

## Discovery of Factors Influencing Marital Dissatisfaction in Spouses of Military Personnel

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The present study aimed to identify the factors influencing marital dissatisfaction among spouses of military personnel.

**Method:** This study employed a qualitative research design, and data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The statistical population consisted of spouses (women) of military personnel residing in the city of Isfahan in 2025. The participants were selected using purposive sampling. After conducting interviews with 12 spouses (women) of military personnel, the factors influencing marital dissatisfaction were identified and data saturation was achieved. Data analysis was performed using the thematic analysis method proposed by Stirling (2001), and the themes were categorized into three levels: basic, organizing, and global themes.

**Findings:** Based on the findings of the study, the basic themes comprised 50 concepts, the organizing themes included 11 concepts, and the global themes were classified into three overarching categories entitled individual factors, spouse-related factors, and spouse's occupational factors, which were identified and extracted.

**Conclusion:** According to the results of this study, identifying and understanding the factors influencing marital dissatisfaction among spouses of military personnel can contribute to the reduction of marital dissatisfaction and enhance individuals' awareness of the issues and challenges associated with marriage to military personnel in premarital counseling.

**Keywords:** Marital dissatisfaction; spouses; military personnel; thematic analysis

### 1. Introduction

Marriage is widely recognized as one of the most significant social institutions shaping individual well-being, psychological stability, and social functioning across the life span. Decades of research demonstrate that marital quality is strongly associated with mental health,

physical health, emotional regulation, and overall life satisfaction, while marital dissatisfaction serves as a critical predictor of depression, anxiety, psychosomatic symptoms, and relational instability (Kim & Kwon, 2024; VanLaningham et al., 2001; Woods et al., 2019). Marital dissatisfaction reflects a multidimensional construct encompassing emotional disengagement, ineffective

communication, unmet expectations, conflict escalation, role strain, and declining intimacy, all of which progressively undermine relationship stability and personal functioning (Kuo & Johnson, 2021; Sayehmiri et al., 2020; Schvey et al., 2022). Within this broader context, certain populations experience heightened vulnerability to marital distress due to structural, occupational, and environmental stressors that systematically strain relational resources, among which military families constitute one of the most psychologically burdened groups.

Military life introduces a complex constellation of stressors that distinguish it sharply from civilian family systems. Frequent relocations, prolonged separations, exposure to combat risk, rigid institutional hierarchies, unpredictable deployment schedules, and persistent concerns for physical safety create chronic relational strain and disrupt normative developmental trajectories of couples and families (Briggs et al., 2020; Carbajal, 2025; Richardson et al., 2020). These pressures are not episodic but continuous, often spanning the entirety of a military career and permeating every domain of marital functioning. Research consistently demonstrates that military spouses experience significantly elevated levels of psychological distress, emotional burden, and relational dissatisfaction compared to civilian spouses (Cozza et al., 2022; Steenkamp et al., 2018; Toomey et al., 2019). Such findings underscore the importance of examining marital dissatisfaction within military families as a distinct phenomenon requiring specialized conceptual and empirical attention.

The psychological burden borne by military spouses is further compounded by their dual role as emotional anchors and functional managers of the household in the prolonged absence of their partners. While marital relationships ordinarily rely on reciprocal emotional exchange and shared responsibility, military spouses frequently shoulder disproportionate responsibility for childcare, household management, financial decision-making, and crisis resolution, often without adequate institutional or social support (Just-Bourgeois, 2019; Wellman, 2017). This accumulation of responsibility fosters role overload, emotional exhaustion, and diminished personal autonomy, all of which are closely associated with declining marital satisfaction and deteriorating psychological health (Gottfried, 2021; Woods et al., 2019). The interaction between occupational stress and family functioning therefore becomes a central mechanism through which military life erodes marital quality.

Empirical evidence further indicates that military spouses exhibit elevated prevalence of anxiety disorders, depressive symptoms, and trauma-related psychopathology, particularly when their partners return from combat with physical injuries or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Edem Iniedu, 2010; Mansfield et al., 2014; Yambo et al., 2016). Exposure to a partner's trauma frequently transforms the marital relationship into a caregiving dynamic, wherein emotional intimacy is gradually replaced by clinical vigilance, crisis management, and persistent hyperarousal. This shift in relational structure not only reduces marital satisfaction but also disrupts spouses' personal identity, emotional security, and sense of agency (Cozza et al., 2022; Yambo et al., 2016). Over time, such transformations generate cumulative relational erosion that is difficult to reverse without targeted psychological intervention.

