued to be centred around spouses living close to existing military bases and communities.

Previous research has indicated that support, such as those provided by a partner's work organisation, provide a set of services that can be helpful, especially in the context of experiencing work-related separations (Orthner and Rose, 2009). However, military spouses prefer to seek support through informal avenues (for example, from other spouses), rather than formal mechanisms like welfare teams (Aducci *et al.*, 2011; Dandeker *et al.*, 2006) as their first line of support. It is unclear why this is. However, a study by Mailey *et al.* (2018) identified how spouses held a perception that they needed to demonstrate to others they were capable of coping with military demands, and therefore were unlikely to seek support because of this fear. Equally, other spouses may worry that seeking support from formal channels may reflect negatively on the serving personnel (Mailey *et al.* 2018), further demonstrating the need to uphold the notion of the good military wife (Enloe, 2000). However, in this study, it was apparent that participants wished to have more communication and support from formal military channels, such as welfare teams. Potentially this is because most participants were no longer able to access the immediacy of support from other military spouses, like they would have if they still resided within a

military patch community. Thus, exploring spouses' preferences for greater communication and support, and how this can be provided should be a priority for welfare teams to consider, given the increased dispersal of military families. Indeed, it also means that spouses have to make use of any such communication and support that would be provided.

Secondly, the lack of connection and support received from formal military channels, such as welfare, led to the emergence of a sense of resentment towards the military and feeling let down, that for some participants, created additional strain on the family and had implications for their wellbeing. In previous studies, Jervis (2011) and Gribble, Goodwin, Oram and Fear (2019) identified resentment and blame as common feelings amongst military spouses, mainly in relation to a perceived lack of agency that was experienced during overseas postings and the concessions spouses felt they were required to make, mainly in regards to their employment, because of the military. However, unlike these previous studies the resentment that participants reported in this research study was as the result of not feeling adequately supported by the military, particularly in comparison to their previous experiences of support when living on a military patch. Such perceptions may have long-term implications, for example, spouses potentially blaming partners for adversities caused by the military. This is seen in a study by Keeling, Woodhead and Fear, (2015) which identified how resentment led to relationship difficulties, and on some occasions the serving personnel leaving the military altogether. This is of particular importance since serving personnel are more likely to leave the military if their spouses are dissatisfied with military life, than those who are satisfied (Drummet, Coleman, and Cable, 2003). Thus, this is also a relevant factor for the retention of serving personnel.

Another finding that emerged from the study was that the ability of formal channels, such as welfare teams, to meet the expectations of spouses, is difficult to achieve particularly in its current set-up. Indeed, previous work conducted by the AFF (2016), and Verey and Fossey (2012) has identified how these teams may struggle to access military families that choose to live outside of an established military community, making them particularly hard to reach. More recently, a paper by Rodrigues *et al* (2020) highlighted how most of the military support that can be provided to families is centred upon living within an established military community. According to Rodrigues *et al* (2020) residing outside of this community may therefore reduce a families ability to access military based support. This is because, as identified by the House of Commons Defence Committee (2018), support is not currently

adapted to meet the needs of military families who choose to live in this way, which was a key theme in participant's experiences. The choice of becoming geographically stable, and living outside of the military patch community therefore appears to come at a cost. The costs are not only in relation to difficulties in establishing community and social connections as a result of perceived differences (see section 4.1 and 5.1) and the experience of more regular separations (see section 4.2 and 5.2) but another cost is in relation to having limited access to formal support. It was clear from the study's findings that the support mechanisms currently in place have not yet evolved to ensure families have access to channels of support. It was evident that participants desired more support, and that this would have gone some way in supporting their sense of wellbeing.

The limited contact and access to support that participants experienced led to a sense of disconnection and exclusion from the military community as a whole. Drawing upon the small amount of literature conducted with reservists may help provide some understanding for the study's findings and the experiences that participants report. For example, reservist families and spouses are also usually disconnected from military communities because they tend to live within local civilian communities instead, and therefore have less access to both the informal and formal support networks that military patch communities tend to provide (Edmunds *et al.* 2010; Segal and Segal, 2003 in Faber *et al.*, 2008). Research with reservists has therefore shown that reservist families are more likely to become socially isolated and may struggle to accept and tolerate the considerable demands of military life as a result (Dandeker, Greenberg, and Orme, 2011). In the context of the proposed initiatives that will likely see more military families take advantage of stability and therefore reside outside of the military community in the same way reservist families live, it is again important that a closer understanding of the support needs of spouses be identified, and how connections between spouses and the military can become stronger. Moreover, creating a 'sense of community' for spouses, via better relationships, may also go some way in helping fulfil the need for connection and belonging amongst military spouses (Bowen *et al.* 2003; Wang *et al.* 2015;), which may have important benefits for wellbeing.

Finally, within some participant accounts a sense of being suspended between both civilian and military communities was identified; neither of which they felt they were a member of. These findings are similar to reservists who must navigate both the civilian and military world and tend to be suspended between the both (Lomsky-Feder, Gazit, and Ben-Ari,

2007). Such a sense of suspension potentiated the loss of a sense of place, purpose and belonging for participants in this study. While physically most participants were no longer residing within the military community (in that they tended to live outside of this), the military community had been internalised and contributed to participants sense of self, in that, it provided them with a sense of grounding, belonging and meaning. However, the level of disconnect and the experience that they no longer *'existed'* within this community meant that their identity had become compromised in some way. According to Haslam (2008) this may lead to negative psychological consequences, and for some participants they indeed appeared to no longer have a sense of place, reporting that they were not a *'normal'* family (because they were military), but also that they did not feel as though they were a civilian family either. Meanwhile, others reported that they did not feel *'part of'* anything.

In sum, the loss of connection with the wider military community, the experience of poor communication and support, along with the impact that this had on participants sense of self and wellbeing has previously been reported by army spouses (Verey and Fosey, 2013). This, according to Verey and Fossey (2013) potentiated the weakened support of two vital social networks: both the military and civilian communities. Clearly, this has implications for future spouses who choose to take advantage of initiatives such as FAM and Help to Buy schemes, as the implications on their sense of wellbeing may be great.

#### *5.4 The Military Community: A Place of Several Meanings – 'Loss' and 'Visions of Army Wives Gathering and Supporting'*

In this study, as a result of now residing outside a military patch community, participants highlighted the loss of a sense of *'community'* and social connections with other military spouses who were in the *'same boat'*. The *'community feel'* of a military patch community was therefore missed by many, as well as the strong bonds that many had developed. Although, importantly, this was not the case for all participants, and therefore the military patch community held different meanings for each participant.

A sense of community has been described as the perception of belonging to a larger dependable and stable structure (Wang, Nyutu, Tran and Spears, 2015). The absence of this sense of belonging was therefore identified with participant accounts, and was further exacerbated by their experience of disconnection to the military community more generally,

and losing their sense of place as a result (see section 4.3 and 5.3). The importance of replicating this '*community feel*' was discussed by one participant, who talked about how she attempted to re-create this sense of belonging within her civilian neighbourhood, although did not comment on whether this was achieved. Achieving this '*community feel*', together with increasing access to military support (see section 4.3 and 5.3) is an important consideration not only for the wellbeing of spouses, but for the retention of serving personnel (Burrell *et al.* 2003).

The findings from this study also revealed that as well as the loss of a '*community feeling*', the bonds and availability of an important social network was also hard to replicate within a civilian community. Many participants described missing the camaraderie and the specialness of these friendships and connections, in the same way that veterans describe their military colleagues upon leaving the military (Koenig *et al.* 2014 in McDermott, 2020). Again, the intensity of shared experiences was important for participants, and suggests that it leaves behind what Cooper *et al.* (2017) identifies within the veteran population as a military legacy that endures beyond service. For participants in this study, this created experiences of loss, which has implications for spousal wellbeing. Specifically, this loss was in relation to the friendships and the support in which they could provide. The loss participants described is also demonstrated in other research by Gribble (2017b). In Gribble's (2017b) study, spouses identified loss, and even grief when leaving behind the supportive relationships that they had built with other military spouses, although this was in the context of leaving accompanied postings.

Social support refers to the behaviours of others who provide guidance, assistance, emotional support and social interactions (Vaux, Riedel, and Stewart in Wang, Nyutu, Tran and Spears, 2015), which has consistently shown to be of significant importance in sustaining good mental health and wellbeing (Bowen 2015; Dandeker *et al.*, 2006; Green, Nuris, and Lester, 2013; Mereolla, 2010; Skomorovsky, 2014). Those who have access to, and are embedded in close relationships, for example with friends, family and neighbours which can be called upon at times of stress or need (Voydanoff, 2005), are much more likely to report better adjustment to stressors than those who do not (Sinokki *et al.* 2009). Indeed, for military spouses, research has shown that social support, particularly informal support, can help families manage the demands of military life (Wang *et al.* 2015), especially the

frequent absences of military personnel (Van Winkle and Lipari, 2015), thereby benefiting spousal mental health and wellbeing (Fields *et al.* 2012; Van Winkle and Lipari, 2015).

Furthermore, a growing body of research has indicated that social support is much more likely to be given, received and made use of if individuals perceive themselves to share a sense of social identity with others (Haslam, 2004; Haslam, 2005; Levine *et al.*, 2005). There is therefore benefit in connecting with others of whom are in a similar situation or share some mutual understandings (Rivera and Soderstrom, 2010). This may go some way in explaining why some military spouses tend to prefer to seek support from others spouses within the military community, rather than through formal channels as demonstrated in noted by Dandeker *et al.* (2006). However, research in this area can differ, and as highlighted in this study, participants appeared to also want more connection and support from formal military networks. This is perhaps because they did not have the availability of other military spouses to turn to as they would have if living on a patch, or perhaps because they had greater difficulty establishing meaningful relationships with civilians.

On the other hand, the findings also revealed that not all participants in this study experienced the '*community feeling*' and strong connections between themselves and other military spouses. Some reported that this is not what they had pictured or expected to experience while living on a military patch. For some, living within and the connections made with others was therefore a '*much of a muchness*' to them, and their experiences were a stark contrast to the majority of other participant experiences. Jervis (2011) too also challenges the myth that has been developed in regards to this close-knit supportive community, or military '*family*' that many participants in this research study report. Research has suggested that mobility often discourages spouses from making new social relationships (Finch, 1983), and indeed some participants described how developing connections with other spouses during their time residing on a patch was difficult. This was because they knew that they would likely move on within two years, and similar to Jervis' (2011) findings, some felt that establishing relationships with other spouses within a military community would be short-lived and would offer little meaningful support. This became a barrier for some participants in forming connections during their experience of residing within a military patch community.



Furthermore, some participants who described difficulty in living within a military patch community appeared to question whether they were responsible for not '*putting themselves out there*', and not being able to develop these friendships and connections and utilise these for support. They also hoped that they may experience these connections and associated benefits in the future. Consequently, there was a sense of hope that their experiences were similar to what was experienced by the majority of other military spouses. This hope remained for one participant despite highlighting the existence of cliques and other difficult dynamics that they witnessed whilst residing on a patch, and between spouses. A different sense of loss was therefore identified within these participant accounts. It was not, however, in relation to the loss of bonds and support with other spouses as for some they did not experience these. Instead, it was the loss of an idea and expectation of this idealized community where participants expected and hoped to experience a sense of belonging and support that had been informed through 'teachings' by other spouses, and from fictional movies of military life where wives would be seen as supporting each other. This fictional picture of what military life is like is also likely to be linked to civilian's lack of understanding that was reported by participants in this study, in that it is often misunderstood (see section 4.1 and 5.1). The findings from this study may suggest that participants, due to their hope to have a positive experience of the military patch community and the support that this provides, feel some pressure to uphold the expectations of the 'good' military wife (Enloe, 2000) and to be seen as being supportive of the military, the serving personnel and their career. This may go some way to understanding their reasons for continuing seeking a sense of belonging and identity through this military community, and the support it could offer (see section 4.3 and 5.3).

##### 5.5 An Opportunity to Gain – '*You can do what you want*'

Choosing to reside outside of the military community, and become geographically stable was identified by participants as having many benefits that potentiated a greater sense of well being. Specifically, an increased sense of autonomy, self-efficacy, and control was identified, which are conducive to positive mental health and wellbeing (Ryff, 1989).

Military life, mainly the frequent and repeated relocations, can constrain military spouses' sense of agency and control with regards to planning and making decisions about many aspects of their and their family's life, thus, the opportunity to have greater choice in

regards to where and how they wanted to live was important for participants and contributed to their sense of wellbeing.

Firstly, having the opportunity to establish and maintain a stable career / job was one of the main advantages for participants, with many drawing upon the disadvantages that being a mobile family had on their ability to further their work opportunities. Some participants made reference to the fact that when they were a mobile family they had actively chosen to opt out of employment and into full-time parenting, or homemaker roles. One participant discussed how her job required significant training, thus could understand the potential reluctance of employers investing in her. For this reason she had chosen, whilst she was a mobile spouse, to remain out of work. The employment disadvantages that military spouses face are well-documented within the literature (Bourg and Segal, 1999; Castandeda and Harrell, 2008; Lyonette *et al.* 2018), thus, opting for stability in one location would therefore likely address the low unemployment rates of military spouses and the potential reluctance of employers to invest in spouse employees (Harrison and Laliberte, 1994), an area that initiatives such as FAM are attempting to address. However, it is important to note that findings from this study indicate that longer-term stability may not be possible to maintain for all spouses, since their experience of whether stability was '*worth the sacrifices*' was not fixed and continued to ebb and flow.

The prospect of being able to hold a consistent track record of employment in a consistent location was therefore appealing for many spouses, however it was evident from participant accounts that their work was perhaps not given equal consideration, and participants (with children) implicitly implied that they could not prioritise their work due to assuming a single parent role during the week, and needing to respond to child-care issues at short notice for example. Thus, for many this resulted in participants opting for part-time work that was flexible. Nevertheless, the ability to work, regardless of whether this was part-time appeared to be important to participants and potentiated a greater sense of autonomy and self-efficacy, that is often hampered by the mobility of the military lifestyle. A study examining the employment experiences of military spouses suggested that spouses who are able to work and obtain fulfilling employment help support the development of social connections and wellbeing (Gribble, Goodwin, Oram, and Fear, 2019).

Additionally, some participants highlighted the other opportunities that living outside an established military community provided them with. This included having the opportunity to decorate their homes as they wished, and having greater choice in, for example, who they chose to complete repairs on their homes. This sense of greater ownership and control was similarly identified by army spouses in other studies (Verey and Fossey, 2012), who reclaimed a sense of mastery over the home environment through the action of decorating. For participants in this research study, these smaller acts allowed them a greater sense of control and agency, which previously appeared limited and restricted especially as they discussed their previous experiences of residing within SFA on an established military community.

In addition the study found that for one participant a sense of freedom from the military was experienced, which has not previously been reported elsewhere. That is, in choosing to live outside of the military community this particular participant commented upon how they no longer felt watched. This created a sense of liberation and improved autonomy that the military would no longer *be 'watching'* or controlling their actions and choices. It would appear that this was highlighted when contrasting their experiences to times when living in SFA within a military patch community whereby the need to perhaps conform to the good military wife (Enloe, 2000) and the more restrictive elements of residing on a patch was more prominent.

Similarly, within other participant accounts, a sense of freedom was further identified mainly in relation to not needing to experience the *'march in and outs'* of SFA, which describe the process in which families prepare to occupy or vacate their SFA. Their causal use of this language and the processes that they described during the interviews in regards to this experience highlighted this sense of freedom and liberation from the high levels of immersion into the military culture and the incorporation into a greedy institution (Segal, 1986). Indeed, it has been documented that spouses are expected to conform to required standards of behaviour, and attitudes whilst living within an established military community (Jessup, 1996), and Jervis (2011) in her own account of being a military spouse overseas, further highlights this and the challenges she faced in regards to her autonomy. Nevertheless, despite the power and restrictions that the military appears to have over spouses, many of the participants discussed the importance of wanting to continue having a

relationship with the military, the community and the support in which it potentiated (see section 4.3 and 5.3).

## **5.6 Summary**

This chapter sought to contextualise the study's findings in relation to the wider literature and theories. Firstly, similar to the experiences of veterans, participants perceived there to be a cultural differences and a lack of understanding between themselves and their civilian counterparts. Importantly, this highlighted that army spouse participants, like veterans, experience similar difficulties when transitioning and residing outside of a military patch community. In order to support army spouses, counselling psychology may have a role in helping spouses adjust to their new communities, to develop connections and new relationships.

Secondly, the experience of more frequent separation was identified across all participants, and could be seen in the context of ambiguous loss whereby the coming and goings of the serving personnel created uncertainty within the family, which had implications on marital relationships and spousal wellbeing. The ability of participants to cope with the impact of separation was an important factor in whether participants continued to reside outside of, and some distance away from a military patch community and their partner's place of work. Counselling psychologists may have a role in further developing spouses coping abilities and ways in which to bolster wellbeing.

Thirdly, spouses experienced a sense of disconnection and exclusion with the wider military community, and as a result there was a mismatch between expectation of communication and support from formal military channels and what was received. Such findings therefore challenge the existing paradigm of support that is currently available to military families. Considering how to improve this is important for maintaining the military's relationship with families, as well as families own sense of wellbeing. Additionally, multiple experiences and meanings were derived from residing on and within a military patch community. For some, the loss of a sense of community and social relationships that the patch provided was identified, while for others a different sense of loss was noted. Mainly this was in relation to the loss of an expectation and vision that the military patch community would provide participants a sense of belonging and support. Importantly, this led to participants feeling

suspended between two communities, with no sense of place in the world, which had implications for wellbeing.