Communication patterns within military marriages represent another critical pathway to marital dissatisfaction. During deployments, spouses often rely on constrained modes of communication, including brief phone calls or social media interactions, which lack emotional nuance and contextual depth (O'Keefe, 2016). This impoverishment of communication restricts emotional disclosure, intensifies misinterpretations, and amplifies insecurity, particularly under conditions of chronic uncertainty regarding a partner's safety. Even after reunification, couples frequently struggle to renegotiate emotional closeness, synchronize daily routines, and restore pre-deployment relational patterns, resulting in persistent emotional distance and relational instability (Cole, 2014; Richardson et al., 2020).

Beyond individual and relational processes, broader social and institutional factors further complicate the marital experience of military families. Stigma surrounding mental health treatment, concerns about career consequences, and perceived barriers to accessing psychological services significantly reduce help-seeking behavior among military spouses (Lewy et al., 2014; Schvey et al., 2022). Limited availability of culturally competent clinicians familiar with military life further constrains effective intervention (Borah & Fina, 2017; Cole, 2014). Consequently, marital dissatisfaction often remains unaddressed until it reaches clinically significant levels, exacerbating psychological distress and relational breakdown.

The presence of children within military families introduces additional layers of complexity. Research indicates that children of deployed service members display elevated risk for emotional dysregulation, behavioral problems, and academic difficulties, particularly when

parental stress and marital dissatisfaction are high (Briggs et al., 2020; Fairbank et al., 2018; Park, 2011). The emotional climate of the marital relationship exerts a powerful influence on child development, such that unresolved marital distress frequently transmits psychological vulnerability across generations. This bidirectional interaction between marital functioning and child adjustment underscores the systemic nature of marital dissatisfaction in military families.

Moreover, military culture itself exerts powerful normative influences on marital expectations and coping strategies. The ethos of stoicism, self-sacrifice, and emotional suppression that characterizes military institutions often discourages open emotional expression and vulnerability within marital relationships (Cole, 2014; Fisher et al., 2016). While such traits may serve operational demands, they undermine emotional intimacy and mutual support within marriage, thereby increasing susceptibility to relational dissatisfaction. Over time, the conflict between institutional identity and relational needs becomes increasingly pronounced, particularly for spouses who must navigate both domains simultaneously (Borah & Fina, 2017; Just-Bourgeois, 2019).

Socioeconomic pressures further exacerbate marital strain. Employment instability, workplace discrimination, and interrupted career trajectories disproportionately affect military spouses due to frequent relocations and limited job portability (Wellman, 2017). Financial insecurity, loss of professional identity, and diminished economic autonomy contribute significantly to emotional distress and marital conflict (Aknin et al., 2009; Kim & Kwon, 2024). These structural constraints reduce spouses' perceived control over their lives, undermining psychological well-being and relational satisfaction.

The international literature increasingly emphasizes that marital dissatisfaction is not a static outcome but a dynamic process shaped by cumulative stress exposure, adaptive capacity, and systemic support structures (Clark & Georgellis, 2013; VanLaningham et al., 2001). In military families, the chronic nature of occupational stress amplifies this dynamic, creating cycles of strain, partial adaptation, and recurrent destabilization. Despite growing recognition of these challenges, significant gaps remain in understanding the lived experiences of military spouses, particularly in non-Western cultural contexts where military institutions, family structures, and gender roles may differ substantially from those examined in existing studies (Borah & Fina, 2017; Carbajal, 2025; Khayat et al., 2024).

In many societies, cultural norms surrounding marriage, gender roles, and family obligations further shape how military spouses experience and interpret marital dissatisfaction. For example, expectations regarding caregiving, obedience, and emotional endurance may inhibit spouses from expressing distress or seeking assistance, thereby intensifying internalized psychological burden (Gottfried, 2021; Khayat et al., 2024). Understanding marital dissatisfaction within military families therefore requires an integrative framework that accounts for psychological, relational, occupational, and cultural dimensions simultaneously.

Although prior research has yielded valuable insights into specific correlates of marital dissatisfaction among military families, most existing studies adopt quantitative approaches that capture outcomes without sufficiently illuminating the subjective processes through which dissatisfaction develops and is maintained (Borah & Fina, 2017; Just-Bourgeois, 2019). Qualitative inquiry offers unique potential to uncover the nuanced meanings, emotional trajectories, and coping strategies that shape marital experiences over time, thereby providing a richer foundation for intervention design and policy development.

Furthermore, contemporary shifts in global political dynamics, military engagement patterns, and societal attitudes toward military institutions have introduced new stressors that may further transform marital experiences within military families. These evolving conditions underscore the urgency of context-specific, in-depth exploration of marital dissatisfaction that reflects current realities rather than relying solely on historical data (Carbajal, 2025; Cozza et al., 2022; Richardson et al., 2020).

Given the profound implications of marital dissatisfaction for individual mental health, child development, family stability, and social cohesion, advancing empirical understanding of this phenomenon within military families constitutes a critical priority for psychological research and clinical practice. Only through comprehensive examination of the interacting forces that shape military marriages can effective prevention, counseling, and support systems be developed to strengthen both relational resilience and psychological well-being.

Therefore, the aim of the present study is to explore and identify the factors influencing marital dissatisfaction among spouses of military personnel using an in-depth qualitative approach.

## 2. Methods and Materials

### 2.1. Study Design and Participants

In this study, a qualitative approach and thematic analysis were employed to identify the factors influencing marital dissatisfaction among spouses of military personnel. The study population consisted of all spouses (women) of military personnel residing in the city of Isfahan. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, and given the qualitative nature of the study, sampling continued until data saturation was achieved. Accordingly, the participants included 12 spouses of military personnel who met the inclusion criteria, namely being married to military personnel, having at least five years of marital life, and providing informed consent to participate in the study. The exclusion criteria included inability to adequately respond to the interview questions and unwillingness to disclose personal experiences.

Participants were assured that all information provided during the interviews would remain confidential. Although some of their statements were reported in the findings, no identifying information such as names or surnames was disclosed. To ensure anonymity, codes were used in the transcribed interviews instead of real names. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time or decline to answer any questions they considered inappropriate.

### 2.2. Measures

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Sample interview questions included: During your single

years, did you anticipate marrying a military spouse, and what were your views about such a marriage? and After the beginning of married life, what challenges and concerns did you experience? Please explain. The duration of each interview, depending on the participants' willingness to respond, ranged from 40 to 50 minutes. For ethical considerations, interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' permission, and it was clarified that recording could be stopped at any time at the participant's request, in which case only written notes of their statements would be taken.

### 2.3. Data Analysis

For the analysis and interpretation of the interview data, thematic analysis was conducted following the approach proposed by Attride-Stirling (2001), and themes were classified at three levels: basic, organizing, and global. To enhance the trustworthiness of the data, validation was conducted using the four criteria proposed by Guba and Lincoln (1982). Finally, the transcribed interviews, along with the researchers' interpretations, were returned to the participants for member checking in order to verify the accuracy of the extracted information.

## 3. Findings and Results

In this study, 12 participants took part. The participants' ages ranged from 22 to 61 years, and the mean and standard deviation of age were 36.17 and 11.24, respectively. The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Demographic Characteristics of the Interviewees*

Row	Participant Age	Gender	Duration of Marriage	Education Level	Occupation
1	35	Female	12 years	Diploma	Homemaker
2	28	Female	7 years	Bachelor's degree	Homemaker
3	42	Female	17 years	Diploma	Homemaker
4	61	Female	39 years	Diploma	Homemaker
5	22	Female	14 years	Diploma	Homemaker
6	38	Female	9 years	Bachelor's degree	Homemaker
7	53	Female	32 years	Master's degree	Employee
8	49	Female	30 years	Diploma	Homemaker
9	43	Female	25 years	Middle school	Homemaker
10	37	Female	13 years	Diploma	Homemaker
11	25	Female	4 years	Bachelor's degree	Employee
12	30	Female	10 years	Diploma	Homemaker