Finally, residing outside a military patch community brought many benefits that were important for participant's wellbeing. Increased employment opportunities, a sense of greater choice and freedom were identified, particularly in comparison to the more restrictive elements of living on a patch. Arguably, the contrast supports the suggestion that living on a military patch ensures a degree of military control over spouses, and a greater encouragement to adopt the position of being a good military wife.

## CHAPTER SIX

## **6. Chapter Six: Recommendations and Conclusions**

Within this chapter, the quality of the study is evaluated and both strengths and limitations are outlined. The chapter concludes with implications for practice, and recommendations that have emerged from the thesis findings before offering a final conclusion of the entire thesis.

### **6.1 Assessment of Quality**

There are a number of ways to appraise the value of qualitative research, and whilst there appears to be no specific method that can be applied to IPA research, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) suggest the utilisation of Yardley's (2000) 'four principles' approach for assessing the quality of IPA research. In this approach, quality is judged in relation to four criteria: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, and finally impact and importance (Yardley, 2000). The following section will therefore apply Yardley's four principles to this study.

#### *6.1.1 Sensitivity to context*

Throughout this study a sensitive and responsive approach to the research process was maintained. As a military spouse I already held an understanding of the area, but also as a professional I entered into the topic area by conducting a literature search, both of which shaped the aims of this study and the processes in which I took to prepare for data preparation, collection and analysis. This allowed me to further understand the context in which spouses may be situated.

In keeping with an IPA approach, as the researcher I wished to uphold the authenticity of participants lived experience through paying attention to and illustrating their subjective, ideographic experiences that they had recounted for the purpose of this study. I did this whilst acknowledging the effects of my own position, perspectives and experiences and how this may shape the data. Thus, I attempted to remain sensitive to participant's accounts through engaging in supervision, research meetings, and maintaining a reflexive journal.

#### *6.1.2 Commitment and rigour*

In order to complete this study a high level of personal and professional development and challenge was needed. Initially, prolonged engagement with the topic, not only as a

researcher but also as a military spouse, was necessary. I took care to maintain ethical standards throughout and approach participants and their lived experiences with openness. Participants' keenness to participate, and to engage in the interviews with such honesty likely came from my position not only as an insider researcher, but as sensitive and thoughtful researcher, who was open to their experiences whilst balancing my position as being perceived as an insider. Moreover, commitment and courage to utilise open-ended questions, and allow latitude during data collection, likely encouraged participants to recall and make sense of 'their' lived experiences too. This demonstrated respect and commitment to the exploration of their inside world. Finally, during data analysis, immersion in the data required persistent contemplative and empathic exploration in order to move beyond the first descriptive level of analysis and ensure justice to the IPA approach (Brocki and Wearden, 2006).

In terms of rigour, Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, (2009) guidance on conducting IPA research allowed for a framework to be followed that enabled a comprehensive format that guided the process of analysis. This ensured rigour particularly as I was a novice researcher. Furthermore, I engaged in reflexivity through utilising a journal, regular supervision and research meetings in order to give space for potential interpretative ideas to form. Engaging in the process of reflexivity, moving back and forth between participant accounts and my journal in which I documented my own experiences to this and what this meant, allowed me to repeatedly see the data from both perspectives. This helped achieve the multi-layered understandings of participant's experiences that informed the study's findings. Engagement with this process required considerable effort and commitment. I needed to acknowledge the presence of 'me' in this process whilst also remaining faithful to participant accounts and experiences.

### *6.1.3 Transparency and coherence*

Throughout the study, I maintained transparency by detailing the steps that I have taken at each stage of the study. Indeed, Smith, Flowers, and Larkin's, (2009) guidance in conducting IPA research has provided assistance with this, particular during the data analysis stage and the write up of the study's findings. Furthermore, utilising a journal whereby I had the opportunity to record my own reflections and thoughts on the learning journey and on the research itself was helpful and in many ways enacted much of this principle. Particularly during the analysis stage, the journal allowed me the opportunity to document surfacing



thoughts and experiences at the time, as well as comment on the meaning of participants words and stories, encouraging me to learn more about the data, and then later to subsequently seek out relevant literature. The journaling process therefore helped evidence my interpretations, thus ensuring transparency and integrity.

Brocki and Wearden (2006) note that issues relating to reflexivity were often lacking, or even absent from IPA studies. Therefore utilising a journal, and remaining commitment to the process of reflexivity allowed me to be transparent and ethical throughout this process. It allowed me space to think, question, empathise, and to interpret participants lived experiences as noted above, and indeed some of these extracts are included elsewhere within this study. It was important in this research journey to ensure that readers of this study were able to locate and understand my position. This included how I have arrived at my decision and how I came to interpret and make sense of participant's accounts, but also, remaining open to the fact that that readers may form a different view or arrive at different interpretations, based upon on their own lived experiences.

In terms of coherence, the study's aims were particularly suited to a phenomenological study. The aim was to explore and give voice to army spouse's experiences of living outside an established military community, and the perceived impact that this may have on their sense of wellbeing, therefore IPA with its commitment to uphold 'voice' and gain an insider perspective, allowed a consistent and complete exploration of spouses lived experience to be uncovered. Moreover, regular supervision and research meetings created a means of 'checking' the fit between spouse's accounts and their own words with my own interpretations and understanding of the literature. In this sense, supervision as noted by Smith *et al.* (2009, p90) helped to ensure that the study's findings were inspired by spouses own words rather than being imported from outside.

#### 6.1.4 *Impact and importance*

The study set out to explore experiences of army spouses who were currently, or had previously resided outside of the military patch community, and the implications this had on their sense of wellbeing. Indeed, the study achieved its aims, and tells us something about these spouses' lived experiences, which highlighted the complexity of experience and the continuous balance of benefits and disadvantages of choosing to live in this way, which had implications on spouse's sense of wellbeing.

Given that research in this area is minimal, utilising an IPA approach allowed in-depth experiences and meanings to be uncovered, and also provided a voice to army spouses. This was particularly important given that military spouses' experiences and needs are rarely brought to the fore (Fossey, 2012). The findings from the study therefore add some much needed understanding of the lived experiences of residing outside a military patch community, that cannot be as adequately captured with surveys that the MoD complete to gain spouse's views of the military demands and lifestyle. The findings therefore may go some way in helping inform future family decisions and shape interventions that will better support military families.

Finally, this study also has importance to the field of counselling psychology. To start, counselling psychology has always been concerned with the individual's subjective experience and appreciating the complexity of difference (Strawbridge and Woolfe, 2003; Rafalin, 2010). This study, by attending to the individual perspective and the diverse experiences of this unique population within the context of living outside of an established military community, enabled this concern to be met. Specifically, because of the use of IPA, participant's lived experience, their internal worlds and the meanings they attach to this experience have been uncovered (Smith and Osborn, 2008). Consequently, this has enabled new insights into this unique population and this unique way of life, from which new developments for counselling psychology research and practice can be derived. The production of 'good work' that is of high quality, carried out ethically and is engaging to practitioners (Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi, and Damon, 2011) is at the heart of counselling psychology's mission for research (Rafalin, 2010). The commitment to doing good work was the guiding principle in completing this research study. This was underpinned by a focus on ethics, context and reflectivity as outlined above, and throughout this study as well as producing research that was relevant, and enabled an original contribution to knowledge and practice.

## **6.2 Original Contribution to Knowledge**

There are a number of aspects of this study that provide an original contribution to knowledge. Firstly, this is an emerging topic of interest and given the lack of literature and studies conducted in this area, the study has added a much-needed understanding of the experiences of military spouses who have lived, or were living outside of an established military patch community. Specifically, experiences have been uncovered at great length and

depth. The focus on one service branch (army) was a key strength of this study (see section 6.4), and has provided a richer, more nuanced insight and understanding of the phenomenon from the perspective of army spouses. This has allowed for movement beyond the descriptions of experiences that has been identified elsewhere, and has gone further by highlighting the potential implications this way of living may have on spouse's sense of wellbeing.

This study has also revealed a number of findings and new topics that have not been discussed in detail within previous literature, and have the potential to be developed further during future research. Firstly, the findings highlight that the military v civilian gap exists not only for veterans when they exit the military and transition to civilian life, but for spouses too. The findings therefore shift our understanding of spouses, in that they also experience similar difficulties when leaving SFA and residing in accommodation outside of the military patch community.

Secondly, a sense of vulnerability was identified within participant accounts in relation to identifying themselves as army spouses. Such vulnerability appeared to be a barrier in building social connections with civilians, and created a sense of distance between themselves and the civilian world, which had implications for wellbeing.

Thirdly, living outside a military patch community allowed participants an opportunity to gain greater autonomy and control. One participant specifically reported feeling '*watched*' by the military, and discussed how living outside a military patch community allowed her a sense of freedom from military practices and norms. This is an interesting discovery that warrants further exploration, particularly in relation to exploring the changing relationships between spouses and the military as an organisation, as this may further alter as more families opt to live away from military patch communities and garrisons.

The experience of resentment has previously been noted in other research, but this study did not identify resentment towards the serving personnel but rather identified resentment towards the military as an organisation. This was due to the mismatch between expectations and what was being received in terms of support, especially as many participants could draw disparities in the support received from times when they resided on a military patch. This potentiates a number of implications on spousal wellbeing as well as the retention of the serving personnel, and therefore needs further exploration.

The experience of living outside a military patch community, the benefits and the challenges, appeared to be in a constant state of flux. The findings uncovered that the choice to become stable in one location is often weighed up to determine whether it is worth the sacrifices and the implications on wellbeing that was being experienced. Thus, participant's ability to cope fluctuated in response to the changing demands and appraisals of the situation. This meant that for some participants multiple transitions were experienced (e.g., move from patch, to own home, to patch, to own home again), while for others a sense of anxiety was experienced in relation to the threat of needing to become mobile again, both of which may have implications on spousal wellbeing. This is an important new insight that allows for a more complete understanding of the perceived benefits (and challenges) that the new initiatives may offer current and future army spouses.

Lastly, for many participants, feeling suspended between both the military and civilian community, neither of which they felt they belonged too. This potentiated an affect on participant's wellbeing, in terms of a loss of place and purpose. Such findings are similar to experiences reported by reservists and this too also requires further and more in-depth exploration.

### **6.3 Strengths of the research study**

The qualitative nature of this study, particularly the use of IPA, allowed for a rich exploration of the lived experiences of army spouses. Whereas previous peer-reviewed and UK-based qualitative research concerning military spouses has focused on the experiences of relocation and deployment separation, this study focused on spouses experiences of living outside an established military patch community. Furthermore, it focused on exploring the implications that this may have had on their sense of wellbeing. The topic area for this study was timely and highly relevant for the military community, particularly since the introduction of MoD and government-led initiatives that may change the way military families live in future.

There has however been three UK-based reports that have begun to shed some light on what living outside a military patch community is like, but the findings from these reports were specific to each service branch, with only one focusing on army spouses in particular, and this was conducted some years ago (see: Verey and Fossey, 2013). While this study unveils similar experiences, it expands on these further, moving beyond spouse's descriptions of their experience to uncover the meanings that are assigned to these, which is

the aim of an IPA approach. Consequently, this study has uncovered in-depth insights into spouses experiences, enabling an understanding as close as possible from an 'insider perspective'. Within the interview process, great latitude was allowed, enabling participants an opportunity to uncover some of their personal reflections, make sense of this way of life and the implications that this had on their own sense of wellbeing.

As has been highlighted in previous research, there are differences in the needs of military families across service branch. Consequently, exploration of military families needs and wellbeing should therefore be done according to service branch. Thus, a further strength of this study was in relation to the recruitment of army spouses only, rather than a combination of all service spouses; RAF, Naval and British Army. As a result this study provides a detailed insight into the lived experiences of army spouses.

Thirdly, utilising a broad definition of wellbeing allowed participants scope to adopt and make sense of the term themselves, as defined through their own lens. This granted participants 'best expert status' on their own phenomenological experience (McGregor and Little, 1998, p508) which was felt to be important, particularly given that this study was about individual lived experience and adopted an IPA approach. Consequently, this enriched the study's findings, and this allowed great coverage of a range of factors that were likely to have implications for spousal wellbeing.

Finally, a further strength of the study was in relation to my position as an 'insider' researcher. While this also had disadvantages, my position as an insider researcher was an important part of this study. Indeed, the beginning of this study stemmed from my own personal interest in this area (see section 1.1), and by disclosing my position and identity as an army spouse it brought a number of benefits to the research, that has been discussed and covered in more detail in section 3.15.1. As a result, my experience of the phenomenon is considered a strength and it is likely that this contributed to the generating of thick data, although I had to ensure that this was managed appropriately through the process of reflexivity.

#### **6.4 Limitations of the research study**

The study had many strengths but it also had limitations that will now be explored. These are separated into limitations relating to myself as a novice researcher, and secondly the limitations in relation to methodological issues.

#### 6.4.1 *Myself as a novice researcher*

Through the entire research process, and indeed this professional doctorate I have needed to balance the demands of the course and this thesis with other commitments that make up general 'life' outside of this journey. My reflexive notes suggest that there were many points in this journey that I felt anxious or overwhelmed, and, therefore this may have impacted that data in which I collected, and the subsequent findings.

As noted in chapter 3, I experienced a sense of anxiety during my first interview with Fern in relation to it being the first IPA interview, and my concern over collecting the 'right' data. This meant that during the interview with Fern I clung to structure and the questions that I had hoped to cover. Consequently, this meant that I was guided by the interview schedule that was informed by my own understanding of the phenomenon rather than probing and asking for elaborations to her responses and experiences. I also, upon reflection, did not allow her much latitude to expand on her experiences in the same way that I did with others. Upon reflection, the interview with Fern was not as broad or indeed as in-depth as other interviews were. My performance as a novice researcher, together with this anxiety and a desire to control meant I was detracted from Fern's story and did not help her draw out her experiences or help develop any personal interpretations. Thus, a limitation of the study, is related to the potential quality of the data collected in this first interview. A practice interview would therefore have been helpful in the first instance, allowing me to become familiar and to make any modifications in my approach prior to the study, to ensure the quality of data was not affected (Vivar, 2007). However, in reflecting upon my experiences and performance of the interview process, I was subsequently able to relinquish this sense of anxiety and control and made a conscious effort in subsequent interviews to allow participants to share more closely in the direction of the interviews (See section 3.11 and 6.3.1 for further details). I ensured that my questions were flexible and relatively broad, and would act mainly as a guide for discussion. I explained to all participants beyond Fern that the interaction would likely take the form of a conversation rather than a traditional interview, and this worked well in gaining a great amount of rich data. Indeed, I felt that interviews from this point on were much more relaxed and fruitful as I developed my confidence as a researcher, and made conscious efforts to allow participants to guide the interviews rather than potentially imposing my own structure on participants narratives.

Within my journal, I also described feeling overwhelmed by the demands of the research, particularly when I reached the point of data analysis and the interpretation stage. This was mainly due to the sheer volume of data produced, and my inexperience of handling such rich data and attending to it in detail. It is known that conducting IPA research is complex and time-consuming (Tuffor, 2017), however, I had not anticipated the length of time taken to analyse the data, nor had I anticipated analysis to be as demanding and intense as it was. Indeed, it has been acknowledged that IPA analysis is 'painstaking' (Smith and Osborn, 2008), and I relate to this below and in section 3.15.7.

The level of demand required to patiently and openly analyse participant's accounts in detail to satisfy the requirements for an interpretative IPA analysis (rather than at the descriptive level) was at times difficult to achieve. Thus, at these particular times when I felt overwhelmed, my journal documents the tensions I felt in relation to imposing my own assumptions to aid interpretations and my desire to 'fit' the findings into themes that had already emerged in other accounts. I was already aware that, for example my biases and assumptions may become an obstacle to interpretation. Thus, through the process of reflexivity and supervision I was able to keep an account of my personal motivations and responses to participants and the data. Revealing and openly discussing these with my supervisory team, their roots, and where they had stemmed from allowed me to see past them and overcome such tensions. Essentially, it allowed me to remain focused as much as possible on each participant account. Nevertheless, I acknowledge that I could not completely 'bracket' and escape my own experience and assumptions, and indeed IPA research acknowledges this. However, such subjectivity needs to be noted and therefore this study offers only a single version of accounts represented through my interpretation and voice. Thus, there are several other possible interpretations that could have been.

Finally, because accounts were in-depth, and also because of my conscious efforts to relinquish control which meant that participant's had great space and flexibility to discuss experiences as they deemed necessary, the interviews produced vast amounts of rich data. I was unable to include some of this data in the write-up of this thesis. This is firstly because of the word limitations and secondly because some of the participants stories were not directly relevant to the study's aims. Nevertheless, these are equally an important area for any potential further research. For example, the experiences of military children experiences who reside outside of a military patch community. Further reflections on this are provided in section 3.15.5

#### 6.4.2 Methodological issues

Although IPA was an appropriate approach for the study, there were limitations to this approach. Firstly, this study used a small sample as is required in IPA research, which may limit the generalisation of the study's findings. However, the purpose of IPA is not to generalise but to instead provide a detailed exploration of experiences from individual perspectives (Smith *et al.* 2009), which was achieved. However, this study may have been limited by the opposite of using a small sample. My choice to include a sample size of seven participants could be considered as too large (Hefferon and Gil-Rodriguez, 2011). Indeed, it did present challenges, mainly in relation to my ability to maintain privilege to an ideographic approach for each participant, especially as the data was rich. My struggles with this have been outlined elsewhere (see section 3.15.5), and while I did manage to move beyond the identification of themes at a group level, this took considerable effort and there were parts of spouses accounts that I paid less attention to as a result. Thus, a smaller sample size may have been beneficial and would be my preference in any future IPA research.

The study's sample, in keeping with an IPA approach, was also purposefully selected to enable exploration of what it is like to live outside an established military patch community and the implications that this may have potentiated on wellbeing across a group of army spouses. All participants who participated in the study were female and were married to serving personnel who were officers, or senior NCO's, although one male spouse wished to participate but due to his late expression of interest and my need to analyse seven other accounts in-depth, he was not included. Consequently, the experience of male spouses are not known, and this could have potentially added to the study's findings and brought a different perspective, which is needed. This is therefore an important area for future research. Similarly, expressions of interest were indeed received from spouses who were married to more junior personnel as well, and inclusion of these would have broadened and enabled a more representative sample of army spouses. However, the spouses who did express an interest were either difficult to maintain contact with or unable to commit to an interview. This, together with the timing constraints of the study, meant that I was unable to follow these offers up or have the flexibility to offer an interview at a later date.

In addition to selecting each spouse for inclusion, spouses who partook in this study and gave their time may have had a greater desire to recount and make sense of their own



experiences more so than perhaps other spouses who felt a level of discomfort around engaging. This may have been the case for some of the spouses who felt unable to commit to the interview process and therefore this is another factor to consider.

Lastly, in regards to the sample, it is important to consider that spouse's experience of living outside an established military community varied, in that, some spouses had recently made the transition, whilst others had lived for a number of years within their own home. Equally, some spouses had after some time decided to move back to being a mobile family, therefore their accounts were retrospective based upon past experiences of living outside the military community, in their own homes or private rentals. While this was purposeful when selecting participants, taken together, the study's findings should therefore be understood in the context of the ideographic nature of the study. Caution should therefore be taken when attempting to generalise these findings, although there is likely to be a number of parallels that can be transferred to other groups.

A further constraint of this study was in relation to time, but not only in regards to practical timing constraints of the study as already noted, but in relation to the accounts given by spouses in this study. Indeed, Heidegger proposed that our being in the world is always temporal (Smith *et al.* 2009), thus, spouses experiences are only representative of how their interpreted their experience of living outside an established military community at that particular moment in time. Spouses' interpretations of their experience and the implications this potentiated for wellbeing may have been different if I had interviewed them at a different time of their lives or at a different point in their transition journey, or indeed at a different time point. Equally, the findings of this study have inevitably been shaped and developed through my own personal and professional lens and therefore are ultimately a product of my own values, experiences and interpretations at this point in time, although the use of reflexivity, supervision and research meetings have enabled me to remain open to spouses experiences and be transparent in how the study has been formed at each stage.

Importantly, as interviews were conducted during the covid-19 pandemic, this could have also impacted their experience and interpretations of their experiences, since this may have exacerbated some of the demands of military life as a result of living outside an established military community (for example, needing to take further responsibility for childcare whilst serving personnel works away, having limited contact from others, and an inability to obtain

social support). However, while this is important to consider, none of the participants specifically made reference to this within their accounts.

## **6.5 Implications and recommendations**

Recommendations have been borne out of the study's findings as well as from the participants themselves. Thus, some of the recommendations are suggestions from this particular group of army spouse participants in relation to what would have been of benefit to them whilst living outside a military patch community. Given the word constraints of this study, a table of extracts specifically in relation to some of the suggestions put forward by participants is provided in Appendix 13. Importantly, some of these are not new. For example, the need for increased communication and support have been highlighted previously in reports on dispersed military families (see; Gribble and Fear, 2019; RAF, 2019; Verey and Fossey, 2013). Given that these have been highlighted again, there is an even greater need for these to be considered and attended to.

Firstly, the findings highlighted that the existing set-up of military-based support for families was not adequately meeting the needs of families that were living outside of and some distance away from a military patch community. All participants indicated support from military channels was important to receive, but that this was lacking. Participants therefore felt disadvantaged by living outside of a military patch community in this respect, highlighting that they had little contact with and support from welfare services, and for some from the chain of command (i.e., the hierarchy above the serving personnel). A sense of disconnect between participants and the military was therefore identified. The impact of the weakened communication and lack of support was especially highlighted for participants when for example their partner, the serving personnel, was on operational tour or long exercises away from home. This left some participants feeling like they did not exist, which further potentiated a feeling of resentment towards the military as an organisation, particularly as many participants experienced themselves as the ones that were making most of the sacrifices as a result of having a partner in the military. There was only one participant in this study that highlighted the sacrifices that their partner, the serving personnel, was making in relation to this choice of living.

The ways in which welfare teams can better connect and offer support to spouses who choose to reside outside of a military patch community should be considered, especially given the implications this potentiates for spousal wellbeing and their level of satisfaction

with the military. Moreover, strengthening the communication and support for families residing outside a military patch whilst also experiencing deployment, or lengthy separations should be a priority. The findings from this study highlighted that during these times greater support was even more important to receive. However, any support that is offered needed to be forthcoming through either verbal or physical contact, as opposed to '*some letter through the door, with a number on*'. Thus, a clearer identification of which families are living dispersed in the first instance, and greater efforts to initiate and sustain contact with these families is needed. Given the dispersal of families, it is likely that physical communication and support will be more difficult to achieve, but greater verbal contact could be offered. Greater contact was important for participants and was discussed as going some way in helping participants feel acknowledged for the concessions and sacrifices in which they felt they were making on a daily basis as a result of being a military spouse and living outside of a military patch community.

Whilst not the focus of this study, one spouse overtly highlighted how her children were also disadvantaged by living outside a military patch community. This was firstly in relation to her children not attending a school that were familiar or skilled in addressing their needs when their father was deployed, and secondly because of their inability to access and be involved in military / family events. Most other spouses in this study also identified how they too wanted their children to continue being involved with the military community and in military-focused events, particularly as their children's relationships with other military children was limited. Thus, because of the distance that may be involved, better organisation and planning of these events and activities by welfare is needed to ensure they do not exclude those children who live some distance away from the garrison can be included. Thus, the study's findings highlight that for some families there is a potential for a reduced amount of effective support in dealing with serving children. Thus, there may be scope for welfare teams to work in partnership with community agencies and schools, or provide access to training in future. This would help ensure children's needs are addressed and a collaborative approach is achieved, particularly during experiences of deployment. Additionally, this may be a factor that future military families might want to consider in regards to what area they choose to become settled.

Another recommendation that was identified from participants was in relation to keeping military families and spouses who live outside of a military patch community better connected to others in a similar situation. Participants highlighted the beneficial role of

technology and suggested setting up forums and online community platforms in order to do this. Thus, rather than the emphasising face-to-face social activities to bring military spouses together, welfare could consider setting up more remote-type events would allow all spouses, regardless of where they lived, the opportunity to attend events virtually and meet other spouses living dispersed or within a similar area to them. This would also go some way in delivering the Armed Forces Families Strategy (MoD, 2016a), ensuring all military families feel more informed and engaged in service life.

A greater awareness and the need for families to be able to access information about the possible '*pros and cons*' of leaving SFA on a military patch and choosing to reside within the civilian community was also suggested as being beneficial by participants. Indeed, this is likely to be helpful for any future families considering living in this way in future. A summary of the findings from this study for example could be disseminated by welfare teams or placed on websites such as the AFF, which is likely a place that military families would look for relevant information. This would provide greater choice and empowerment for families in order to make informed decisions based on what best meets their needs, acknowledging that choices change as needs change, which is also a priority outlined in the Armed Forces Families Strategy (MoD, 2016a).

As well as the recommendations raised by participants, a number of recommendations and implications for practice arose from the study's findings. The study highlighted that military families and the stressors that they face are different to civilian families. Such demands have the potential to become exacerbated for those that choose to reside outside of a military patch community.

Specifically, the findings suggest that the military-civilian gap exists for military spouses. While participants in this study were indeed civilians themselves, their experiences of transitioning from SFA on a military patch to a civilian community were similar to the experiences described by veterans. Such experiences are of particular significance if more families are to make the transition and become more dispersed in future as a result of initiatives such as FAM. Equally, the findings may have implications not only for the wellbeing of spouses and families during the move from SFA to a civilian community but at other significant points of transition among military families too, for example, following discharge from the military.

In terms of counselling psychology practice, a recent article by Thomas (2021), albeit in relation to nursing and mental health support, emphasised that unless practitioners have an understanding of military life, effective support cannot be provided. Consequently, Thomas (2021) argues that nurse practitioners would benefit from a greater understanding of the day-to-day experiences, challenges, strengths and assets of military families in order to help support them. Equally, the findings from this study suggest that it would be appropriate for counselling psychologists to also have an awareness of this population and the range of stressors that military families may encounter.

While the experiences of spouses will differ, this study has highlighted that some spouses who live outside of a military patch community may have difficulty building connections within their new civilian communities in which they can derive support. They are also likely to experience frequent separation because the serving personnel tends to work away from the home during the working week, which has the potential to add further demand and cause additional stress. Spouses may also struggle with where they *'fit'* and *'belong'* within their new environments, and may have experienced a loss of important avenues of support - from other spouses and from formal military channels. All of these have implications for spousal wellbeing, and therefore it is important that these are understood by counselling psychologists who work with military spouses and families. Disseminating this study's findings to the counselling psychology community, and more widely to the military community would allow these unique experiences and insights to be understood. Equally, from a counselling psychology perspective additional training to work with this unique population may be beneficial. Little attention is given to this population / area during counselling psychology training courses, thus incorporating workshops or specific opportunities that allow practitioners an opportunity to acquire a more informed understanding of the military culture, lifestyle and potential experiences and issues that military families may face more generally may be of benefit. Specifically, given the *'us and them'* notions that this study has highlighted this becomes even more essential, especially if counselling psychologists wish to provide effective and person-centred support to military families.

Furthermore, in light of the experiences and challenges participants reported, there may be a role for counselling psychologists to be involved in developing targeted support to help military spouses transition into a civilian community. Specific transition programmes / information is available to help serving personnel transition when leaving the military.

Adapting some of these resources may be useful for military spouses who are transitioning from a military community to a civilian one. This could be adapted to include support on building resilience and spouses coping skills as well as offering advice on community adjustment and integration, and the importance of developing and maintaining social connections.

These findings and recommendations should therefore be considered in light of the potential continuation of the increase in families opting to live outside and some distance away from a military community, and initiatives like FAM continuing. Considering these recommendations may help identify some of the difficulties experienced, the potential implications on wellbeing, and importantly how these may be addressed.

## **6.6 Future Research**

This study highlighted a number of important avenues for future research. Given the lack of research on this topic and the likelihood of more families living outside a military patch community in future, any future studies wishing to explore military families that are living dispersed and outside of a patch community would be of benefit and would allow a further expansion on this study's findings. While this study chose specifically to focus on *army* spouse experiences and implications for wellbeing, future research would benefit from exploring, at depth, the experiences of groups not represented within this study, especially spouses of lower-ranked / junior personnel, or those from other service branches. This is important because firstly junior personnel and their families make up a large proportion of the army community, and secondly because each service branch will have their own individual needs and experiences. While there were possible reasons for the low expressions of interest from spouses married to more junior ranks (e.g., not in the housing market to as great a degree as those married to more senior soldiers; see section 3.7), initiatives such as FAM and the Forces Help to Buy will likely close this gap in future enabling spouses of all ranks to share their experiences and perspectives. Targeted recruitment of these spouses will therefore be important to include in future research and would provide a more homogenous sample.

Equally, all participants in this study were female, although, a male spouse registered an interest in participating but was not included for reasons outlined in Chapter Three. However, exploring the experiences of male spouses would be advantageous as male spouse's experiences of residing outside of a military patch community are not yet known. It

would be interesting to explore whether there were similarities or differences between their experiences to that of female spouses. Similarly, more research is needed in relation to male spouses more generally. Research with males would therefore offer a unique contribution to the field, as most research that is conducted on military families is based upon and represented by a traditional, hetero-normative family comprised of a male service personnel, married or in a relationship to a female civilian spouse (Gribble *et al.* 2020). Yet, as this thesis has outlined, the military family is changing (Selous, Walker, and Misca, 2020). Thus, a continual focus on 'traditional' military families within research may prevent the development of understanding the experiences, needs and outcomes of, for example male spouses, as well as other groups such as LGBT, that are less commonly included in military-related research (Gribble *et al.* 2020). Moreover, while it was not the focus of this study and therefore was not included in the write-up of this thesis, some participants highlighted some of the difficulties their children experienced, mainly in relation to when as a family they first transitioned from SFA to a civilian community, and in relation to the '*coming and goings*' and re-integration of service personnel during the week. Future research should therefore be conducted that focuses on the experiences and wellbeing among military children and young people in order to better understand the impact of this particular form of family life.

Previous research into the effect of non-operational family separations on Royal Navy and Marine families highlighted the difficulty spouses had in maintaining exercise and healthy eating (Gribble and Fear, 2009). None of the participants highlighted this as an area of difficulty in this study, however given the small sample size, further exploration into this would be worthy of investigation. Future research would be important particularly since participants in this study described experiencing additional stress, and a number of difficult feelings. Thus, exploring and understanding further if there are any barriers to engaging in health behaviours, such as healthy eating and physical activity that may have a positive impact on spouses' sense of wellbeing and ability to cope with the additional challenges that may be exacerbated when living outside an established military patch would be of benefit

Another avenue of potential research would be in relation to exploring further the findings of this study, particularly in relation to military spouses experiences of safety when living outside a military patch community. Indeed, this study highlighted how participants experienced a sense of vulnerability in relation to who their neighbours were, what views they held of views of the military, and for some this meant that they exercised caution in identifying themselves as a military spouse and when developing social connections with

civilians. This appeared to prevent some participants from fully integrating into the community, and exacerbated the distance and separateness from the wider civilian community. Given the potential implications this potentiates for spousal wellbeing, in terms of their identity and access to social support, future studies should be conducted within this area.

Importantly, in this study, a mismatch between the support that participants expected to receive from the military and what they did / did not obtain fostered feelings of resentment towards the military. Similarly for some participants, knowing what was available and who could provide this was important. While participants in this study highlighted recommendations on what they perceive to have been of benefit to themselves and for future military families, more research should be undertaken to determine what welfare support army families are aware of more generally, and the type of support they would like to achieve. This would help develop more individualised support packages to ensure military families needs, including those that live outside of, and potentially some distance away from an established military patch community, are met. This is of particular importance given the changing nature of the military family and where and how they will live in future.

Lastly, future researchers, particularly those who may identify themselves as ‘insiders’ within the military community may have an advantage in terms of access and recruitment to this hard to reach group. However, any future research should consider some of the potential quandaries that may arise as a result of this position. Specifically, issues around disclosure, confidentiality, and the potential for having future relationships with participants should be considered.

## **6.7 Conclusion**

To conclude, the role of the military family and the way in which they wish to live is changing (Selous, Walker, and Misca, 2020). Increasingly, military families are becoming more geographically dispersed (Rodrigues *et al* 2020), in that they are living outside of, and often a considerable distance away from established military patch communities. This trend is likely to continue; yet research understanding military families’ experiences of this way of living is lacking. Consequently, this thesis uncovered, at considerable depth, the lived experiences of army spouses who had chosen to live outside a military patch community, and the implications that this potentiated for their sense of wellbeing.



Giving a voice specifically to army spouses, together with the richness of the study's findings help illuminate the individual and unique insights, as well as the common experiences across the participant group. . This has further developed an understanding of the lived experiences and sense making of this hard to reach population.

The findings point towards an understanding that army spouses who choose to live outside and some distance away from a military patch community has both benefits and challenges. This continuously needs to be balanced and re-evaluated, and, that these have implications for spousal wellbeing. A number of new findings and meanings were unearthed as interpreted by each participant, and these tell us something different to what has been discussed before.

The findings uncovered that the military-civilian gap was experienced by participants, who identified civilians as lacking an understanding of their lives. In particular, participant's were uncertain of civilian views of the military and this was identified as a barrier, which prevented some from building social connections and immersing themselves in their communities. This fostered a sense of caution in relation to identifying themselves as army spouses, and created a sense of vulnerability that was not experienced when living within a military patch community. Additionally, consistent with other literature the lack of support from formal military channels was identified again in this study, however the sense of disconnect experienced fostered feelings of resentment towards the military as an organisation that has not been previously identified, and both these areas require further exploration.

Throughout this thesis, the participants, and the value in their subjective experience was central. Consequently, many of the recommendations from this thesis were derived from the lived experiences of participants. This highlighted the need for increased awareness and greater access to support that may help better inform and alleviate some of the challenges experienced. This would be helpful not only for themselves, but for army spouses and families that may choose to live outside a military patch community in future.

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## Appendix 1: Ethics approval

University of  
South Wales  
Prifysgol  
De Cymru

Professor Julie E Lydon OBE, Vice-Chancellor  
Yr Athro Julie E Lydon OBE, Is-Ganghellor

September 30, 2020

Amy Burkill  
C/o Faculty of Life Sciences and Education  
University of South Wales

Dear Amy,

**Faculty School Ethics Sub Group Feedback - Army Families Experiences of Living Outside an Established Military Community - A Phenomenological Study [20AP09LR]**

I am writing to confirm that on the 30 September, the School of Psychology and Therapeutic Studies Research Ethics Sub Group approved your submission for ethical approval.

Please note:

- i. Approval is valid for 2 years from the date of issue, you will be notified when approval has expired but you are expected to be mindful of this expiration. Upon the expiration of this ethics approval you may apply for an extension.
- ii. The approved documents are attached. If you intend on deviating from the approved protocol, research team, or documentation you will need to seek approval for any changes.
- iii. This approval does not confirm that indemnity or insurance are in place for this project.
- iv. Please confirm when your research project has closed (a one page closure report highlighting any recruitment issues, adverse events, publications etc. should be appended).

If you have any queries about the committee's decision, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Peter M.Carthy  
Chair of Faculty Ethics Committee

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## **Appendix 2: Copy of Participant Information Sheet**

### **Participant Information Sheet**

**Study Title:** “Army families experiences of living outside an established military community – A phenomenological study.”

Thank you for expressing an interest in this research. Before you decide whether or not you agree to be involved, it is important for you to understand why the research is being conducted and what it will involve.