**Table 2**

*Final Results of Interview Coding and Thematic Analysis*

Basic Theme	Organizing Theme	Global Theme
1. Unpredictability of dangers for the spouse; 2. Fear of widowhood; 3. Constant fear of children growing up without a father; 4. Fear of the spouse being killed during various missions	Fear of injury and death of the spouse	Individual Factors
1. Experiencing periods of depression due to separation from family; 2. Severe insomnia due to excessive waiting for the spouse; 3. Recurrent nightmares involving injury to the spouse; 4. Experiencing panic as a result of living in war zones; 5. Psychogenic migraine headaches	Physical and psychological disorders	Individual Factors
1. Postponing education until the spouse's retirement; 2. Lack of sufficient time to pursue personal interests; 3. Inability to be employed due to frequent relocations; 4. Inability to be employed because of the spouse's absence and childcare responsibilities	Sacrificing personal life after marriage	Individual Factors
1. Constant caregiving for a disabled and war-injured spouse; 2. Severe restrictions on mobility due to caregiving responsibilities; 3. Intense concern about relapse of the spouse's illness; 4. Anxiety regarding psychological attacks in the war-injured spouse; 5. Frequent visits to hospitals and medical centers	Caregiving role toward the spouse	Individual Factors
1. Performing dual parental roles; 2. Lack of division of household and family responsibilities; 3. Role and responsibility shifts between traditional female and male roles; 4. Financial concerns and financial management burden	Fatigue from marital and family responsibilities	Individual Factors
1. Forgetting significant marital occasions (e.g., wedding anniversary); 2. Insufficient time spent with the spouse; 3. Non-participation in most ceremonies and social gatherings due to occupational demands; 4. Diminished normative sexual relations in marital life; 5. Absence during childbirth; 6. Lack of attention to changes in the spouse's emotional states; 7. Recurrent separations and emotional coldness due to military service	Failure to adequately perform the spousal role	Spouse-Related Factors
1. Neglecting children's academic support; 2. Lack of awareness of children's daily conditions and problems; 3. Irritability and harsh behavior toward children due to fatigue; 4. Absence from significant events in children's lives (e.g., birthdays and graduation) due to occupational demands; 5. Neglecting children's developmental needs during puberty and adolescence	Failure to adequately perform the paternal role	Spouse-Related Factors
1. Excessive strictness toward children in daily matters; 2. Restricting children's autonomy in spouse selection; 3. Pressuring sons to choose military careers; 4. Pressuring sons to attend military universities; 5. Prolonged and obsessive investigations into children's spouse selection	Authoritarian and rigid directives regarding children's critical life choices	Spouse-Related Factors
1. Living anonymously due to high-ranking military positions; 2. Changes in personal and family identity and names for security reasons; 3. Secretive living due to fear of assassination by opposition groups; 4. Residence in remote cities without public identity	Covert and anonymous living	Spouse's Occupational Factors
1. Negative public attitudes toward military personnel; 2. Verbal abuse and insults toward military families; 3. Fear of disclosing the spouse's occupation as military personnel; 4. Accusations and insults toward military personnel amplified by Western media	Public attitude change following the "Woman, Life, Freedom" uprising	Spouse's Occupational Factors
1. Recurrent missions in various regions of the country; 2. Continuous and night shift duties; 3. Constant state of readiness against enemy attacks; 4. Loss of social network due to frequent relocations	Military lifestyle	Spouse's Occupational Factors

### Global Theme One: Individual Factors

The results of the interviews indicated that a range of individual factors may influence marital dissatisfaction among the spouses of military personnel who participated in this study. This global theme consists of five organizing themes, as described below.

**1. Fear of the spouse's injury and death:** One of the major contributors to marital dissatisfaction among spouses of military personnel is the persistent and excessive fear of losing the spouse and the constant mental and psychological preoccupation with the possibility of the spouse being killed. O'Keefe (2016) stated that spouses of military personnel live in continuous fear regarding the physical safety of their service member, as they are often unable to maintain regular contact with their spouse, or communication may be limited to social media, which has inherent limitations in conveying tone or context and may therefore increase anxiety.

**2. Psychological and physical disorders:** According to the interviews, spouses of military personnel experience periods of physical and psychological illness as a result of continuous exposure to stressors associated with the military lifestyle. Military spouses often lack consistent motivations and structures to maintain their own health and are exposed to numerous stressors unique to military life, such as relocation and deployment, which may challenge their ability to maintain healthy living (Taylor et al., 2008). For example, Mansfield et al. (2010) reported that spouses of active-duty service members are more likely to experience depression and anxiety than civilian spouses. In addition, Inoue (2010) reported that spouses of soldiers or active military personnel suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental health conditions.

**3. Sacrificing personal life after marriage:** Participants stated that after marriage and the initiation of shared life, repeated relocations, separation from educational



institutions, lack of access to necessary resources, and distance from family members—who serve as supporters and motivators for continuing education—deprived them of the opportunity to continue their education and employment. Occupational and educational challenges during military transfers disrupt the employment and learning trajectories of military spouses and often lead to dissatisfaction and frustration (Wellman, 2017). Accordingly, unemployment and incomplete educational attainment are frequently the consequences of repeated relocations among military spouses (Levy et al., 2014).

**4. Caregiving role toward the spouse:** Spouses of military personnel acknowledged that after years of living with and caring for a disabled and war-injured spouse, their individual identity had largely been forgotten and replaced by a caregiving identity. They reported persistent hypervigilance regarding their spouse's condition and well-being, which has contributed to their marital dissatisfaction. Yambo et al. (2016) noted that military spouses frequently report feeling more like caregivers than partners, acting as advocates and caretakers for wounded or injured service members.

**5. Fatigue from marital and family responsibilities:** In marriages to military personnel, the absence of the service member for extended periods results in the majority of marital responsibilities, including financial management, falling upon the spouse. The lack of a culture of shared responsibility and cooperative task performance compels spouses of military personnel to manage these duties independently, leading to a process described as a shift of traditionally gendered responsibilities. This prolonged transition from conventional feminine roles to masculine roles may, over time, generate chronic fatigue and emotional exhaustion, which can contribute to marital dissatisfaction.

#### **Global Theme Two: Spouse-Related Factors**

The findings from interviews with spouses of military personnel indicated that a set of spouse-related factors can lead to distress and, ultimately, marital dissatisfaction. This global theme consists of three organizing themes, as described below.

**1. Failure to fulfill the spousal role:** One of the most common complaints among all interviewees was the failure of the military spouse to adequately perform the spousal role. Participants stated that due to the spouse's frequent absence and limited presence within the family environment, military personnel are unable to effectively meet the emotional and relational needs of their partners. For example, they lack sufficient emotional attunement to their spouse's feelings

and needs, and repeated separations associated with deployments result in emotional detachment. These separations may also jeopardize the couple's sexual relationship and contribute to marital dissatisfaction.

**2. Failure to fulfill the paternal role:** In addition to inadequate performance of the spousal role, another major source of marital dissatisfaction was related to the absence of the military spouse from the paternal role. Participants reported that their children lacked consistent paternal support during critical developmental stages, particularly during puberty and adolescence, leading to emotional distress among children and, consequently, among mothers. Park (2011) indicated that military deployment may contribute to mental health difficulties in some children.

**3. Authoritarian and rigid directives regarding children's critical life choices:** Another source of marital dissatisfaction and complaint was the authoritarian and rigid approach of military personnel toward sensitive aspects of their children's lives, including career selection and mate choice. Participants reported that their children, particularly daughters, despite having adequate qualifications and higher education, faced excessive restrictions from their fathers. In addition, the obsessive scrutiny of children's prospective spouses and repeated rigid demands often made marriage difficult or impossible, causing the loss of valuable marital opportunities for their children.

#### **Global Theme Three: Spouse's Occupational Factors**

This theme refers to factors arising from the military occupation of the spouses, as reported by the participants. It consists of three organizing themes, as described below.

**1. Covert and anonymous living:** One of the most significant contributors to reduced marital satisfaction was that spouses of military personnel reported being compelled to live for extended periods in secrecy and with concealed identities due to their spouses' high-ranking and security-sensitive positions and classified missions. This condition generated profound sadness and anxiety among spouses, which substantially undermined marital satisfaction.

**2. Change in public attitudes following the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement:** Another factor contributing to marital dissatisfaction was the reported shift in public attitudes toward military personnel and their families following the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement. Participants stated that this shift was accompanied by verbal harassment and insults, which fostered fear and reluctance to disclose the spouse's military occupation.

**3. Military lifestyle:** Overall, spouses of military personnel reported that the military lifestyle, characterized

by frequent relocations, night shifts, and repeated missions, generated persistent dissatisfaction. Tang et al. (2018) noted that military families relocate every two to three years, often without sufficient time for preparation, which adds considerable stress to the relocation process.