Please take time to read the following information carefully before deciding whether or not to take part. Please also discuss it with others if you wish.

If there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information, please contact Amy Burkill on [08009678@students.southwales.ac.uk](mailto:08009678@students.southwales.ac.uk).

#### **1. What is the purpose of the study?**

I am a trainee psychologist at the University of South Wales, and I am conducting this study as part of my professional doctorate.

Little is known about military spouses and families who decide to live in their own properties or in private rentals within local civilian communities. The purpose of this study is therefore to focus on the experiences of army spouses/partners living outside of an established military community / ‘patch’, and the perceived impact this has on wellbeing.

It is hoped that these experiences can help shape any future support for army families who choose to leave SFA, and live outside the patch, among civilian communities.

#### **2. Why have I been invited?**

You have been chosen because you are married/in a civil partnership to a member of the Army and have lived / currently live within your own home, or within a private rental property within the civilian community. I am interested in hearing about your experiences, which are important and will be valuable for the study.

#### **3. Do I have to take part?**

No, your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. It is up to you to decide whether you wish to take part or not. If you decide to take part, you are also free to withdraw at any time up until the point of data analysis. After this point, withdrawing will not be practically possible.

If you decide to withdraw, if it is practical for the researcher, any information you have given will be destroyed.

#### **4. What will happen to me if I take part?**

Should you agree to take part, you will be asked to take part in a telephone interview. The times and dates of the telephone interview will be arranged to accommodate you. The interview should last between 30-60 minutes, and will be audio recorded.

Prior to the telephone interview, you will be asked to sign a consent form to record that you have read this information sheet and agree to take part.

The information collected from the interviews will be transcribed and analysed by the researcher. The recordings and transcripts will be stored securely (encrypted and password protected USB), and only the researcher and the researchers supervisory team will have access to the raw data. Following completion of the doctorate (expected June 2021), all participant contact details and interview recordings will be destroyed. The written and anonymised transcripts will be kept securely in accordance with General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) for 5 years. This is to meet the requirements set by academic journals should the study be published.

#### **5. Expenses and payments**

I appreciate the time taken for those who agree to participate in the study. I am however not able to offer any payment or incentive for taking part in this research.

#### **6. What will I have to do?**

If you agree to take part you will be invited to partake in one 30-60 minute telephone interview that will be audio recorded. During the interview I will ask you questions related to your experiences of living outside the military community / 'patch' in your own home or private sector rental. In particular, I am interested in how this experience has had an impact on your wellbeing.

#### **7. What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

It is unlikely that the research carries risk, however it is possible that you may feel upset when recalling and sharing your experiences. If this happens, you will be given the choice of whether you wish to continue in the study. If appropriate, the researcher may advise you seek support from others, such as your G.P. The researcher will also provide a debrief sheet which will contain information on possible organisations that may be able to offer you support.

#### **8. What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

You may not receive any direct benefit from taking part in the study, however, by providing your experiences you will contribute to a much-needed understanding of what it is like to live outside the military community, and the impact this may have on well being.



It is hoped that by sharing your experiences you can help shape any future support for army families who choose to leave SFA, and live outside the patch among civilian communities.

## **9. What if there is a problem?**

If you have a problem, at any point in this process, you can contact myself ([08009678@students.southwales.ac.uk](mailto:08009678@students.southwales.ac.uk)), or my supervisory team; Dr Gina Dolan ([gina.dolan@southwales.ac.uk](mailto:gina.dolan@southwales.ac.uk)); Dr Royiah Saltus ([royiah.saltus@southwales.ac.uk](mailto:royiah.saltus@southwales.ac.uk)), or Dr Shelly Gait ([Shelly.gait@southwales.ac.uk](mailto:Shelly.gait@southwales.ac.uk)).

If you have any complaints about the study, these should be addressed to Jonathan Sinfield, Research Governance Manager at the University of South Wales on 01443 484618 or via email [Jonathan.sinfield@southwales.ac.uk](mailto:Jonathan.sinfield@southwales.ac.uk).

The Research Governance Manager will deal with the complaint according to the University of South Wales (USW) regulations.

## **10. Data Protection Privacy Notice (mandatory for all studies collecting personal data)**

The data controller for this project will be the University of South Wales. The University Compliance Manager provides oversight of university activities involving the processing of personal data. The University of South Wales Compliance Manager is Mr Rhys Davies ([rhys.davies@southwales.ac.uk](mailto:rhys.davies@southwales.ac.uk)).

Your personal data will be processed for the purposes outlined in this information sheet. Standard ethical procedures will involve you providing your consent to participate in this study by completing the consent form that has been provided to you. However, the legal basis on which this task is being performed is public interest, approved by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee.

If you are concerned about how your personal data is being processed, please contact Compliance Manager, Mr Rhys Davies ([rhys.davies@southwales.ac.uk](mailto:rhys.davies@southwales.ac.uk)).

### Appendix 3: Copy of Participant Consent Sheet




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#### STUDY CONSENT FORM

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Title of Project: **Army families experiences of living outside an established military community – A phenomenological study** (*Proposed Title*)

Name of Researcher: **Amy Louisa Burkill**

Name of supervisor: **Dr Gina Dolan**

Please initial all  
boxes

<p>1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated 5<sup>th</sup> August 2020 (version 3) for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.</p>	
<p>2. I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time up until the point of analysis. After this point, it will not be practically possible to remove your data.</p> <p>I understand if I choose to withdraw I do not have to give a reason, and my data will be destroyed.</p>	
<p>3. I agree to my participation being audio recorded over the telephone and it's been explained how this data will be stored, anonymised, who will have access to it, and how long it will be kept.</p>	
<p>4. I give permission for my data to be stored and processed in accordance with the GDPR (2018)</p>	
<p>5. I agree to my anonymised data being used in study-specific reports and subsequent articles that will appear in academic journals as part of this study. The findings of this research may also be shared amongst social media and other platforms.</p>	

6. I agree to take part in the above study.	
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Name of participant	Date	Signature
Name of researcher taking consent	Date	Signature

## Appendix 4: Copy of Debrief Sheet for Participants

### Participant Debrief Sheet – V3

**Study Title (Proposed):** “Army families experiences of living outside an established military community – A phenomenological study.”

Thank you for sharing your experiences of living outside the military community, and the implications that may have had on your wellbeing.

I hope that you have found it interesting and have not been upset by sharing your story. However, if you have found any part of this experience to be distressing and you wish to speak to the researcher, please contact: Amy Burkill, [08009678@students.southwales.ac.uk](mailto:08009678@students.southwales.ac.uk)

There are a number of external organisations listed below that you can contact should you need to seek support, in addition to your unit provided welfare system. However, if you feel in distress and are in need of urgent advice and support, please contact your G.P.

**Army Families Federation (AFF)** - An independent organisation offering confidential advice for Army families about any aspect of life affected by the Army lifestyle:

- Tel: Use this link to find the contact details of a local AFF coordinator:  
[www.aff.org.uk/contact\\_us/aff\\_gb/contact\\_gb\\_coords/index.html](http://www.aff.org.uk/contact_us/aff_gb/contact_gb_coords/index.html)
- Web: [www.aff.org.uk](http://www.aff.org.uk)
- Email: [us@aff.org.uk](mailto:us@aff.org.uk)

**Forcesline** - As part of Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Families Association (SSAFA) this support line offers totally confidential, non-judgemental, guidance on all personal/welfare for serving members and their families. It is completely independent of the military chain of command. They also provide an email service where they will respond within 24 hours via a contact form on their website.

- Open: Monday – Friday, 9am - 5pm
- Tel: 0800 731 4880

**MIND** - Mind’s telephone helpline offers a range of advice on mental health issues on their information line and also offers legal advice on their legal line. The website also has links to a wide range of booklets and leaflets.

- Open: Mon–Fri, 9.00am – 6.00pm
- Tel (Infoline): 0300 123 3393
- Web: [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)
- Email: [contact@mind.org.uk](mailto:contact@mind.org.uk)

**NHS 111** - Call health professionals for advice about mental and physical health. You can find your local branch via their branch finder on their website.

- Open: 24hrs/365 days a year
- Tel: 111

**Samaritans** - Someone to talk to 24 hours a day. They also offer face to face appointments in local branches. You can find your local branch via their branch finder on their website.

- Open: 24hrs/365 days a year
- Tel: 116 123
- Web: [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)

**Royal British Legion** - Provides financial, social and emotional support to all those who have served and are currently serving in the Armed Forces, as well as their families.

- Open: 7 days a week, 8am – 8pm.
- Tel (Helpline): 0808 802 8080
- Web: [www.britishlegion.org.uk](http://www.britishlegion.org.uk)

**HIVE** - Tri-Service information network offering range of advice to all members of the service community.

- Web: <https://www.army.mod.uk/people/support-well/hive/>

**SSAFA: Housing Advice** - SSAFA has a dedicated area of the website for housing advice where you can find housing information and send them an online query.

- Tel: 0207 463 9354
- Web: <https://www.ssafa.org.uk/get-help>

## Appendix 5: Profile example

The image shows a Facebook profile page for Amy Burkill. The profile picture is a red circle with the University of South Wales logo and the text "University of South Wales Prifysgol De Cymru". The name "Amy Burkill" is displayed next to it. There are buttons for "Edit Profile" and "Activity log". Below the name are navigation tabs: "Timeline", "About", "Friends", "Photos", "Archive", and "More".

At the top of the main content area, there is a prompt: "Amy, what city are you from?" with a search bar and a "Skip" button. Below this is a "Create post" section with options for "Photo/Video", "Live video", and "Life Event". The main post area contains a text input field with the placeholder "What's on your mind?" and buttons for "Photo/Video", "Tag friends", and "Feeling/Activ...".

Below the post area is a "Posts" section with "Manage posts", "List view", and "Grid view" options. The first post is by Amy Burkill, posted 2 minutes ago. The text of the post is: "University of South Wales Doctorate in Counselling Psychology. Study Title: 'Army families experiences of living outside an established military community – A phenomenological study.'" Below the post are buttons for "Like", "Comment", and "Share". At the bottom of the post is a comment input field with the placeholder "Write a comment..." and icons for emojis, photos, GIFs, and stickers.

On the left side of the profile, there is an "Intro" section with the text "University of South Wales Doctorate in Counselling Psychology." and an "Edit Bio" button. Below this are sections for "Studied at University of South Wales", "Current town or city", "Workplace", and "Home town", each with a corresponding icon.

## Appendix 6: Copy of Recruitment Advert

Hi, my name is Amy and I am completing a professional doctorate in psychology at the University of South Wales. Please see details of my research below:

**“Army families experiences of living outside an established military community – An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis”**

**ARE YOU:**

- Over the age of 18
- An army spouse or partner\*
- Currently living, or have previously lived, outside of the military community / patch, whether this is through choice or other reasons (e.g., FAM)

**HAVE YOU:**

- Previously lived in Service Families Accommodation (SFA)

If you answered **“YES”** to all of the above, and are interested in sharing your experiences with me as part of this study then do please get in touch to register your interest and for more information:

**[08009678@students.southwales.ac.uk](mailto:08009678@students.southwales.ac.uk)**

\*Male and female spouses and partners of all ranks and positions will be eligible to partake\*

## Appendix 7: Template of Interview Questions – Revised

### Interview Template

**Study Title (Proposed):** “Army families experiences of living outside an established military community – A phenomenological study.”

#### Background questions:

1. Connection to spouse/partner (length of relationship etc.)
2. Connection to the military (partner’s rank, length of service)

#### Accommodation options and welfare implication questions:

3. Firstly, can you tell me about your experiences of living in SFA, on a patch?
4. Can you tell me about how you came to leave SFA / the patch?

*-Prompts; What events led up to this? What was it like to leave / knowing you would leave SFA/the patch? What did your family feel about this? What did you expect living outside a patch would be like? What was the source of those expectations? What was this like*

5. Can you tell me about your experiences of living outside of a military community/patch (in your own house / rented etc)?

*- Prompts; What is it like? How did you feel at the time of the move / transition? What does this mean for you (and still being part of the Army community)? How does living outside a patch compare to your previous expectations / experience living on a patch?*

6. From your experience, can you describe how this experience (living outside established mil community / patch) has impacted yours, or your families wellbeing?

*- Prompts; In what ways? Can you give an example? What do you think about that? How does this make you feel? How has this impacted your relationships? How do you cope?*

7. Can you tell me about what you consider the positives and challenges are of your current accommodation choice / choosing to live outside a patch?

*-Prompts; Why is this? How did you cope? What does this mean for you / your family? Is there anything that could have alleviated these challenges? Why?*



**Appendix 8: Extract from Interview detailing the development of comments and emergent themes. \* Participant 1 - Fern**

Emergent Themes	Transcript	Comments
<p>Uniqueness of mil way of life</p> <p>Inside v Outside a bubble</p> <p>Commonality v differences</p> <p>Civilian world as confusing</p>	<p>Amy: You know when you said earlier about you being an army spouse and that you are in a bubble, what did you kind of mean by that? Can you just explain that a little bit?</p> <p>Fern: <i>So I think it's different from civilian life. I think you kind of forget a bit about what civilian life is. It's hard to describe, but I think it's a slightly different way of life like, I think with everyone in the boat, as here on the patch, like, you really wouldn't think twice about the outside world but then you step out of it it's a bit, it's perhaps a bit confusing, that's not very helpful, it's just different!</i></p>	<p>Different from civilian life – Difference / Uniqueness</p> <p><i>'Its hard to describe?' Clear sense of having difficulty in articulating something so complex, and relational (everyone in the same boat). Use of 'just' emphasizes this struggle to explain / articulate 'patch life'. Emphasises uniqueness? And others can't understand?</i></p> <p><u>What is perceived to be different? What does she mean here? People in the outside world won't share any commonalities?</u></p> <p>Commonality v differences?</p> <p>Feeling unsure of what civilian life is like <u>–Has it changed since being an 'army spouse'? In what ways?</u></p> <p><i>Civilian world – Confusing? Different culture and understanding?</i> <u>Disorientating stepping into it?</u></p>

		<p><u>Step out of it– Almost as she is describing two different world's, and cultures? Emphasising description of 'bubble' used earlier to talk about the 'patch'.</u></p> <p><u>But, earlier she said she worked – so steps out if it regularly perhaps? Is it different to work in a civilian community to living within / 'amongst' civi's as described earlier?</u></p> <p><u>A sense of safety of being inside – provides certainty, and safety. Outside, is confusing, and disorientating. How does this impact wellbeing?</u></p>
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**Link to reflexive journal:**

*'I can see many similarities with Fern's experience here, and can understand her difficulty in articulating this, as it is such a relational experience that I feel she is attempting to capture. But what is it that makes it different? For me, it's about the understanding of what we sacrifice, I can therefore resonate perhaps with why people being in the same boat was identified to help illustrate this point... but also what makes it confusing for Fern I wonder? This is where the familiarity ends...For me the 'outside world' is not confusing, but one that is 'missing something' perhaps? I'm wondering what this missing something feels for me? And what this confusion feels for Fern? Perhaps confusion is about not having a sense of purpose, direction outside of it?'*

*'I wonder about the not thinking twice about the outside world in Fern's account, is this because she is so immersed? I wonder whether this is because she currently lives on a patch now? Would this interview be the same if she was currently living within her own home, and I did this interview some time ago?'*

**Appendix 9: Example of the process that led to the development of Master themes within each participant account**

\* Participant 1 – Fern

<u>Extract from transcript</u>	<u>Line No</u>	<u>Emerging themes</u>		<u>Master theme 1</u>
<i>I think like in military life you are in a bit of a bubble.</i>	58-59	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bubble</li> <li>• <b>Inside v Outside</b></li> <li>• Safety bubble</li> <li>• Contained</li> <li>• <b>Unique way of mil life / Different way of life</b></li> </ul>		
<i>So I think it`s different from civilian life. I think you kind of forget a bit about what civilian life is. Its hard to describe, but I think it`s a slightly different way of life like, I think with everyone in the boat as here on the patch like you really wouldn`t think twice about the outside world but then you step out of it it`s a bit its perhaps a bit confusing, that`s not very helpful, its different!</i>	64 – 66	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Uniqueness of mil life / different way of life</b></li> <li>• <b>Inside v Outside world</b></li> <li>• <b>Insider v Outsider</b></li> <li>• <b>Perceived differences</b></li> <li>• <b>Commonality v differences</b></li> <li>• <b>Civilian world as confusing</b></li> </ul>		<b>Perceived differences: Military v Civilians</b>
<i>I just think it is different from everyday life.</i>	69	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Perceived differences</b></li> <li>• <b>Uniqueness of mil</b></li> </ul>		

		life		
<p><i>I think if it had been on a patch it would have been a lot easier to meet people but because I didn't have that. I was surrounded by people that weren't like affiliated with the military it was a lot more challenging.</i></p>	18-19	<p>Living outside of an established military community:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comparison between living within and outside of a military community</li> <li>• <b>Difficulty / More challenging to meet others</b></li> <li>• <b>Lack of commonality / shared experiences with others</b></li> </ul>		<p><b>Need for Support: Challenges in making social connections</b></p>
<p><i>It was very lonely at the start. I found it quite isolating and people just didn't kind of get it as when you are on a patch everyone is in the same boat and they can relate but it was difficult to find people to relate to.</i></p>	21-22	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Loneliness</li> <li>• Isolation – Support is patch focused</li> <li>• Lack of support</li> <li>• <b>Lack of belonging / commonality</b></li> <li>• <b>Difficulty in relating</b></li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Difficulty / struggle to meet others and</b></li> </ul>		