#### 4. Discussion

The present study aimed to identify and explain the factors influencing marital dissatisfaction among spouses of military personnel. The qualitative findings revealed three overarching domains of influence: individual factors, spouse-related factors, and occupational factors associated with the military profession. Together, these domains form an integrated explanatory model illustrating how cumulative psychological stress, relational disruption, and occupational constraints systematically undermine marital satisfaction in military families.

The individual factors identified in this study—namely fear of spouse injury or death, psychological and physical disorders, sacrifice of personal life, caregiving role overload, and fatigue from family responsibilities—reflect a pervasive pattern of chronic stress exposure. These findings align closely with prior research demonstrating that military spouses experience elevated rates of depression, anxiety, trauma-related symptoms, and emotional exhaustion as a result of continuous exposure to deployment stressors and family disruption (Cozza et al., 2022; Steenkamp et al., 2018; Toomey et al., 2019). The persistent fear of losing one's spouse, particularly during deployments or high-risk missions, has been identified as a primary psychological burden that erodes emotional security and increases vulnerability to marital dissatisfaction (Mansfield et al., 2014; O'Keefe, 2016). The present findings extend this literature by demonstrating that such fear does not operate in isolation but interacts with prolonged emotional strain and somatic symptoms, creating a cumulative deterioration of marital well-being.

Participants' reports of depression, insomnia, panic symptoms, and psychosomatic illness correspond with existing evidence that military spouses exhibit significantly higher psychiatric morbidity compared with civilian populations (Edem Iniedu, 2010; Steenkamp et al., 2018). Chronic stress associated with repeated relocations, separation, and uncertainty compromises both physical and psychological health, thereby reducing spouses' emotional capacity for marital engagement (Richardson et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2008). The present study further illustrates how

declining health is directly linked to relational dissatisfaction, consistent with longitudinal findings demonstrating reciprocal associations between marital dissatisfaction, depression, and physical illness (Woods et al., 2019).

The sacrifice of personal life following marriage, including abandonment of educational and occupational goals, emerged as a powerful contributor to dissatisfaction. This result is consistent with extensive documentation of employment discrimination and career disruption among military spouses, largely due to frequent relocations and limited job portability (Just-Bourgeois, 2019; Wellman, 2017). Unemployment and stalled professional development undermine economic autonomy and self-esteem, both of which are central determinants of marital satisfaction (Aknin et al., 2009; Kim & Kwon, 2024). The findings therefore reinforce the conceptualization of marital dissatisfaction as embedded within broader socioeconomic constraints rather than being purely interpersonal in nature.

Another critical individual factor was the caregiving role transformation, wherein spouses described losing their personal identity and becoming consumed by caregiving responsibilities toward injured or traumatized partners. This pattern mirrors prior research showing that spouses of combat-injured or PTSD-affected service members experience role engulfment, hypervigilance, and emotional depletion, often feeling more like caregivers than partners (Cozza et al., 2022; Yambo et al., 2016). The erosion of reciprocal intimacy and the replacement of emotional partnership with clinical vigilance gradually destabilize marital bonds, a process strongly supported by previous studies of military couples coping with trauma (Fisher et al., 2016; Mansfield et al., 2014).

Fatigue from cumulative family responsibilities further exacerbated marital dissatisfaction. In the absence of the service member, spouses must assume full responsibility for household management, childcare, financial decision-making, and crisis resolution. This chronic overload aligns with evidence that disproportionate role burden among military spouses is associated with emotional exhaustion and reduced marital satisfaction (Gottfried, 2021; Woods et al., 2019). Moreover, the absence of cooperative role-sharing violates fundamental principles of relational equity that are essential for long-term marital stability (VanLaningham et al., 2001).

The second domain, spouse-related factors, highlights how the military partner's impaired performance of spousal and paternal roles significantly undermines marital

satisfaction. Participants consistently described emotional unavailability, insufficient communication, emotional coldness, and sexual disconnection. These findings are strongly supported by literature documenting how deployments disrupt emotional attunement and weaken couple communication, particularly when contact is limited to brief or impersonal channels (O'Keefe, 2016; Richardson et al., 2020). Over time, emotional distance and relational disengagement emerge, increasing the risk of marital dissatisfaction and instability (Clark & Georgellis, 2013; VanLaningham et al., 2001).