<p><i>I would say it is more of a challenge to meet new people and like I wasn't particularly an outgoing person in the early days, I was quite shy so I struggled to meet people anyway but I think when you move to a new area and everything it is a bit more difficult so I would say that was probably the main thing for me was getting out there and managing to meet people and also meeting people that had an understanding of a military life</i></p> <p><i>I managed to make contact with one of XXXX friends wives, she actually lived on the patch at the time and was a lot more involved, and, I became friends with her in the end so she got me more involved and it really helped being more involved within the patch but if I hadn't had met her it would have been a real struggle.</i></p>	<p>76-78</p> <p>31-33</p>	<p><b>build social connections</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personality factors</li> <li>• <b>Social support</b></li> <li>• <b>Social support based on mutual understanding</b></li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Need for connection and belonging</b></li> <li>• <b>Search for commonality / mutual experiences</b></li> <li>• <b>Importance of support</b></li> </ul>		
<p><i>I would say it definitely put pressure on us as like I was unhappy</i></p> <p><i>Yes and I think it is almost like, I do things for him like me sort of</i></p>	<p>41</p> <p>45</p>	<p>Living outside an established military community:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Living apart</b></li> <li>• <b>Pressure on relationships</b></li> <li>• <b>Unhappiness</b></li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Loneliness</b></li> </ul>		<p><b>Sacrifices: Impact of Separation</b></p>

<p><i>being effectively on my own</i></p> <p><i>I was pretty miserable in XXXX, I mean he was commuting to Winchester and I was commuting to XXXX so we did not see a lot of each other and I had friends at my work but I did not have any friends where we actually lived. It was very unfriendly there and I was pretty miserable.</i></p> <p><i>When I was contacting him I was down and the conversations weren't the best so I say it definitely affected that as well.</i></p> <p><i>Do I have to live away from my husband for a minimum of two years and the kids not see him all the time?</i></p>	<p>129-131</p> <p>42</p> <p>155</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Lack of time together</b></li> <li>• <b>One-sided relationship</b></li> <li>• <b>Sacrifices</b></li>   <li>• <b>Unhappiness</b></li> <li>• Importance of friendships / Support</li> <li>• <b>Loneliness</b></li> <li>• <b>Relationship distance / separation – He and I</b></li>   <li>• <b>Unhappiness</b></li> <li>• <b>Affect on wellbeing</b></li> <li>• <b>Strain on relationship</b></li>   <li>• <b>Fear of separation</b></li> </ul>		
		Living outside an established		

<p><i>I found also the things that were arranged by Welfare tended to be quite patch focused. There were a few things that I was invited to which was great but a lot of it was geared towards people actually living on the patch.</i></p> <p><i>I think not being around people to discuss it with who are going through the same thing that did affect my wellbeing but knowing that there was a community just down the road that I wasn't a part of and they were having support and I wasn't that definitely didn't help with my wellbeing. I was quite down for the first couple of months.</i></p> <p><i>I think if XXXX hadn't gone on tour I don't think I would have really heard from Welfare</i></p>	<p>22-23</p> <p>35-37</p> <p>90</p>	<p>military community:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support – patch focused</li> <li>• <b>Disadvantaged</b></li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Absence of shared experiences</li> <li>• Lack of support</li> <li>• <b>Lack of belonging / Desire to belong</b></li> <li>• <b>Disadvantaged</b></li> <li>• Impact on wellbeing</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of connection / Support from mil</li> </ul>		<p><b>Access to support: feeling disadvantaged</b></p>
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<p><i>I prefer living on a patch because I am in the centre of a community and I think it is good when you move to a new area. If it is a new posting everyone on the patch is sort of in the same boat as you and there seems to be that you get to know people a lot quicker</i></p>	4-5	<p>Living within an established military community:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preference to Patch life</li> <li>• 'Being at the heart' of the community – <b>Community feeling</b></li> <li>• <b>Same Boat = Commonality</b></li> <li>• <b>Ease of social connections / support</b></li> </ul>		
<p><i>I would say that probably, to me, it's probably the main advantage of living on a patch. Just having that support network in that community. Yes that is the main draw for me really.</i></p>	52	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Advantages / Positives of living within a mil community</b></li> <li>• <b>Access to social support – Social networks</b></li> </ul>		<p><b>Military Communities: Providing support and belonging</b></p>



<p><i>I still prefer patch life because I think you just become more ingrained in it. Yes it definitely my preferred way just its like more of a community especially having children as well because you don't have your family nearby and things and sometimes you need someone to help you with something I think that would be a lot more challenging if you were in your own place and didn't know people.</i></p>	<p>82-84</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Sense of community</b></li> <li>• <b>Belonging</b></li> <li>• <b>Practical and Emotional support</b></li> <li>• <b>Building connections with others</b></li> </ul>		
<p><i>You don't want to give them extra worry when they have already got other stuff to deal with when they are deployed</i></p> <p><i>I like to get a job so that I have a bit away from the army just a bit more of my own identity</i></p> <p><i>Because I just had to <u>get on with it</u></i></p>	<p>45-46</p> <p>66-67</p> <p>49</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expectation to not worry husband</li> <li>• <b>Expectation of potentially good mil spouse</b></li> <li>• <b>Identity</b></li> <li>• Employment – <b>Independence</b></li> <li>• <b>Autonomy</b></li> <li>• Coping</li> </ul>		<p><b>Spousal Identity: Independence and Expectations</b></p>

**Appendix 10: Table depicting Master themes across participants**

<b>Master Theme: 'Military life v Civilian Life'</b>		
<b>Perceived differences:</b>		
Fern:	<p><i>'So I think it's different from civilian life'</i></p> <p><i>'I think like, in military life, you are in a bit of a bubble'</i></p> <p><i>'Military life is just different'</i></p>	
Rachel:	<i>'It's not the same'</i>	
Jenny:	<i>'They have got a world view, they have got friends in lots of different countries and to them that was normal and for service children it is quite normal, but in the local little primary school where the children and their family have all gone to the same school that was a challenge for them'</i>	
Sally:	<i>'Um, as I said previously, it is mainly because its an alien situation. You are used to being around people of the same sense, same thought processes'</i>	
Milly:	<i>'We do have a different way of life'</i>	
<b>Problems with understanding:</b>		
Fern:	<i>'People just didn't kind of get it'</i>	
Rachel:	<p><i>'Shut-up, you just don't know what you're talking about!'</i></p> <p><i>'Not that immediate knowledge that people are going to understand your lives and support you'.</i></p>	
Sally:	<p><i>'Most people in the civilian world just don't understand our lives'</i></p> <p><i>'You have to make more effort to get to know people'</i></p>	

	<i>'Most people go "do you not know where he is or what he is doing" and I'm like "no - I don't even know when his is coming home next" and people just don't get that'</i>	
Jenny:	<p><i>'Because the local schools didn't understand service children and thier needs and what they were going through...'</i></p> <p><i>'We had lots of tears and nobody understands me.'</i></p> <p><i>'But because we are away from that environment people don't understand that actually I'm doing the job of a single parent most of the time um they say "can't your husband do that?" "No, he's not here!'</i></p> <p><i>'whereas in a civilian environment, even my workmates now they are like `oh military what is that like and they have not no idea, they are in ore of the military but they don't understand it, they don't know what it involves and I think some people can't understand it. They try to be understanding, its not that they are not nice people but they don't understand actually what it is like for someone that comes and goes or moving around and the pressures that that can bring'</i></p> <p><i>'You can talk about it but you have to live it to know, you know what I mean, and the military family whether its army, navy or air force, and, if you are, you may be talking to somebody in the navy who you have never been based with but they will just know where you are coming from'</i></p>	
Helen:	<p><i>'It's weird and you're like... people don't understand it and people don't want to ask about it and people don't really know about'</i></p> <p><i>'Nobody really understands and that is not their fault but it is really hard to try and explain to them'</i></p>	
<b>Difficulties in building connections:</b>		
Fern:	<i>'I think if it had been a patch it would have been a lot easier to meet people'</i>	

	<p><i>'When there is a deployment you're already, obviously, you are greatly stressed so to not have a support network was a struggle'</i></p> <p><i>'I would say it is more of a challenge to meet new people, and I wasn't particularly an outgoing person in the early days'</i></p>	
Rachel:	<p><i>'I can't be bothered to start explaining...'</i></p> <p><i>'You know, obviously people here are just getting on with their lives... some have been here for 20-30 years and are just getting on with life'</i></p>	
Sally:	<i>'In a city patch, you have no idea who your neighbours are and it actually does prevent you from making friends'</i>	
	<i>'You have to make more effort to get to know people'</i>	
<b>Loneliness and Isolation:</b>		
Jenny:	<i>'People don't get that so I can be a bit lonely'.</i>	
Fern:	<i>'Yes, it was very lonely at the start. I found it quite isolating and people just didn't kind of get it'</i>	
Rachel:		
Sally:		
<b>Vulnerability and concerns about safety:</b>		
Rachel:	<p><i>'I have no idea what people's views of the military are'</i></p> <p><i>'There is no way XXXX would go to work in uniform'</i></p> <p><i>'You do get a lot of people being quite anti military'</i></p> <p><i>'I have got no idea what our neighbours views are of the military'</i></p> <p><i>'Not really knowing how people around me, our new neighbours how they perceive the military so it is not something that I am going to be completely open about'</i></p>	
Sally:	<i>'Being military, and not knowing who your neighbours are. That was a bit scary'</i>	

	<i>'You are like `oh should I be talking to you um am I ok to talk to you` its quite alienating.'</i>	
<b>Changes in Identity:</b>		
Rachel:	<i>'I am really proud of him but I think living outside of SFA that part of my identity doesn't matter as much'</i>  <i>'It's difficult to feel like the army wife part of my identity which I am proud of matters when I live off SFA, where as, I know when I am in SFA it does matter and its respected'</i>	
<b>Master Theme 2: Separation v Stability: The sacrifice</b>		
<b>Additional demands:</b>		
Milly:	<i>'Things like doing the school run'</i>  <i>'It was tough... we just decided that our eldest, who was only 1 at the time, we just sort of had enough of us not being all together'</i>  <i>'He's in the army... and I am on my own here in the week'</i>	
Dawn:	<i>'I didn't like the experience of him being away'</i>  <i>'I just didn't like it, I just didn't want it'</i>  <i>'Yes, especially if you have got children involved as well it does mean that you need that extra hand, that extra support and that person only coming home at weekends, its hard'</i>  <i>'my husband going away um because he might not have been able to come home because he is working late and its such a travel back and not being able to get home because of where he lives and because he is not on a patch'</i>	
Fern:	<i>'Like, do I have to live away from my husband for a minimum of two years again and the kids not see him all the time?'</i>	
Jenny:	<i>'you are like a single parent most of the time'</i>	

	<i>'the separation is definitely more than if we were in quarters somewhere'</i>	
Milly:	<i>'Obviously, he's unable to assist if the children are poorly, and, I could have been at work you know'</i>  <i>'Um yeah just things like, hobbies that the children might do after school that he can't be involved with'.</i>	
<b>Distant Relationships: Strain and Strength</b>		
Milly:	<i>'XXXX would go to work and I'd be at home and I would be working and he would come home at weekends'</i>  <i>'If at times he is home, it tends to mess us up'</i>  <i>'There are some weeks where you think I've had enough of this'</i>	
Dawn:	<i>'The only communication you have got is on the phone'</i>  <i>'XXXX would call when he had free time to talk to me, but I would be busy at work and when I had free time to talk to him he would have got back to the base and unable to get a signal'</i>  <i>'I can't see how he is, he can't see how I am and when I need his help so emotionally it not an easy thing especially when you have a feeling its not going to work'</i>  <i>It's logic to spend, that if you spend a lot of time away that it will have an impact</i>  <i>I don't think its, in my view anyway, I don't think its very helpful to a relationship.</i>  <i>'we are more stronger as a couple'.</i>  <i>'Um it made us more stronger as a couple in the end and possibly made us to make the decision that we wanted to move because we knew the affect of it'</i>	

Jenny:	<p><i>'I don't even know when he is coming home next'</i></p> <p><i>'I am conscious that my husband is coming and going all of the time'</i></p> <p><i>'We thought we survived that one so we can survive anything... you get used to it, I used to be in the military as well so it is kind of the lifestyle that we know, um, I'm not a needy person so I don't need him here all the time'</i></p>	
Fern	<p><i>'We did not see a lot of each other'</i></p> <p><i>'I would say it definitely put pressure on us as like I was unhappy and obviously I wasn't able to contact him as much'</i></p> <p><i>'When I was contacting him I was down and the conversations weren't the best so I say it definitely affected that as well'</i></p> <p><i>'No, we are fine now – It was just added stress at the time'</i></p>	
Sally:	<p><i>'That was exactly what we had and actually I probably found that the hardest because he was working for XXXX so he was working during the week, some evenings and then probably two out of four weekends ... we didn't see a lot of each other'</i></p>	
Helen:	<p><i>It does really put a lot a pressure on relationships, I can see that it does make people quite frustrated because you are also missing them</i></p>	
Rachel:	<p><i>'My husband was having to stay in a hotel in XXXX you know Monday to Friday and then come back down to XXXX and I was completely fed up with this at this point'</i></p> <p><i>'my husband has always been very very firm about the idea that this is a team effort and he will only, he is only staying in the army for as long as it works for both of us'</i></p>	
<b>Time to adjust:</b>		
Milly:	<p><i>'We have our own routine here... If at times he is home, it tends to mess us up'</i></p>	

	<i>'the children are not used to having him here, when he is here they just seem to go into excited, silly mode, do what they want mode, you know everything else just goes out the window. You kind of have to think, well ok they have not seen him for however long so I've got to let it be but you are kind of thinking I have got other stuff that needs to be done'</i>	
<b>Emotional Impact:</b>		
Milly:	<i>'Its things like that that we could never do'</i>  <i>I think it is fair to say, they do miss him but they do know that it will only be a few day when he will be back for the next weekend. We always say its only this week and then he will be back.</i>  <i>'I have found it tough'</i>  <i>'Emotionally. I was quite upset most of the time'</i>	
Dawn:	<i>'I didn't like being left all the time'</i>	
Jenny:	<i>'it is a bit, I can be a bit lonely'</i>	
Fern:	<i>'I was pretty miserable in Basingstoke... we did not see a lot of each other'</i>  <i>'I was down'</i>	
Sally:	<i>'That was exactly what we had and actually I probably found that the hardest because he was working for xxx so he was working during the week, some evenings and then probably two out of four weekends'</i>	
<b>Coping: Weighing up</b>		
Milly:	<i>'You sort of see the bigger picture of the kids settled'</i>  <i>'For me its ok, I don't mind'</i>  <i>'I have found it tough... but its fine'</i>	



	<i>'So, I think I kind of got used to it now and it is what it is'</i>	
Jenny:	<i>'The children felt like they had a home'</i>  <i>'You know you are sacrificing something and its that weighing up if it is worth the sacrifice'</i>  <i>'It's knowing that this is our future as well and its not tied to the military, we know where we are, we know where we are going to be living for years to come'</i>	
Helen:	<i>'Yes, what do we prioritise?'</i>  <i>'Because now my decisions about moving XXXX have changed because he is so established where he is'.</i>	
Rachel:	<i>It's a tricky one insn`'t it because with the army you, its my husband`s chosen job that he wants to do because in 5 years if he is not enjoying the job, then the sacrifices we make are completely pointless...but if he is enjoying the job then actually the moving around, not seeing each other etc etc, you know, the fact that I can`'t build a steady career that`s fine, its worth it, because you know as a team we are building something and he is enjoying his career and I`m more than happy with that'</i>	
Dawn	<i>'one way of the other I had to give up what I um what I am used to and start a new life and here we are, um, the only thing that has benefited me is that I have been able to deal with is that we have been able to rent our house in XXXX'</i>	
<b>Master Theme – 'You don't feel part of anything'</b>		
<b>Disconnection</b>		
Helen	<i>'I don't even have any connection whatsoever to the army'</i>  <i>'I guess I mean I have probably just detached'</i>  <i>'I would just want some kind of connection'</i>	

	<p><i>'I guess this is just what it is now and we are not really part of it'</i></p> <p><i>Since I have been in XXXX I have not heard anything from the army in any way'</i></p> <p><i>'it was awful so I guess I felt even more disconnected being here'</i></p> <p><i>'Yes definitely, oh ten times more, it isn't good anyway if your in your own home you know if your in army accommodation but you are disconnected, completely disconnected'</i></p> <p><i>'so apart from what I hear from him about the army I don't feel really connected at all, you know apart from events if we go to a mess do at Christmas or something'</i></p>	
Rachel	<i>'I think I just felt we were going to be quite isolated from the army community, and that definitely is the case'</i>	
Milly:	<p><i>'I don't feel like I have anything to do with the army really now'.</i></p> <p><i>'I just think that something, there could have been some kind of acknowledgement, I don't really know what but just something</i></p> <p><i>'You might as well not even exist'</i></p>	
Fern:	<i>'Knowing there was a community just down the road that I wasn't part of'</i>	
Jenny:		
<b>Let-downs and resentments</b>		
Helen	<p><i>'I have always had a bit of an issue with the army's attitude to family life... it doesn't feel that they are really caring about these women'</i></p> <p><i>'Some kind of support that would be nice, but I doubt very much that we are going to get that'</i></p>	
Milly:	<i>'I think it was a bit of a let-down'</i>	
<b>Lack of formal support:</b>		

Helen:	<p><i>'I feel that they don't really communicate with the wives'</i></p> <p><i>'I didn't get much from the kind of welfare side'</i></p> <p><i>I didn't hear anything really apart from that literature through the post</i></p> <p><i>actually there is no communication in terms of none of his managers or anybody who he is kind of under have contacted me and said 'you know what is life like for you how is it going to impact on your family, what can we do to support you, have we made life better for you, is there some way of us being able to make it easier' I do expect that a little bit because of the commitment that they expect from XXXX</i></p>	
Rachel:	<p><i>'Moving here and I have already written to our MP here about various stuff and I have mentioned that we are an army family and there is no response to it'</i></p> <p><i>'The interests of army families, which are very specific, are not being met'</i></p> <p><i>'You don't have a hive, you don't have information about your local area'</i></p>	
Milly:		
Fern:	<p><i>'Knowing there was a community just down the road that I wasn't part of and they were having support and I wasn't that definitely didn't help with my wellbeing'</i></p> <p><i>'There were a few things that I was invited to which was great but a lot of it was geared towards people actually living on the patch'</i></p>	
Sally:	<p><i>'when you are all in the same boat, you are all living in the same street I went to the totally opposite, I was on my own and I had no, there was no military support'</i></p> <p><i>'I think I had one e-mail from his old CO just touching base just saying "if you need anything just shout" which is fine but he was moving on about four months later'</i></p>	

	<i>'I think the main disadvantage I have ever felt about being outside a patch is flow of information'</i>	
Jenny:	<p><i>'I think the thing that I would still find hard now is the knowing if I had issues is how to access the military system for support'</i></p> <p><i>'when he deployed the system was very good at doing packs for those living on a patch when you got deployment but there was very little in terms of anyone living off a patch you know'</i></p> <p><i>'we are missing family activities that we can go to, you find out about them afterwards'</i></p> <p><i>'not having the support from the military when he was deployed when I was having problems, well not problems but when the children were struggling and really having someone I could go to, to talk through how I could help the children get through it whereas if I had been on a patch I could have gone around to perhaps another mum who was going through the same thing and ask 'how have you dealt with you what do you say' um but that was short lived'</i></p>	
<b>Longings and losses</b>	<i>'</i>	
Helen:	<p><i>'I would just want some kind of connection'</i></p> <p><i>'I guess this is just what it is now and we are not really part of it'</i></p> <p><i>'When you have lived somewhere all your life... so you don't feel a part of anything because you're not part of the army community, and not a part of your home community'</i></p>	
Rachel:	<p><i>'I am really proud of him but I think living outside of SFA that part of my identity doesn't matter as much'</i></p> <p><i>'It's difficult to feel like the army wife part of my identity which I am proud of matters when I live off SFA where as I know when I am in SFA it does matter and its respected'</i></p>	

Milly:	<i>'It's literally like I could not have even existed...you don't feel either'</i>	
<b>Master Theme: Loss of community and social support</b>		
<b>Loss</b>		
Jenny:	<p><i>'there is an element of what you miss when you do move around if that military family'</i></p> <p><i>'Its bits of it you still want'</i></p> <p><i>'it's the unwritten rule, it's the military family ... I don't feel that you get that the same'</i></p> <p><i>'You can talk about it but you have to live it to know, you know what I mean, and the military family whether its army, navy or air force, and, if you are, you may be talking to somebody in the navy who you have never been based with but they will just know where you are coming from'</i></p> <p><i>I miss it at times. I have got some really good friends here, but I do really miss some of them.</i></p>	
Rachel:	<i>'there is a lack of an established community'</i>	
Helen:	<p><i>'My expectations was I guess very high given my limited knowledge of being an army wife and I guess I didn't have any friends that were army wives so I kind of thought oh this is going to be a real community, its going to be really lovely'</i></p> <p><i>'I would love that community feeling, you know, when you watch the films about army wives'</i></p> <p><i>'visions of army wives gathering and supporting'</i></p>	
Dawn:	<i>'she was just happy, and everything she taught me was just positive....I just haven't had that experience'</i>	

	<i>'I don't know if I had the same interview with you again in the next three years, I would give you a different story'</i>	
<b>Belonging and detachment:</b>		
Jenny:	<p><i>'That Military family that you can't quite define... you get picked up and brought along''</i></p> <p><i>'Missing the camaraderie that you get'</i></p> <p><i>'There is always somebody that you can knock on the door at anytime'</i></p> <p><i>'it's the unwritten rule, it's the military family'</i></p> <p><i>'Yeah, its that military family thing isn't it?'</i></p> <p><i>'You can have some really good friends, but I don't think it's the same'</i></p> <p><i>'I don't know, actually if think possibly it's the shared understanding being the serving person or the spouse of, if your in that military environment you know what the job is, the job can be anything as you know my husband is a XXXX but it can be an infantry soldier, you know what the military do and the challenges of family life that go with that such as deployment, exercise and all of those things and you don't need to explain that to someone who is either in the military, its what I was saying before, that military family'</i></p>	
Rachel:	<p><i>'People are willing to help you out'</i></p> <p><i>'It's knowing that if something were to happen that you have that support available'</i></p> <p><i>'even if you never have to call on your army wife friends, you know you can'</i></p> <p><i>'it's kind of like you know that thing where you can say anything you want'</i></p>	

Sally:	<p><i>'they tell us together, they help us deal with it all together'</i></p> <p><i>'patch life can be remarkably special'</i></p>	
Helen:	<p><i>'you still can't really make friends with people in the barracks you the know the wives because you are going to move after 2 years'</i></p> <p><i>'I have never really experienced that whole community feeling'</i></p> <p><i>'I literally just came and went and we didn't really engage with army life at all'</i></p> <p><i>'I don't think that I ever felt really that connected'</i></p> <p><i>'Um well I think at that point I was pretty kind of accepting the fact that there wasn't much family you know kind of life to the army in that sense. I think by that time I probably detached a little bit'.</i></p>	
Fern:	<p><i>'I prefer living on a patch because I am part of it, in the centre of a community'</i></p> <p><i>'when you are on a patch everyone is in the same boat and they can relate but it was difficult to find people to relate to'</i></p> <p><i>'I still prefer patch life because I think you just become more ingrained in it. Yes it definitely my preferred way just its like more of a community especially having children as well'</i></p>	
<b>Master Theme – An opportunity to Gain</b>		
<b>Greater Autonomy and choice</b>		
Milly:	<p><i>'I have been able to get a job, because I have not worked for years'</i></p> <p><i>'get a job and not having to stay at home because in a few months I might be moving'</i></p>	

	<i>'it just helps me mentally'</i>	
Dawn:	<i>'Your home is your home, it's your home and you can do what you want'</i>	
Jenny:	<p><i>'Having your own space and not feeling like the military is watching you. We can do what we like here'</i></p> <p><i>'He also gets to escape the military which is good for him'</i></p> <p><i>'I have got a job I go out and feel that I am doing something each day whereas moving around all the time getting a job is actually quite challenging, so it has given me that freedom to do that which financially it helps out, even if only for the kids'</i></p> <p><i>'but they wouldn't recruit someone who was going to move every two years they would look to the fact that and they told me that they were looking for people who had long period of service with previous employers and the lady that I took over from who moved on had been there for 23 years and 21 years in another department so they don't want people who are going to keep moving'</i></p>	
Milly:	<i>'Being able to do what we wanted with the house'</i>	
Helen:	<i>'I guess is about owning your own house, you can't wish for more than that really, I mean I think that in terms of stability, for my job, for xxxx and in terms of you know army careers can end quite quickly sometimes and to be so heavily dependent upon having cheap rent and having you know accommodation it has always been something that I would have wanted to achieve anyway'.</i>	
<b>Greater Control</b>		
Dawn:	<i>'when you're in your own house, you can just choose, ring up, and ask when are you coming? Come on, I need you today! So, just little things like that, but it makes a massive difference'</i>	
Jenny:	<p><i>'I think its that freedom of there isn't any control'</i></p> <p><i>'it feels like our home and not somewhere we are just passing through. So that feeling of grounding'</i></p>	



	<p><i>'If I don't clean my oven, there is no march out when they come and check the accommodation'</i></p> <p><i>And at weekends doing it up and we don't have to have magnolia walls</i></p> <p><i>Yes we don't have any of that its lovely, we can do it up in anyway we like</i></p>	
Fern:	<i>'Nice carpets, no magnolia walls'.</i>	
<b>Greater convenience</b>		
Jenny:	<p><i>'Yes, filing in application forms for finance, getting credit and finance for mortgages and all those things it's a lot easier when you have got that firm base'</i></p> <p><i>'Just like simple things like who to go to for plumbing or an electrician and joiners that kind of thing we have got that network already set up'.</i></p>	

**Appendix 11: Table Master themes final version (v.3)**

Master themes		Sub-themes		Perceived Impact
A) Military life v Civilian life: <i>'Military life is just different'</i>	As experienced and linked to	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perceived differences</li> <li>• Lack of understanding</li> <li>• Difficulties in building connections</li> <li>• Concerns about safety</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Isolation</li> <li>• Loneliness</li> <li>• Vulnerability</li> </ul>
B) Stability v Separation: <i>'The sacrifice'</i>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Additional pressure</li> <li>• Relationship strain and strength</li> <li>• Coping: Weighing up</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional impact; Stress, feeling down, upset</li> <li>• Strain on relationships</li> <li>• Strength within relationships</li> <li>• Acceptance</li> </ul>
C) Disconnection: <i>'You don't feel part of anything'</i>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of formal support</li> <li>• Lack of belonging</li> <li>• Sense of exclusion</li> <li>• Sense of being in between two communities</li> <li>• Loss of meaning</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resentment</li> <li>• Sadness – Feeling let down</li> <li>• Lack of belonging</li> <li>• Sense of exclusion</li> <li>• Sense of being in between two communities</li> <li>• Loss of meaning and identity</li> </ul>

D) The military community - A place of several meanings: <i>'Loss'</i> and <i>'Visions of Army wives gathering and supporting'</i>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Loss of community and social bonds</li> <li>• Something yet to be experienced</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sense of loss – Belonging and connections</li> </ul>
E) An opportunity to gain: <i>'You can do what you want'</i>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stability</li> <li>• Ownership and Mastery</li> <li>• Employment</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Autonomy</li> <li>• Choice</li> <li>• Control</li> <li>• Freedom</li> <li>• Grounded</li> </ul>

## Appendix 12: Living outside an established military community – Implications on aspects of wellbeing list

- A) Theme: Military v Civilian life: *'Military life is just different'*
- Isolation: Subjective (neg. affect) and Social wellbeing (social lives / connections with community)
  - Loneliness: Subjective (neg. affect) and Social wellbeing (social lives / connections with community)
  - Vulnerability: Subjective (neg. affect)
- B) Theme: Stability v Separation: *'The sacrifice'*
- Emotional impact: Stress, feeling down, upset Subjective wellbeing (neg. affect)
  - Strain on relationships: Psychological wellbeing (relationships with others)
  - Strength within relationships: Subjective wellbeing (satisfaction, pos. affect) and Psychological (relationships with others)
  - Acceptance: Subjective wellbeing (satisfaction, pos. affect)
- C) Disconnection: *'You don't feel part of anything'*
- Resentment: Subjective wellbeing (neg. affect)
  - Sadness – Feeling let down: Subjective wellbeing (neg. affect)
  - Lack of belonging: Social wellbeing (social lives / connections with communities)
  - Sense of exclusion: Social wellbeing (social lives / connections with communities)
  - Sense of being in between two communities: Social wellbeing (social lives / connections with communities)
  - Loss of meaning and identity: Psychological wellbeing (acceptance and purpose in life)
- D) The military community - A place of several meanings: *'Loss' and 'Visions of Army wives gathering and supporting'*
- Sense of loss – Belonging and connections: Psychological wellbeing (relationships with others) and social wellbeing (social lives / connection with communities)
- E) An opportunity to gain: *'You can do what you want'*
- Autonomy: Psychological wellbeing (Autonomy, personal growth, purpose in life, mastery) and subjective wellbeing (satisfaction, pos. affect)
  - Choice: Psychological wellbeing (Autonomy, personal growth, purpose in life, mastery) and subjective wellbeing (satisfaction, poss. affect)
  - Control: Psychological wellbeing (Autonomy, personal growth, purpose in life, mastery) and subjective wellbeing (satisfaction, poss. affect)
  - Freedom: Psychological wellbeing (Autonomy, personal growth, purpose in life, mastery) and subjective wellbeing (satisfaction, poss. affect)
  - Grounded: Psychological wellbeing (Autonomy, personal growth, purpose in life, mastery) and subjective wellbeing (satisfaction, poss. affect)

**Appendix 13: Recommendations for support emerging from participant accounts with supporting quotations**

Participant	Quotes	Line No.	Comments / Notes
Fern	<p><i>I think for Welfare to play a more active role, so basically everyone living off the patch... to be more inclusive of people and having more regular events that just didn't involve either people with children or people living on the patch. I think that would be very helpful because even if you don't live on the patch you could still meet people in a similar situation.</i></p> <p>Is there anything else you think might have helped at that time then [in regards to support while partner was deployed], I know you said that you felt really down but is there anything else that you feel could have been helpful, or done different at the time?</p> <p><i>I don't particularly think so, unless they had any sort of support, like someone to talk to, anyone to talk to, or just someone to listen really but apart from that I don't really think so.</i></p>	<p>91-93</p> <p>106 – 107</p> <p>108-109</p>	<p>Role for Welfare – More Active Supporting connections with other spouses</p> <p>Inclusivity of those outside of the patch, and no children</p> <p>Greater contact during deployments</p> <p>Listening service – Additional Support? Signposting?</p>
Rachel	<p><i>I am not sure if this would work, but if there was some way of sign posting families who did want to [consider leaving SFA, and opt for stability in a local civilian community] towards other families who have already done it. There is always going to be the first person of course but creating, I mean maybe, you know, the AFF could be involved with this because obviously they do great work around supporting army families or some form of network whether that be a Facebook group or the AFF or welfare or something ... whereby if you are say close to XXXX and perhaps you don't live there in SFA if you could be sign posted towards other people who don't live in SFA too. I mean it wouldn't necessarily mean you would want</i></p>	<p>293-301</p>	<p>Greater awareness / information</p> <p>Availability of Information</p> <p>Signposting to mil charities / organisations</p> <p>Supporting connections between spouses in similar positions</p>

	<p><i>to rent a house next door, but it would mean that there was other people who you bring the same set of conditions as you and make the same choices as you so you know you could meet up or establish communications. I think knowing that other people are doing the same thing as you and being able to ask them questions and talking amongst friends I think would probably very useful. I mean if we had, it's a very difficult to go back now because we definitely don't want to do that, but I think if one did want to do that then I think just knowing that there were other people that you can talk to about it who have gone through the same experience, and what its actually like, that would be useful.</i></p>			<p>Role for AFF – Greater awareness / Availability of information</p>
Sally	<p><i>...they can't be keeping in touch with everybody but it would be nice for them to send a news update, e-mail etc, just checking in, just making sure everything is ok, just reminding you if you have got any problems here are the details etc etc.</i></p> <p><i>... on the patch you quite often get news letters, you get that sort of thing but people living off the patch, even if you were living in the same vicinity, you don't get that information. Although saying that Facebook has improved that massively.</i></p> <p><i>... the way I see it Welfare have to work doubly or probably triply as hard to keep everybody in the loop, um, because it is all very well, if you have got a patch like XXXX you get people on each street to deliver flyers, it works but if you have got for example one soldier on Acorn Street, one on Oak Street, one on Chestnut Street who is going to deliver that sort of information to those people? What I will say is that, you probably think I'm a dinosaur, the fact that e-mail, Facebook when we got married didn't exist, but I think that technology has got a big part to play in keeping communities going and people up-to-date.</i></p>	<p>176-177</p> <p>198-199</p> <p>219 -213</p>		<p>Greater communication</p> <p>Maintaining contact</p> <p>Role of technology in disseminating information and maintaining contact</p>



	<i>day out or they do nice things for the kids, but your not even, you might as well not even exist because there was nothing really. I got some letter or a pack in the post which had a phone number on it or something.</i>			military children to connect with others
	But no kind of personal contact?	119		Personal contact desired
	No	120		



**Appendix 14: Brief Thesis Summary in preparation for the AFF**

Brief thesis summary (*draft*), in preparation for the AFF

The Experiences of Army Spouses Living Outside a Military Patch Community and the  
Implications on Wellbeing: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Amy Burkill

2021

**Background:**

While the majority of military families continue to relocate frequently and live within accommodation provided by the MoD on an established military 'patch', there is a small but growing trend of families that are displaying a preference to remain stable in one geographic location, which may be a considerable distance away from a military community. These military families are tending to live within their own homes, or private sector rentals amongst a civilian population. The introduction of MoD and government initiatives that offer greater choice to military families and encourage greater stability will also likely contribute to this growing trend meaning that larger numbers of military families will become geographically dispersed across the country in future. Despite the possibility that this trend is likely to increase alongside such initiatives, and together with the potential implications of such change, there is a lack of research on this topic area. Little is therefore known about these military families who currently live in this way. This study utilised a phenomenological approach to address this gap and to add some much needed understanding of the experiences and needs of these families. It aimed to explore, in-depth, the lived experiences of army spouses who were residing, or who had resided outside of an established military patch community and the implications that this potentiated for spousal wellbeing.

**Methods:**

A qualitative approach was considered most appropriate to meet the study's aims, and furthermore IPA, underpinned by phenomenology, hermeneutics and ideography, was utilised. This allowed for an in-depth understanding of spouses' lived experience to be gained and the personal meanings they associate with them. Seven participants were recruited, and data collection took the form of semi-structured telephone interviews. This suited the geographic dispersal of participants. During the completion of the study, no major ethical issues arose. Interviews were transcribed, and analysed following the guidance set out by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, (2009).

**Summary of Findings:**

Five themes were identified which best represented the commonalities in participant's stories; Military life v Civilian Life: *'Military life is just different'*; Separation v Stability – *'The Sacrifice'*; Disconnection – *'You Just Don't Feel Part of Anything'*; The Military

Community: A Place of Several Meanings - *'Loss' and 'Visions of Army Wives Gathering and Supporting'*; An opportunity to gain – *'You can do what you want'*.