Failure to perform the paternal role also constituted a major source of distress. The absence of consistent paternal involvement during children's critical developmental stages generates emotional distress in both children and spouses. This pattern is well documented in studies showing elevated emotional and behavioral difficulties among children of deployed service members, particularly when parental stress and marital conflict are high (Briggs et al., 2020; Fairbank et al., 2018; Park, 2011). The present findings further illustrate how children's emotional struggles intensify maternal distress, creating a feedback loop that deepens marital dissatisfaction.

Participants also emphasized the detrimental impact of authoritarian and rigid control over children's life choices, particularly regarding career and mate selection. Such behavior reflects deeply ingrained military cultural norms emphasizing discipline, control, and obedience (Cole, 2014). However, when transferred into the family system, these norms disrupt autonomy, provoke conflict, and erode relational trust, thereby contributing to marital dissatisfaction (Borah & Fina, 2017; Just-Bourgeois, 2019). This finding underscores the tension between institutional identity and family functioning that characterizes many military households.

The third domain, occupational factors, revealed how structural features of military life exert powerful indirect effects on marital satisfaction. Covert and anonymous living due to security constraints imposed profound emotional strain on spouses, consistent with research demonstrating that occupational secrecy and chronic fear intensify anxiety and relational instability (Carbajal, 2025; Cozza et al., 2022). The erosion of social identity and community belonging further isolates spouses, reducing access to social support and amplifying emotional vulnerability (Borah & Fina, 2017).

Public attitude changes toward military families, accompanied by social hostility and stigma, further

compound marital distress. Such social stressors intensify spouses' sense of marginalization and fear of disclosure, reinforcing psychological burden and relational strain. Similar barriers to psychological well-being and help-seeking have been documented in studies of perceived stigma and limited mental health access among military spouses (Lewy et al., 2014; Schvey et al., 2022).

Finally, the pervasive military lifestyle, characterized by frequent relocations, unpredictable schedules, and repeated deployments, emerged as a central destabilizing force. These conditions disrupt continuity of social networks, career development, and family routines, thereby undermining emotional security and marital satisfaction (Carbajal, 2025; Richardson et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2008). Frequent relocations alone have been shown to increase stress and weaken social integration, particularly when families lack adequate preparation time (Briggs et al., 2020; Toomey et al., 2019).

## 5. Conclusion

Collectively, the present findings support a systemic model of marital dissatisfaction in military families, wherein psychological vulnerability, relational disruption, and occupational constraints interact dynamically over time. This integrated framework is consistent with contemporary theories of marital adaptation and stress accumulation (Clark & Georgellis, 2013; VanLaningham et al., 2001) and highlights the necessity of addressing marital dissatisfaction within its broader ecological context.

## 6. Limitations & Suggestions

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The qualitative design and relatively small sample size limit the generalizability of the findings. Participants were all spouses of military personnel from a single geographic region, which may restrict the applicability of results to other cultural or institutional contexts. Self-report data may also be subject to recall bias and social desirability effects. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of the interviews precludes causal inference regarding the temporal development of marital dissatisfaction.

Future studies should employ longitudinal designs to examine the developmental trajectory of marital dissatisfaction across different stages of military service. Comparative studies between military and civilian families may clarify the unique contribution of occupational



stressors. Quantitative modeling of the identified factors could further validate the proposed framework, while cross-cultural research would enhance understanding of how sociocultural norms shape marital dynamics in military families.

Intervention programs should integrate psychological counseling, family therapy, and institutional policy reform to address the multifaceted sources of marital dissatisfaction. Support services must target emotional regulation, communication skills, caregiver burden, and occupational stress management. Policymakers should prioritize employment protections, relocation assistance, and accessible mental health services for military families to promote marital resilience and long-term family stability.

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### Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

### Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

### Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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### Authors' Contributions

M.M.E. conceptualized the study, designed the qualitative methodology, and supervised the research process. F.S. conducted the semi-structured interviews, managed data collection, and participated in thematic coding and analysis. Z.F.K. contributed to data interpretation, refinement of thematic categories, and preparation of the results section. R.M.K. drafted the initial manuscript,

coordinated revisions, and ensured coherence of the final version. All authors reviewed the manuscript critically, approved the final version, and take full responsibility for the integrity of the work.

### Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

### Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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The authors report no conflict of interest.

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