Together, these themes pointed towards an understanding that living outside an established military community held multiple meanings for participants. It had both benefits and disadvantages that continuously needed to be balanced and re-evaluated, and these had implications for spousal wellbeing. The benefits of choosing to live outside a military patch community enabled most spouses to have greater **stability and consistency** for both their and their family's lives. This provided spouses with a greater sense of **autonomy** and **control**. On the other hand, this was continuously weighed up against the disadvantages that living outside an established military community brought. This was particularly in regards to the impact of **separation**, and the sense of **disconnection**, and even **exclusion** that participants experienced there to be between themselves and the military community in which they were previously part of. This, together with their perception that **civilians lacked on understanding of their lives**, and the sense of **loss** in regards to the sense of belonging and connections made with other military while residing on a patch, exacerbated feelings of **isolation, and loneliness**. Even those that had not experienced the strong social bonds that others had whilst living on a patch appeared to remain hopeful that they would experience this sense of belonging in future if they returned to reside within this community. The military patch therefore became a place of multiple meanings, as interpreted by each participant. For many, this meant that they were suspended between two communities, neither of which they felt members of, which potentiated a further **loss in relation to a sense of place and purpose**.

#### **Discussion Overview:**

Firstly, similar to the experiences of veterans, participants experienced there to be a cultural differences and a lack of understanding between themselves and their civilian counterparts. This highlighted that army spouse participants, like veterans, experienced similar difficulties when transitioning and residing outside of a military patch community. Secondly, the experience of more frequent separation was identified across all participants, and could be seen in the context of ambiguous loss whereby the coming and goings of the serving personnel created uncertainty within the family, which had implications on marital relationships and spousal wellbeing. The ability of participants to cope with the impact of

separation was an important factor in whether participants continued to reside outside of, and some distance away from a military patch community and their partner's place of work. Two participants identified that the sacrifices that were being made had become too great, and that this had prompted their return to become a mobile family again. This meant that for two participants, they returned to reside within a patch community in order to retain their family unit and reduce the impact of separation. Thirdly, spouses experienced a sense of disconnection and exclusion with the wider military community, and as a result there was a mismatch between participants expectations in relation to communication and support from formal military channels and what was delivered. Such findings therefore challenge the existing paradigm of support that is currently available to military families. Considering how to improve this is important for maintaining the military's relationship with families, as well as families own sense of wellbeing.

In addition, multiple experiences and meanings were derived from residing on and within a military patch community. For some, the loss of a sense of community and social relationships that the patch provided was identified, while for others a different sense of loss was noted. Mainly this was in relation to the loss of an expectation and vision that the military patch community would provide participants a sense of belonging and support. This further linked into the misunderstandings that participants reported in regards to civilian's understandings of what military life is like and entails. This led participants to feel suspended between two communities, which had implications for wellbeing. Finally, residing outside a military patch community brought many benefits that were important for participant's wellbeing. Increased employment opportunities, a sense of greater choice and freedom were also identified, especially when drawing comparisons to the more restrictive elements of living on a military patch. Arguably, the contrast supports the suggestion that living on a military patch ensures a degree of military control over spouses, and a greater encouragement to adopt the position of being a good military wife.

### **Recommendations:**

Firstly, all participants indicated that the support received from formal military channels, such as welfare, was important to receive. Greater contact was important for participants and was discussed as going some way in helping participants feel acknowledged for the concessions and sacrifices in which they felt they were making on a daily basis as a result of having a partner in the military, and living outside a military patch community.

The ways in which welfare teams can better connect and offer support to spouses who choose to reside outside of an established military community should therefore be considered, especially given the implications this potentiates for spousal wellbeing and their potential level of satisfaction with the military. Moreover, for families residing outside a military community and also experiencing deployment, strengthening communication and support should be a priority.

Another recommendation that was identified from participant accounts was in relation to keeping military families and spouses who live outside of a military patch better connected to others in a similar situation. Participants highlighted the beneficial role of technology and suggested setting up forums, and online community platforms in order to do this. Thus, rather than emphasising face-to-face social activities to bring military spouses together, welfare teams should consider setting up more remote-type events that would allow all spouses, regardless of where they lived, the opportunity to attend virtually and meet other spouses living dispersed or within a similar area to them.

Finally, a greater awareness and the need for families to be able to access information about the possible '*pros and cons*' of leaving SFA and choosing to reside outside of a military patch was also suggested to be of benefit by participants. Indeed, this is likely to be helpful for any future families considering living in this way in future, and would provide greater choice and empowerment for families in order to make informed decisions based on what best meets their needs, acknowledging that choices change as needs change.

**Appendix 15: Article (*draft*) in preparation for submission to *Armed Forces & Society***

**Article Title:** The Experiences of Army Spouses Living Outside a Military Patch Community and the Implications on Wellbeing: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

**Abstract** (Max 150 words):

The majority of military families continue to relocate frequently and live within accommodation provided by the MoD on an established military 'patch'. However, there is a small but growing number of families that are choosing to remain stable in one geographic location, which may be a considerable distance from a military community. Little is known about the experiences of these families. The aims of this study sought to address this gap by exploring the lived experiences of seven army spouses who were residing, or who had resided outside of a military patch community and the implications that this potentiated for spousal wellbeing. Semi-structured interviews were analysed, using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, identifying five themes. The findings pointed towards an understanding that residing outside a military patch had both benefits and disadvantages that continuously needed to be balanced, and had implications for spousal wellbeing. Recommendations that may support future military spouses were also identified.

**Key words** (Max 7): *Army; Family; Spouse; Dispersed; Qualitative Research; Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*

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**Disclosures:** None

**Main Document [Manuscript – *In draft*]:**

Families have always been connected to the military (Angelis and Segal, 2015). Historically families were referred to as '*camp followers*' and tended to '*follow the flag*', that is, following the serving personnel on assignments around the world (Selous *et al.* 2020, p.13). Yet this is changing, and there is a small but growing trend of military families that no longer wish to follow the flag. Instead, military families are beginning to choose a different way of life, and are increasingly choosing to remain stable in one location. In doing so, families are having the opportunity to live within their own homes, or private sector rentals within local civilian communities, some of which are a considerable distance away from established military patch communities and bases. These changes are also occurring against the backdrop of MoD and government-led policies and initiatives, such as the Families Accommodation Model (FAM; MoD, 2021) and the Forces Help to Buy Scheme (MoD, 2014). Such initiatives are intended to offer more choice to military families about where and how they want to live, and to support those that wish to obtain stability rather than remaining mobile, and relocating frequently. In many ways, these initiatives could be seen as recognising the changing needs and role of the military family, and are potentially the beginnings of addressing some of the challenges militaries families, particularly spouses face by being highly mobile. Such challenges have been repeatedly and widely documented within the literature, for example, in regards to employment (Dandeker *et al.* 2005; Gribble *et al.* 2019). It is therefore likely that with the implementation of these policies and initiatives greater numbers of military families will in future begin to take advantage of the benefits that these initiatives appear to offer. Consequently then, military families will therefore become more dispersed and live outside of and potentially a considerable distance away from a military community in future. Instead, they will likely reside within a

location of their choice amongst a civilian neighbourhood. This will be a considerable change to how military families will live in future, especially for army families who are the most mobile of all service branches (MoD, 2021a). The implications of these changes have yet to be fully considered (Selous *et al.* 2020), and moreover the experiences of dispersed military families have not been fully understood. Most research on military families to date, particularly in relation to spouses, has focused on exploring the impact of operational deployments and specifically how separation related to these deployments can affect spousal wellbeing (Dandeker *et al.* 2006; Thandi *et al.* 2017), whilst other research has focused on spouse's experiences of relocation during accompanied postings (Jervis, 2011; Gribble *et al.* 2019). This study was therefore deemed necessary, and timely.

The aim of the study was to explore, in-depth, the lived experiences of army spouses who had experience of residing outside of a military patch community, and the meaning in which this had. Secondly, the implications this potentiated on their sense of wellbeing also formed part of the study's aims.

## **Methods**

A qualitative methodology, with its emphasis on capturing lived experience was considered most applicable to the study's aims. Specifically, the study employed an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach due to its commitment to understanding and making sense of an individual's life world (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009). A distinctive feature of IPA research is its commitment to a detailed interpretative account of lived experiences (Tuffour, 2017), hence sample sizes tend to be small. This study had a sample size of seven female participants, aged 30-55 years, of whom six identified themselves as White-British and one as Black-African. All were married or in a relationship with an army personnel, and had experience of both living in accommodation provided by the MoD (Service Family Accommodation; SFA) on an established military patch as well as outside of this community. At the time of data collection, five spouses were currently residing outside, mostly in their own homes, although one was residing in Substitute Service Family Accommodation (SSFA; classed as a private rental when no SFA is available), and two participants identified themselves as living on a 'patch', but had a number of years of living within their own homes before choosing to become mobile again, due to the challenges of living dispersed. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with individual participants



over the telephone and recorded. All interviews were transcribed and then analysed using IPA, following guidance from Smith et al. (2009).

Broadly, this involved reading the transcripts, making initial notes, developing emerging themes, searching for connections across themes, moving to the next case, and finally looking for patterns across cases. The Research Ethics Committee at the University of South Wales granted full ethical approval for this study in September 2020.

## **Findings**

From the interviews, five master themes were identified. The themes chosen best represented the individual lived experience of the participants interviewed, and the shared aspects of the experience across them. The findings therefore, whilst uncovering unique experiences, also attempted to draw commonalities that could be used to further develop an understanding of this choice of living and the implications this had on participants' sense of wellbeing.

### ***Military life v Civilian Life: 'Military life is just different'***

Perceived differences between the military and civilians were identified, which contributed to the perception that **civilians lacked an understanding of the unique demands and stressors of Army life**. These differences appeared exacerbated when living within a local civilian community away from a military patch, and potentiated a sense of distance between spouses and civilian neighbours. Furthermore, this led some to experience a sense of **isolation, frustration and feelings of not being safe** as a result of feeling uncertain regarding civilian's opinions of the military, all of which have implications for spousal wellbeing.

**Fern:** *'I think, like, in a military life you are in a bit of a bubble... It's different from civilian life. I think you kind of forget a bit about what civilian life is like. Its hard to describe...military life is just different'*.

*'... .. it was very lonely at the start. I found it quite isolating and people just didn't kind of get it as when you are on a patch everyone is in the same boat and they can relate but it was difficult to find people to relate to...'*

**Sally:** *'... .. because you are used to being around people of the same sense, same thought processes, same understanding and most people in the civilian world just do not understand our lives. They just don't understand that our husbands can be away for 6 months at a time, they struggle with them going away for 1 night and we're going what the hell'.*

*'... .. So its always a bit daunting, I mean, the first time we did it [Live outside a military community] we are talking 3 years after 9/11...um... being military and not knowing who your neighbours are. That was a bit scary. When you are on a patch, ok you're going to have literally military whether you have got army, air force, or navy but they are all going to be included in some sort of way, whereas in a city patch you have no idea who your neighbours are and it actually does prevent you from making friends because you are like 'oh should I be talking to you? Um... am I ok to talk to you?' It's quite alienating'.*

**Rachel:** *'I feel quite defensive of my life-style and think shut-up! You don't know what you're talking about!' and further goes on to say; 'When I bumped into a neighbour in the road the other day, he said did you move up here from XXXX? I just said yes, because I thought I can't be bothered to start explaining ... .. in order to explain, I would have to explain quite a lot, and also the problem of course, is that I have no idea what people's views of the military are'.*

### **Separation v Stability – 'The Sacrifice'**

Living some distance away from an established military community potentiated a number of quandaries for participants, namely whether the choice of greater geographic stability was worth the sacrifice of **frequent separation** that was identified as one of the most common consequences. This created a number of challenges, namely the experience of **single parenting and a lack of connection and communication between participants and their partners**. This resulted in additional **pressure and stress** on participants, and also created **relationship strain** but also a renewed sense of **relationship strength**. Moreover, the experience of shorter, yet more frequent separation created **feelings of loneliness** and a general sense of **unhappiness** could be identified within participant's accounts. Taken together, some participants considered the impact of such sacrifices too great which prompted them to consider, or indeed to become a mobile family again and to reside back

within an established military community. Yet for others there appeared to be a level of acceptance of the sacrifices in which they and their partners were making, helping them to better tolerate and cope with their experiences and the impact of on-going separation.

**Milly:** *'I think because sort of even things like doing the school run you will see um families that I know that are children`s parents you know their mums and dads will split the school run and one will work in the morning, the other will pick them up later and its things like that that we could never do'.*

*'... ... there are some weeks where you think, I`ve had enough of this, lets just pack it in and go back to the patch again...but then you sort of see the bigger picture of the kids settled'.*

**Dawn:** *'It is one of those things where you just don`t want to be in that situation because obviously one of you is sacrificing because that is how one becomes two and um for me I didn`t like it, I just didn`t want it... and it means that the only communication that you have got is on the phone'.*

*'... Emotionally. I was quite upset most of the time and felt lonely and because he is not there and I can`t talk to him and I can`t see how he is, he can`t see how I am and when I need his help, so emotionally it is not an easy thing especially when you have a feeling its not going to work'.*

**Jenny:** *' ... ... when you make that decision you know that you are sacrificing something, and its that weighing up if it is worth the sacrifice and what we are trying to achieve from it, and for us it was our long term future of a place to call home and having a base'.*

*'We thought we survived that one so we can survive anything... you get used to it, I used to be in the military as well so it is kind of the lifestyle that we know, um, I`m not a needy person so I don`t need him here all the time'*

**Disconnection – 'You Just Don't Feel Part of Anything'**

A sense of **disconnection and exclusion** from the military community is observed, particularly when living outside an established military community. This was linked to a number of factors, and from these arose a number of different experiences and feelings. Firstly, the **lack of formal support** from the military, particularly during times of increased stress such as deployment, exacerbated such disconnection and as a result appeared to intensify the presence of any difficult feelings that participants were holding towards the military. With this came in some cases a sense of **resentment** towards **and feeling let down** by the military. This was difficult for some participants whom felt that they had sacrificed and continue to make concessions as a result of the demands posed by military life. Secondly, the lack of connection to the military, when living outside of an established military community, further potentiated a **loss of meaning and identity** for some participants, in that, their identity and understanding of themselves as an army spouse appeared to have been challenged in some way and in need of re-negotiating. Moreover, for those participants with previous high levels of immersion in the military community, moving to and living within a local civilian community required a period of adjustment. Being suspended between the both communities, with uncertainty in regards to their relationship with the military, therefore created experiences of a **loss of place and belonging** for participants.

**Helen:** *'... ... some people choose not to be a part of it at all but I kind of like to know, I kind of like to be a part of it, I`m very proud of XXXX and what he does and what he has achieved, and you know, I like being an army wife ... ... I feel that they (Army welfare) don`t really communicate with the wives particularly about what is on offer and especially more so now that I am here, I don`t even have any connection whatsoever to the army`.*

*'... ... it`s a real struggle when you have lived somewhere all your life and then you make that decision to move away and think that you`re going to be living in other areas for the rest of your life and then you come back and that`s really odd, so you then don`t feel a part of anything because you are not part of the army community, and your not a part of your own home community... um... it`s very odd, it`s a strange situation really`.*

**Rachel:** *'I think I just felt that we were going to be quite isolated from the army community and that definitely is the case`*

*' I am really proud to support my husband. I am really proud of him but I think living outside of SFA that part of my identity doesn't matter as much... .... It's difficult to feel like the army wife a part of my identity which I am proud of... where as I know when I am in SFA it does matter and its respected.'*

**Milly:** *'...I think it was a bit of a let-down, as when he was in Afghan for 8 or 9 months, but he had also been away for 2 months before, so it was a long, you know he was away for best part of a year really and it was really tough. I just think that something, there could have been some kind of acknowledgement, I don't really know what but just something because I know if your living on a patch you get a coach day out or they do nice things for the kids but your not even, you might as well not even exist because there was nothing'.*

*'...Its literally like I could not have even existed... ... you don't feel either that you are just a normal family because he's in the army and we do have a different way of life, because you know I am on my own in the week, so yeah...'*

### ***The military community: A place of several meanings - 'Loss' and 'Visions of Army Wives Gathering and Supporting'***

A perceived sense of **loss** was experienced when living outside an established military community. This included missing the strong sense of community cohesion and belonging that residing within this environment provided many participants. The perceived **loss of social bonds with other military spouses**, which were often likened to family, was highlighted and how connections made with others outside of this were different, in that, they lacked a **sense of camaraderie and specialness**. However, not all participants experienced this, particularly those that did not develop these strong relationships whilst residing within a military patch community. However, some participants anticipated and hoped for an experience similar to what was experienced by others, and similar to what they had been 'taught' by others and learnt from fictional movies of army life. For these participants, this was yet to be experienced and therefore there was a different sense of loss in their accounts – the loss of this 'idea' or vision of a supportive, military community and the development of strong bonds between women.

**Jenny:** *'...there is an element of what you miss when you do move around is that military family that you can't quite define, but whenever you move with the military you get picked up and brought along... ...'*

*'I think for me it's the missing the camaraderie that you get in the military family with others'.*

**Helen:** *'I have never really experienced that whole community feeling of being on camp, I guess its much a muchness to me... ... as I said to your earlier I don't know whether that is because I haven't maybe put myself forward enough'.*

*'I would love that community feeling you know when you watch the films about army wives and you just think you know, there is a couple isn't there, where you just think 'god what would I do if my husband was killed in Afghanistan and someone turned up and knocked on my door` who would I turn to if I was living in army accommodation? But you wouldn't, I wouldn't, not in my situation now... and then you have, in the films got all the visions of army wives gathering and supporting...'*

**Dawn:** *'... ... she was just happy, and everything that she taught me was just positive, it was like you know when they lived in Cyprus, when they lived in Germany, when they came back and the community that they lived in, the friends that they had made around the world... it was absolutely amazing, so that was the picture I had in my mind, um, but in our case it wasn't the same... I just haven't had the experience'.*

*' I don't know if I had the same interview with you in the next three years, I would give you a different story.'*

### ***An opportunity to gain – 'You can do what you want'***

Many participants described benefits and the gaining of specific opportunities when living outside of an established military community. Such opportunities potentiated a greater sense of wellbeing for participants and the opportunity to establish geographic stability was an important factor for many, contributing to a sense of feeling grounded and enabling participants to **establish, and maintain jobs**. Employment, for many, created a

**greater sense of autonomy and self-efficacy.** In addition, participants commented upon other opportunities that living outside of SFA, and an established military patch community brought. This included having the opportunity to decorate their homes as they wished, and choice over the tradespeople who completed maintenance on their properties for example. These smaller opportunities, along with not feeling 'watched' for one particular participant, allowed **participants to regain a sense of control and agency** that perhaps was more restricted when living in quarters, on an established military patch.

**Jenny:** *'I have got a job I go out and feel that I am doing something each day whereas moving around all the time getting a job is actually quite challenging, so it has given me that freedom to do that which financially it helps out, even if only for the kids'*

*'... having your own space and not feeling that the military is watching you. We can do what we like here and if I don't clean my oven there is no march out when they come and check the accommodation whenever we have moved but yes I think its that freedom of there isn't any control other than as you say we are legally allowed to do because its our home so the positives are very much that it feels like our home and not somewhere where we are just passing through so that feeling of grounding and escape for him and he is a lot more relaxed when he is away from the military, and at the weekends, so that definitely is a positive'.*

**Milly:** *'You are on the property ladder, and you have got your own house... .. I have been able to get a job, because I have not worked for years so that is another positive that I have been able to do, get a job and not having to stay home because in a few months I might be moving, so that's one thing being able to work for me, as a person, even though I don't work a lot, it just helps me mentally'.*

**Dawn:** *'... living on a patch you have got restrictions...I do love the idea of, um, they do look after the maintenance so you can just request it, but that takes a long time and you don't know where or when they are coming, but when you are in your own house you can just choose, ring up, and ask when are you coming? Come on, I need you today! So, just little things like that, but it makes a massive big difference'.*

## **Discussion**

### ***Military life v Civilian life – ‘Its just different’***

Within this research study, participants perceived there to be cultural differences between the military and the civilian community, which appeared more evident when choosing to live outside of an established military patch community. The military world is vast, and has been described by some as a closed society with rules and regulations that often govern the lives and performance of the serving personnel (Thomas, 2018). Such rules, regulations and norms are unique, and have been identified as differing from that of civilian society (Cooper *et al.*, 2017; Thomas, 2018). Arguably, this reinforces conformity with these distinct sets of norms and attitudes leading to distancing from civilian life. Similarly, for participant spouses in this study, cultural differences also led to a sense of separation and feelings of difference, best described as an ‘us’ and ‘them’ culture as seen through their choice of language. While participants were not military and were indeed civilians themselves, the all-encompassing nature of military life that has been acknowledged to extend beyond that of the serving personnel was therefore demonstrated.

In addition, participants made repeated references to how civilians lacked an understanding of the uniqueness of their lives. Specifically, they described civilians as not understanding the demands and impact of various aspects of military life, such as long working hours, time spent apart, single parenting. Similar perceptions have also been previously been reported by army spouses who were living geographically dispersed (Verey and Fossey, 2013). However, in the study conducted by Verey and Fossey’s (2013), the lack of understanding arose specifically because spouses perceived civilians as being unable to empathise with the complex ways in which deployment cycles affected the family. Yet within this study, participants reported a much broader lack of understanding from civilians of the demands and implications of military life rather than specifically in relation to one military demand - deployment. For participants in this study, such misunderstandings exacerbated the sense of distance participants experienced between themselves and their civilian counterparts, which created challenges for them in relation to establishing both social and community connections. Often, this sense of distance and difference was highlighted when participants made reference to their previous experience of living on a military patch community. It would appear that their previous patch experience created an intensity of shared experiences that contributed to a sense of connection and belonging that was difficult to achieve when residing outside this community. Many participants shared how being in the



*'same boat'* as others when living on a patch meant that social support based upon mutual understanding could easily be derived, and that this could not be replicated or experienced in the same way with civilians. Consequently, in comparison to this previous experience and built-in community support system, participants discussed the difficulties in developing and managing new social and community connections, which would have been helpful for providing them with support. This left some participants experiencing a sense of loneliness and alienation.

Another important experience that was identified within this research study that has not previously been identified in past research was that some participants reported feeling uncertain of what civilian's views of the military were. This was raised in comparison to living on a military patch, which provided participants with not only a physical sense of security but a relational one too. Many participants made reference to the adversities that had impacted the military community, and how memories of these events (for example the death of Lee Rigby) were continuing to shape their responses and behaviours. Subsequently some participants described exercising caution in identifying themselves as a military spouse and how forthcoming they were with this information when in conversation with their civilian neighbours. This created an additional barrier to immersing themselves fully in their local civilian communities and developing social connections with others. Such concern fostered feelings of vulnerability, and further exacerbated the distance and separateness from the wider civilian community, which had implications for wellbeing. This was an important new insight into the lived experiences of participants.

### ***Separation v Stability – 'The Sacrifice'***

In this research study, all participants reported shorter but more frequent separations as a result of residing outside of and a considerable distance away from a military community. The experience of greater amounts of separation has also been highlighted in all three reports on military families who have lived outside of an established military community (Verey and Fossey, 2013; RAF, 2018; Gribble and Fear, 2019). While separations tend to be a common feature of military life, the impact of such frequent separations in this study was reported to be great and had implications on participants sense of wellbeing as well as their marital relationships.

The experience of separation and 'coming and goings' of the service personnel from the family home during the working week meant that some flexibility around usual family relationships and roles was often required, especially for those participants with children. Consequently, the demands on participants increased during the week due to the temporary assumption of a single parent role and need to take on additional responsibilities around the home. Research has demonstrated that these stressors have the potential to cause an adverse effect on the wellbeing of the military spouse (Eaton *et al.*, 2008; Figley, 1993; Dandeker *et al.*, 2006; Patzel *et al.*, 2013;), and this was also the case for participants in this study. Specifically, participants reported experiences of increased stress, as well as feelings of loneliness. These experiences were especially prominent when participants discussed the absence of their partner's presence and support as they went about their everyday life. Similar experiences of solo parenting and emotional strain have been identified in other research concerning army spouses during unaccompanied postings (Verey and Fossey, 2013). Additionally, spouses from other service branches have also described taking on the majority of family and home responsibilities during non-operational separations, and have identified the impact that this has had on being able to maintain and commit to their employment, as well as maintain healthy exercise and eating habits (Gribble and Fear, 2019).

Secondly, the findings from the study revealed that as well as the increased amount of time participants and their partners spent apart, the lack of physical connection and the void of shared experiences also had implications on their sense of wellbeing. Consequently, these experiences exacerbated participant's feelings of loneliness, and led to a sense of unhappiness, loss and even abandonment for some. Dissatisfaction with their marital relationships was also experienced. These findings are similar to previous research that has identified loneliness as a common theme among military spouses during deployment separation (Warner *et al.*, 2009), and that marital relationships can be negatively affected (Dandeker, French, Birtles and Wesseley 2006; Meadows *et al.*, 2017).

The dissatisfaction and additional strain on marital relationships that was reported by some participants however appeared to only be temporary and short-lived, before a renewed sense of relationship strength was created. This was demonstrated by participant's choice of language that was used as they recounted their experiences and described their current relationships.

For the participants, the impact of separation was one of the most frequently reported consequences of choosing to reside in one location outside of the military community. For some, they acknowledged that separation was part of the '*sacrifice*' for ensuring greater stability for themselves and their families. Drawing on their previous experiences, most spouses identified that the opportunity to create a consistent base was '*worth*' these sacrifices, and allowed them to continue living in the way they did. Yet this appeared to be in a continuous state of flux, with participants appearing to endlessly '*weigh up if it is worth the sacrifice*' (stability v separation). Specifically, separation meant that they were unable to live together as a family unit which some longed for. Additionally, the implications that separation had on participants own sense of wellbeing was also noted as a sacrifice.

On the other hand, for some of the other participants in this study, the sacrifices had or were indeed becoming too great, prompting change to occur. For some participants this meant making the decision to return to being a mobile family, or to again consider this possibility in the future. For these participants in particular this caused a sense of anxiety that the consistency and stability they were trying and hoping to maintain had the potential to become disrupted. Thus, the choice to become stable and reside outside of an a military patch community, while it had benefits for participants, was not fixed and was subject to change depending on the level of sacrifice experienced and whether these were worth it at a particular point in time.

### ***Disconnection – 'You Just Don't Feel Part of Anything'***

Experiences of disconnection and exclusion were expressed by participants in this study as a result of choosing to reside outside of an established military community. Such experiences are similarly identified by veterans (Gordon, Burrell, and Wilson, 2020), and have also been reported by spouses who were living outside a military patch community (Gribble and Fear, 2019). In this study, participants felt unacknowledged, and as if they did not '*exist*' by the military. The findings of this study further demonstrated that the sense of disconnection and exclusion arose from a mismatch between the expectations that participants held and the provision that was being provided. This had implications on participant's sense of wellbeing.

The communication and support participants expected to receive (from welfare) and the lack of this, meant that participants reported feeling disadvantaged by living outside a military patch community. This arguably exacerbated the impact of military life and the inherent demands. While participants had actively chosen to not reside in SFA within this community, their accounts suggest that they had not necessarily chosen to become disconnected or disadvantaged from accessing military-based support either. Instead, many participants reported that they wished to be kept informed, remain involved and invited to family related events and services, and they saw this as helpful support. Previous research has indicated that support, such as those provided by a partners work organisation, provide a set of services that can be helpful, especially in the context of experiencing work-related separations (Orthner and Rose, 2009). However, while military spouses tend to prefer to seek support through informal avenues (for example, from other spouses), rather than formal mechanisms like welfare teams (Dandeker *et al.*, 2006; Aducci *et al.*, 2011) as their first line of support, it was apparent that participants wished to have more communication and support from formal military channels in this study.

The lack of connection and support received from formal military channels, such as welfare, further led to the emergence of a sense of resentment towards the military and feeling let down. This for some participants created additional strain on the family and had implications for their wellbeing. In previous studies, Jervis (2011) and Gribble *et al.* (2019) identified resentment and blame as common feelings amongst military spouses, mainly in relation to a perceived lack of agency that was experienced during overseas postings and the concessions spouses felt they were required to make, mainly in regards to their employment, because of the military. However, unlike these previous studies the resentment that participants reported in this research study was as the result of not feeling adequately supported by the military, particularly in comparison to their previous experiences of support when living on a military patch.

### ***The Military Community: A Place of Several Meanings – ‘Loss’ and ‘Visions of Army Wives Gathering and Supporting’***

As a result of now residing outside a military patch community, participants highlighted the loss of a sense of ‘community’ and social connections with other military spouses who were in the ‘*same boat*’. The ‘*community feel*’ of a military patch community

was therefore missed by many, as well as the strong bonds that many had developed. Although, importantly, this was not the case for all participants, and therefore the military patch community held different meanings for each participant.

Many participants described missing the camaraderie and the specialness of these friendships and connections, in the same way that veterans describe their military colleagues upon leaving the service (Koenig *et al.*, 2014 in McDermott, 2020). Again, the intensity of shared experiences was important for participants, and suggests that it leaves behind what Cooper *et al.* (2017) identifies within the veteran population as a military legacy that endures beyond service. For participants in this study, this created experiences of loss, which has implications for spousal wellbeing. Specifically, this loss was in relation to the friendships and the support in which they could provide. The loss participants described is also demonstrated in other research by Gribble (2017). In Gribble's (2017) study, spouses identified loss and even grief when leaving behind the supportive relationships that they had built with other military spouses, although this was in the context of leaving accompanied postings.

On the other hand, the findings also revealed that not all participants in this study experienced the '*community feeling*' and strong connections between themselves and other military spouses. Some reported that this was not what they had pictured or expected to experience while living on a military patch. Jervis (2011) too also challenges the myth that has been developed in regards to this close-knit supportive community, or military '*family*' that many participants in this research study report. However, some participants in this study appeared to question whether they were responsible for not being able to develop these friendships and connections and utilise these for support. They also hoped that they may experience these connections and associated benefits in the future. A different sense of loss was therefore identified within these participant accounts. It was not, however, in relation to the loss of bonds and support with other spouses as for some they did not experience these. Instead, it was the loss of an idea and expectation of this idealized community where participants expected and hoped to experience a sense of belonging and support that had been informed through 'teachings' by other spouses, and from fictional movies of military life where wives would be seen as supporting each other. This fictional picture of what military life is like is also likely to be linked to civilians lack of understanding that was reported by participants in this study, in that military life it is often misunderstood. The findings from this study may also suggest that participants, due to their hope to have a

positive experience of the military patch community and the support that this provides, feel some pressure to uphold the expectations of being a good military wife (Enloe, 2000) and to be seen as being supportive of the military, the serving personnel and their career.

### ***An Opportunity to Gain – ‘You can do what you want’***

Choosing to reside outside of the military community, and become geographically stable was identified by participants as having many benefits that potentiated a greater sense of well being. Specifically, an increased sense of autonomy, self-efficacy, and control was identified, which are conducive to positive mental health and wellbeing (Ryff, 1989). Military life, mainly the frequent and repeated relocations, can constrain military spouses’ sense of agency and control with regards to planning and making decisions about many aspects of their and their family’s life, thus, the opportunity to have greater choice in regards to where and how they wanted to live was important for participants and contributed to their sense of wellbeing.

Firstly, having the opportunity to establish and maintain a stable career / job was one of the main advantages for participants, with many drawing upon the disadvantages that being a mobile family had on their ability to further their work opportunities. However, it was evident from participant accounts that their work was perhaps not given equal consideration, and participants (with children) implicitly implied that they could not prioritise their work due to assuming a single parent role during the week, and needing to respond to child-care issues at short notice for example. Thus, for many this resulted in participants opting for part-time work that was flexible. Nevertheless, the ability to work, regardless of whether this was part-time appeared to be important to participants and potentiated a greater sense of autonomy and self-efficacy, that is often hampered by the mobility of the military lifestyle. Additionally, some participants highlighted other opportunities that living outside a military patch community provided them with. This included having the opportunity to decorate their homes as they wished, and having greater choice in, for example, who they chose to complete repairs on their homes. This sense of greater ownership and control was similarly identified by Army spouses in other studies (Verey and Fossey, 2012), who reclaimed a sense of mastery over the home environment through the action of decorating.

Finally, for one participant a sense of freedom from the military was experienced, which has not previously been reported elsewhere. That is, in choosing to live outside of the military community this particular participant commented upon how they no longer felt watched. This created a sense of liberation and improved autonomy that the military would no longer be *'watching'* or controlling their actions and choices. It would appear that this was highlighted when contrasting their experiences to times when living in SFA within a military patch community whereby the need to perhaps conform to the good military wife (Enloe, 2000) and the more restrictive elements of residing on a patch was more prominent.

### **Recommendations**

The recommendations below are suggestions from this particular group of army spouse participants in relation to what would have been of benefit to them whilst living outside a military patch community.

Firstly, all participants indicated that the support received from formal military channels, such as welfare, was important to receive. Spouses felt disadvantaged by living outside of a military patch community in this respect. The ways in which welfare teams can better connect and offer support to spouses who choose to reside outside of an established military community should be considered, especially given the implications this potentiates for spousal wellbeing and their potential level of satisfaction with the military. However, any support that is offered needed to be forthcoming through either verbal or physical contact, as opposed to *'some letter through the door, with a number on'*. Thus, a clearer identification of which families are living dispersed in the first instance, and greater efforts to initiative and sustain contact with these families is needed. Given the dispersal of families, it is likely that physical communication and support will be more difficult to achieve, but greater verbal contact could be offered. Greater contact was important for participants and was discussed as going some way in helping participants feel acknowledged for the concessions and sacrifices in which they felt they were making on a daily basis as a result of having a partner in the military, and living outside a military patch community.

Another recommendation that was identified from participants was in relation to keeping military families and spouses who live outside of an established military community, better connected to others in a similar situation. Participants highlighted the beneficial role of technology and suggested setting up forums, and online community platforms in order to do

this. Thus, rather than the emphasising face-to-face social activities to bring military spouses together, setting up more remote-type events would allow all spouses, regardless of where they lived, the opportunity to attend virtually and meet other spouses living dispersed or within a similar area to them.

A greater awareness and the need for families to be able to access information about the possible '*pros and cons*' of leaving SFA and choosing to reside within the civilian community was also suggested by participants. Indeed, this is likely to be helpful for any future families considering living in this way in future. A summary of the findings from this study, for example, could be disseminated by welfare teams or placed on websites such as the AFF, which is likely a place that military families would look for information on accommodation needs or if they were considering the move from a patch community to a civilian one.

These findings and recommendations should be considered in light of the potential continuation of the increase in families opting to live outside and some distance away from a military community, and initiatives like FAM continuing. Considering these recommendations may help identify some of the issues families may experience, and therefore how these may be overcome from their own perspective.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, the role of the military family and the way in which they wish to live is changing (Selous *et al.* 2020). Increasingly, military families are becoming more geographically dispersed (Rodrigues *et al.* 2020), in that they are living outside of, and a considerable distance away from an established military community, residing instead within local civilian neighbourhoods. This trend is also likely to continue. The findings from this study point towards an understanding that army spouses who choose to live outside of a military patch community has both benefits and disadvantages that continuously need to be balanced and re-evaluated, and, that these may have implications for spousal well being. Increasing awareness and developing an understanding of this way of living may help military families that are considering this offer in the future.



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